

Megachurch 2020

The Changing Reality in
America's Largest Churches

By Warren Bird, Ph.D., and
Scott Thumma, Ph.D.

Church
IS FUN!

Oakhurst Grand Opening
September 8th

LiquidChurch



HARTFORD INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGION RESEARCH

See our library of free research findings at hartfordinstitute.org



HARTFORD INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGION RESEARCH

Megachurch 2020

The Changing Reality in America's Largest Churches

by Warren Bird, Ph.D. and Scott Thumma, Ph.D.

Much is still unknown about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches, but one pattern is already clear: larger churches are providing much of the thought leadership for how to spiritually navigate the crisis—similar to how larger churches have been significant influencers in the years before the pandemic.

In short, despite frequent negative press treatment toward megachurches (a portion well-deserved, such as from financial scandal or, more recently, defying social gathering and mask bans) the vast majority of America's largest churches are continuing to set positive precedents in many important areas of faith development.

In virtually every city and region, across denominations and less formal church networks, megachurch leaders continue to set the pace for other church leaders, both directly and indirectly. (Megachurches are commonly defined as Protestant churches with regular attendances pre-pandemic of 2,000 or more adults and children.) This impact shows up in the examples that megachurches embody through vision, values, innovations, and priorities, and also in the words their leaders voice through conferences, books, coaching networks, podcasts, social media posts, and personal relationships.

At the same time, the roughly 1,750 megachurches in the United States continue to evolve and respond to changes in our society and culture. Their changing reality propels our continued research. This sixth national study of these largest Protestant Christian churches continues to show developing trends and adaptations to their overall ministry efforts.

Megachurches Today Are in a State of Gradual (and Continual) Transition

What, then, are the latest trends in today's megachurch? What follows are the most significant patterns and trends that we identified from 582 churches of 1,800 average attenders and larger through a survey conducted in early 2020. This study is part of a series of similar surveys conducted every 5 years (2000, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2015 and now 2020), enabling long-term comparisons. The research was conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA, and Leadership Network.¹ The survey, along with response frequencies, is in the appendix to this report.

Many of the patterns and trends are also illustrated in the accompanying graphics. What happens in large churches today both models and shapes the landscape for most other churches tomorrow—for better or for worse.

Figure 1 offers an overview of U.S. megachurches today. A majority of the general traits depicted in Figure 1 will be addressed below in greater detail, but it may be helpful to

Profile of a U.S. Megachurch 2020 (Pre-pandemic)

LEADERSHIP



53 Average age of the lead pastor

15 Number of years at the church in this role

73% Led church through most dramatic growth

FINANCES

Total 2019 budget: **\$5.3** million (median)

96% of church income comes from the contributions of attendees

78% Has financial statements audited by external/independent CPA

CHURCH



Attendance: **4,092** (mean)

5,982 (mean)
Total number of regular participants

Growth in attendance from 5 years ago: **34%**

Multisite **70%**

Multiracial **58%**

Part of denomination **60%**

Seating capacity where primary services are held **1,200** (median)



66% Helped start or plant a new congregation in the last 10 years

58% Had no serious disagreements or conflicts in the last 5 years

83% have board drawn entirely from this church

76% of churches require the board to have majority of "independent" members to ensure proper accountability

PARTICIPANTS



72% Predominantly white



56% Female



56% College graduate



65% Part of the congregation more than 5 years

Total budget is for 2019. All other statistics are for 2020.

Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Figure 1

start with an overall mental image of a church with 4,092 in attendance (pre-pandemic) that claims 5,982 as the total number of regular attenders. Most impressions are that megachurches are nondenominational, but in fact a majority have a denominational affiliation.

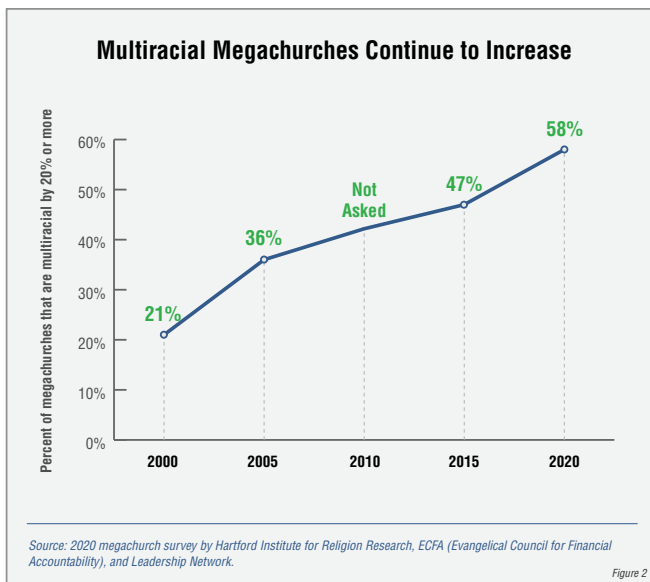
Do all these people gather in a huge facility with abundant seating capacity? No. Our overview confirms a trend that we saw in the last two national studies: the seating capacity of the largest sanctuary space remains steady at 1,200, even while the average attendance continues to rise.

The study also confirmed that the majority of participants continue to be white and college educated, although, as will be seen below, this racial makeup is in a dramatic pattern of change. Finally, while megachurches continue to wrestle with the challenge of a constant churn of new people flowing in while others slip out the backdoor, nevertheless nearly two-thirds have been at their churches for more than 5 years, implying that a large body within the congregation are permanent, committed and active participants, even as our data below also shows that they might be shifting their rates of participation.

In all, this new research described in the following report shows megachurches to be both vital and trendsetters but also in their own state of adaptation and evolution.

Megachurches Are Becoming More Multiracial

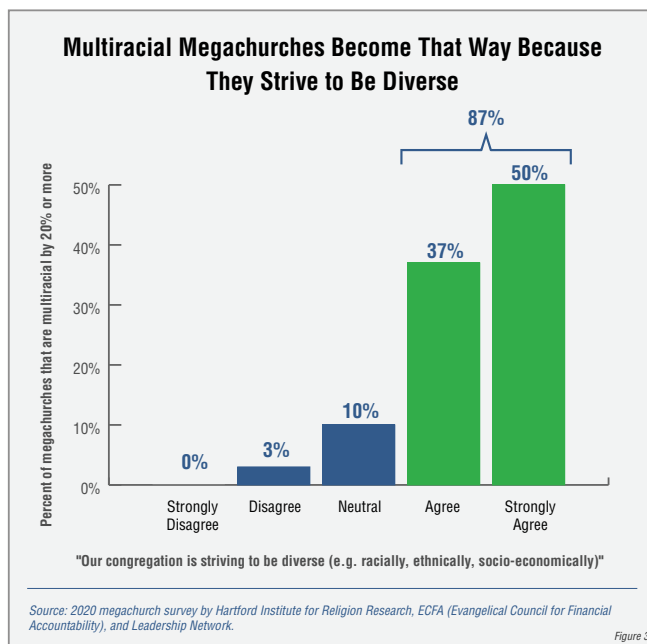
We've known for some time that the larger the church, the more likely it is to be racially diverse, but the growth in racial diversity in megachurches is now of headline-making character.



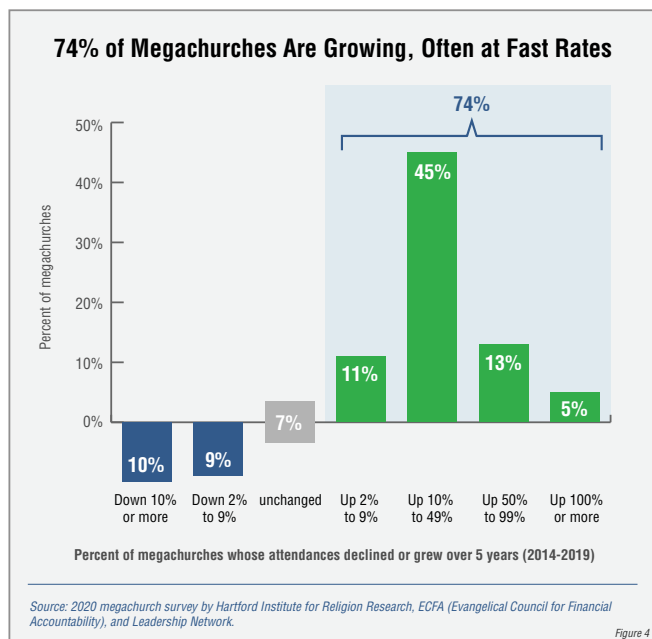
Two decades ago, only 21% of megachurches were multiracial, but that is not true any longer. More than half of them (58%) report being multiracial today, defined as having 20% or more minority presence in their congregation. Figure 2 traces the strong path of increase across 5-year increments from 2000 to 2020. In many ways, megachurches are leading the way toward what we hope is a future where multiracial churches are the norm. Their racial mix contrasts significantly with what churches of other sizes report. Back in 2005, only 7% of all congregations were multiracial. By 2019, that number had doubled to 16% of all congregations across all faith groups could be described as

having at least 20% racial or ethnic diversity in their attending membership.²

What helps churches become more multiracial? Certainly a variety of factors including being very large, as we noted above, but also a diverse local community, multiracial leadership, certain worship styles, and as this year’s survey makes evident, acting out of an intentional desire for diversity. When asked, “Is [the congregation] striving to be diverse (e.g. racially, ethnically, socio-economically)?” a whopping 78% agreed or strongly agreed. We found a powerful statistical relationship between those churches who were striving to be diverse and actually have a more multiracial congregational makeup (87%, see Figure 3).



This increased racial diversity also goes hand in hand with a number of other characteristics that all describe a church that has created a culture of welcome and inclusion. These characteristics include being better at incorporating new people into the life of the church, having a larger percentage of recent immigrants in the church, being more open to persons with special needs (by being very intentional about such ministry or offering certain accommodations), and having higher rates of new people in the previous 5 years. However, diversity also has downsides. The more diverse churches are more likely to experience conflict and to rate their financial health as less robust than other megachurches.



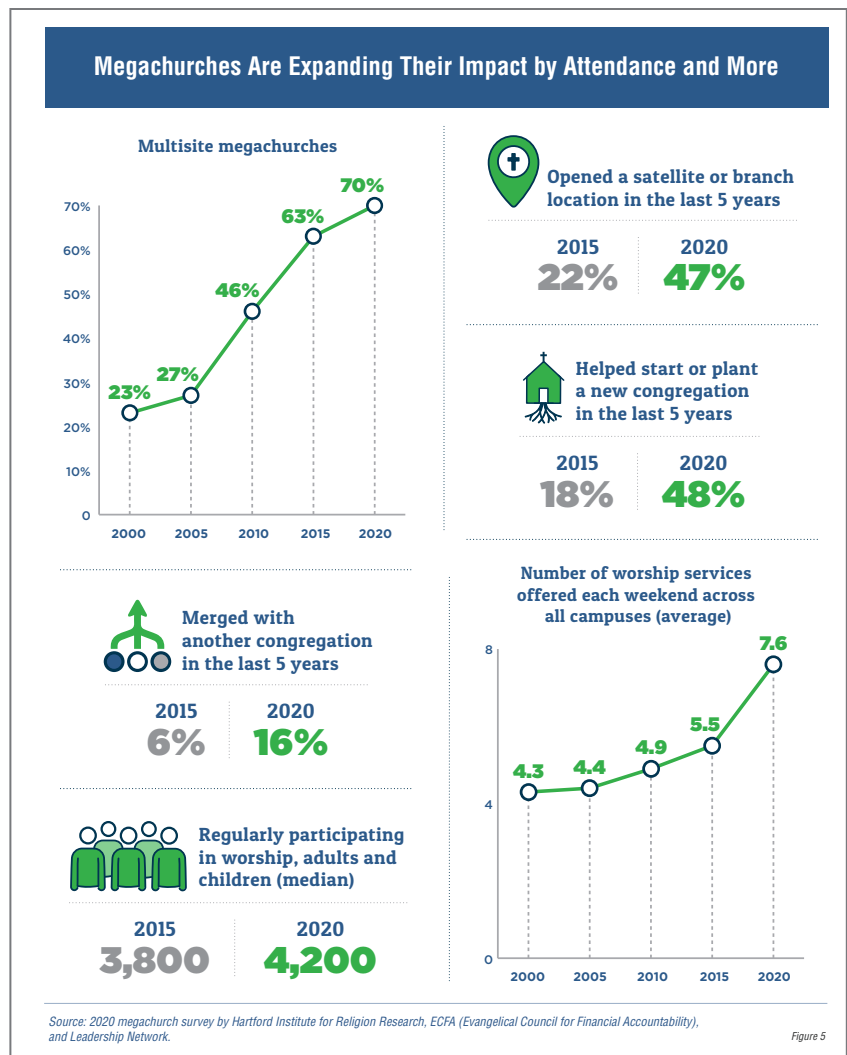
Though we have often heard, “Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week,” with each passing year it’s less true of large churches, as a large percentage of megachurches are less likely to be homogeneous collections of the same kind of person. Along with that, racial diversity also comes with a considerable mix of economic groups and educational levels, with roughly 50% being college graduates, significant representation from all age groups (a greater mix of ages than the vast majority of smaller churches), political persuasions as will be seen below, and income levels based on this and our previous research. Size is a significant reason for this diversity, but such diversity

is also augmented by an intentional desire for diversity and a leadership willing to change various church dynamics necessary to bring this to reality.

Megachurches Have Been Expanding in Many Ways

If the amazing increase in racial diversity is our most pronounced finding, close behind is the rapid growth of megachurches (Figure 4), with three quarters of them (74%) growing over the last 5 years, many at meteoric rates.

This expansion shows up in a number of ways. Yes, the nation’s largest-attendance churches have grown bigger—from 2015’s median of 3,800 adults and children each weekend to 4,200 in 2020, as Figure 5 illustrates. That increase also includes growth in the number of separate worship services offered weekly across all campuses, averaging 7.6 per week for 2020 up from 5.5 just 5 years ago (all numbers are pre-pandemic).



But they have also expanded in other ways, as Figure 5 illustrates, most notably the commitment of megachurches to church planting has skyrocketed. Only 18% of megachurches claimed to have helped start or plant a new church between 2010-2015 but almost half (48%) said they did so in the last 5 years (2016-2020).

Likewise, the 20-year trend to become multisite—one church in two or more locations—has continued to explode. Back in 2000, 23% of megachurches were multisite. Now 70% have adopted this strategy, and an additional 10% responded that they are not yet multisite but are “thinking about it.” In the last 5 years, almost half (47%) of megachurches opened one or more satellites or branch locations. Not surprisingly, the larger the church, the more likely it is to be multisite.

Just as the number of worship services has increased, so has the number of multisite campuses—also known as locations, sites, or satellite churches. When asked how many site locations they have, 45% of multisite churches have 4 or more locations. According to other research, at least 32 megachurches have 10 or more campuses.

Comparisons between single and multisite churches show a host of benefits to this distributed approach. Multisite churches are not only larger than single-site churches, but they are also more likely to have larger budgets and to have grown more rapidly in last 5

years. Multisites plant more new churches than single-site churches, especially in the 2016-2020 period, and merge more often with other churches. Multisite congregations claim that a greater percentage of their people “talk about faith to those outside the church,” are active in recruiting new people, and have a larger percentage of the congregation in small groups. Finally, multisite churches indicate a greater willingness to change, are more likely to say they have a clear mission and purpose, and are more likely to view themselves as innovative, informal, and contemporary than do single-site megachurches.

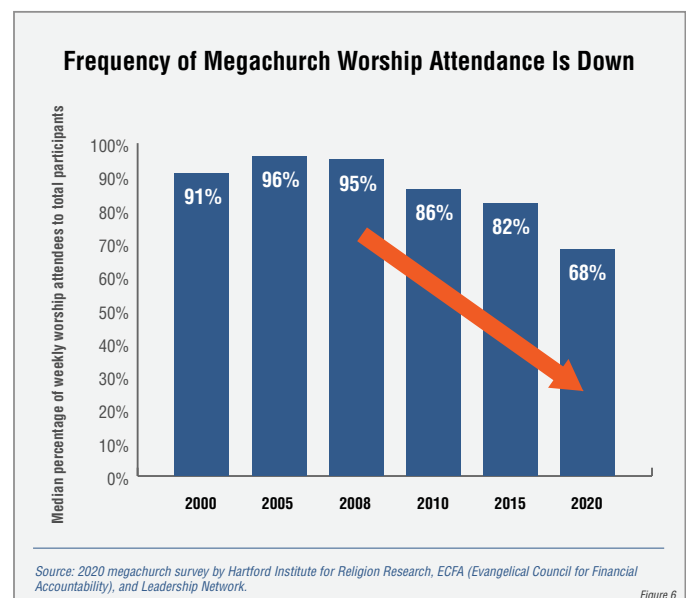
Likewise, the idea of small and medium-size churches merging with a megachurch is beginning to take off. Only 6% of megachurches said they had been part of a merger between 2010 and 2015, while 16% claimed merging with other churches between 2016 and 2020. “We’re seeing a growing trend that mergers are helping strong churches increase their outreach and impact, stuck churches get revitalized, and struggling churches be rebirthed,” says Jim Tomberlin, lead author of *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, expanded and updated edition.

Interestingly, given all this dramatic growth, megachurches are continuing the trend of having far less seating capacity than they do average attendance. This is completely counter to the dynamic seen in many smaller churches across the United States where seating capacity far exceeds actual (prepandemic) attendance. In 2020, the median seating capacity where a megachurch’s primary services are held is 1,200. For single-site churches, median seating is 1,375 for 2020. It is interesting that the average megachurch sanctuary size has been declining since 2000 but has leveled out in the last 5-10 years at about 1,200. This is no doubt due to the increased use of multiple locations, often rented spaces, for worship as well as to the dramatic rise in the number of separate services offered on a typical weekend. And this doesn’t even take into account the large percentage of churches that are offering a fully-staffed worship campus online (whose numbers are not included in our stated attendance totals). Nearly all worship locations within a multisite megachurch offer at least 2 or more weekend services, opting to make full use of the space they have over and over again, rather than what once was the goal of building ever bigger primary worship facilities.

Interestingly, single-site churches average 3.3 services per week while multisite churches average 2.4 services per location.

Oddly, even with all this growth and expansion, another dynamic we first noted in 2015 has continued with this study: that worshippers are not attending as frequently. Megachurches are part of the general multi-year trend among churches of all sizes in which the average attender comes to church less often—and who knows if post-pandemic attendance frequency will be even less often!

Figure 6 documents a 20-year pattern of regular participants attending worship less frequently. We are measuring this by comparing the stated total regular participant



figures by the average weekly attendance figures given by the churches rather than asking members themselves or getting clergy to estimate the participants' frequency of attendance.

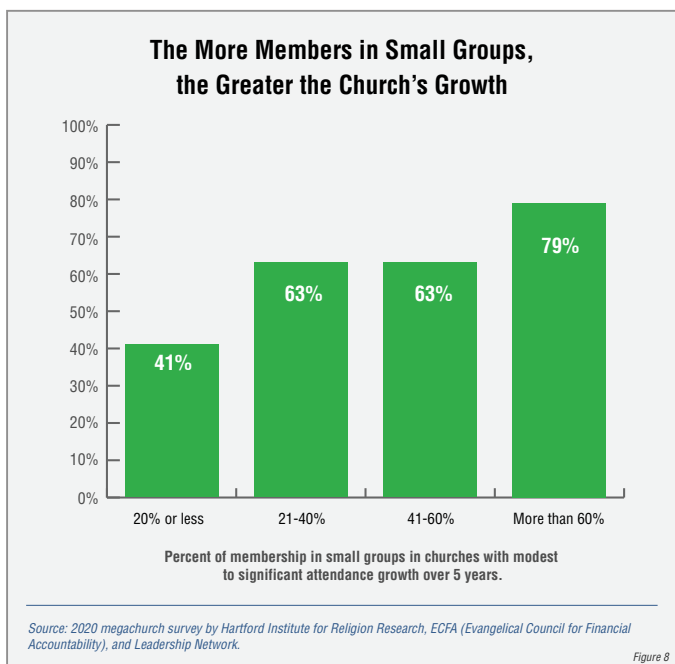
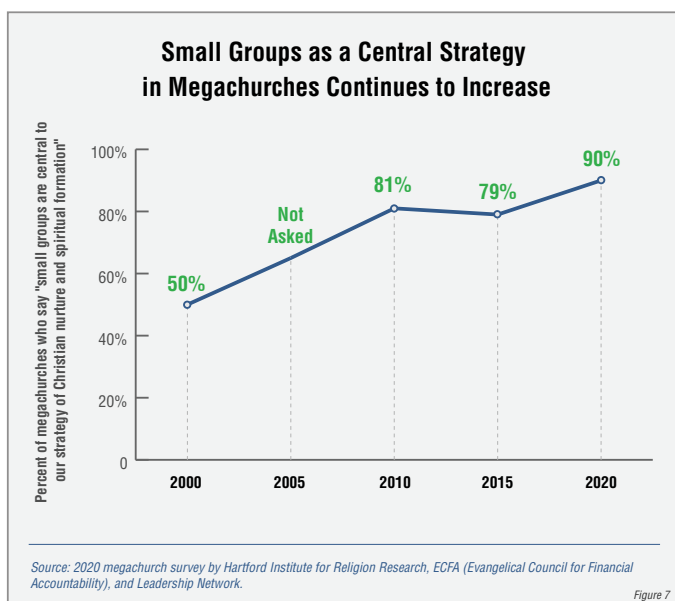
Our survey did not explore reasons for this shift, but a broad range of influences could be identified: less cultural pressure to attend, lower commitment expectations conveyed by churches, online options, and more alternative activities that compete with worship, such as Sunday morning children's sports leagues. When the pandemic ends, the use of online church is likely to be seen as an increasingly viable alternative to in-person attendance.

Small Groups Are Central to Megachurches' Spiritual Formation of Members

The use of small groups has long been a hallmark of megachurches—the idea of distinct units within the greater church where people know each other personally and participate in various kinds of spiritual ministries. Their purpose can include fellowship, spiritual nurture, ministry, and/or religious education. They might be called names like Sunday school classes,

Bible studies, missional teams, home groups, community groups, discipleship groups, or any number of other terms.

Our latest survey shows that small-group practice continues to increase dramatically, but also that the spiritual-health impact of the use of small groups is profound. When asked if small groups are central to their strategy of Christian nurture and spiritual formation, an astounding 90% of megachurches said yes, as Figure 7 shows. This percentage has steadily grown over the years; for example, back in 2000, only 50% of megachurches said yes to the same question.



When asked what percentage of the church's adult participants are typically involved in a small group, the response in 2020 was a median of 45%. In 2015 the median was 40%. This increased priority given to small groups is evident in the growing percentage of adults who are involved in small groups within their congregations. Small group participation is directly related to a number of positive trends for the congregation. As Figure 8 illustrates, the more adults in small groups, the greater the church's growth rate.

Those churches with the highest percentage of their congregation active in

their small groups were also more likely to say they had larger percentages of their members volunteering regularly at church, recruiting new people, sharing their faith with those not a part of the congregation, and new to the congregation in the last 5 years. These are noteworthy correlations! They are highlighted in Figure 9.

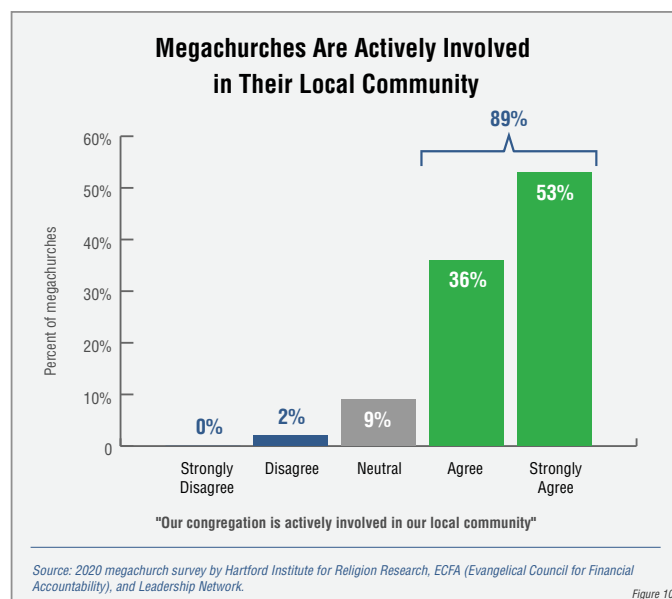
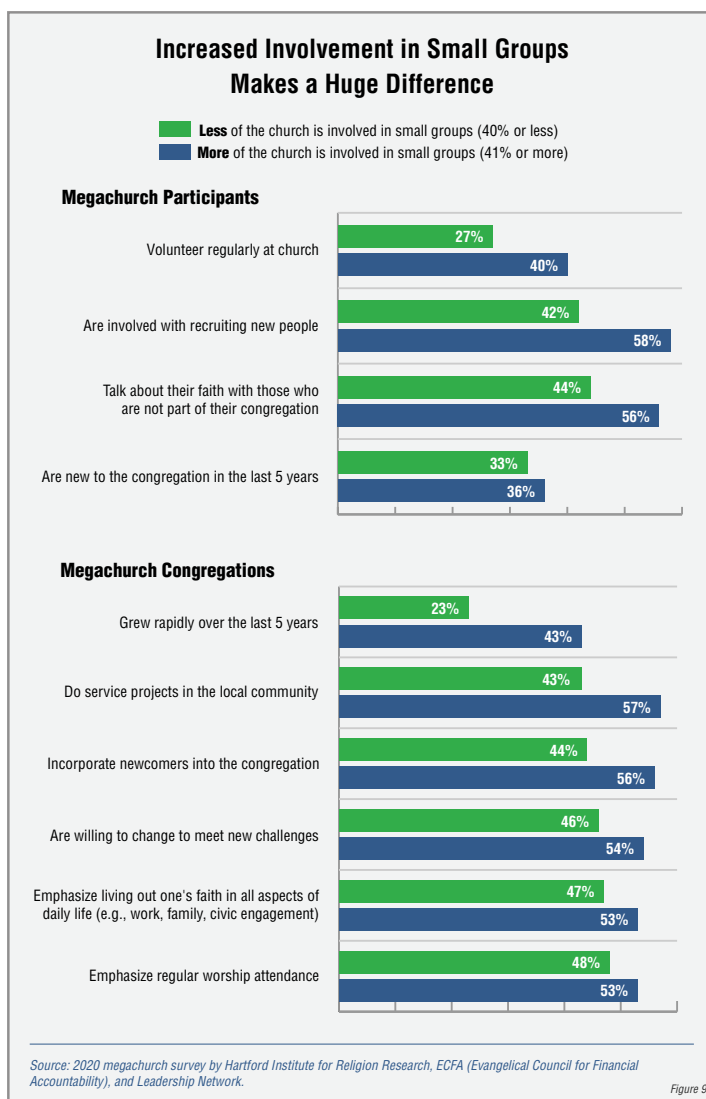
Figure 9 also documents how megachurch congregations with the highest percentage of their people in small groups were better at encouraging frequent worship attendance, were more likely to do service projects in the local community, and described themselves as better able to incorporate newcomers into the congregation, to change to meet new challenges, and to emphasize living out one’s faith in all aspects of daily life (e.g., work, family, civic engagement).

Our survey also asked about programs and activities within the entire church, offering a dozen options and asking if they were of no emphasis, some emphasis, or a lot of emphasis in the congregation. Those programs that ranked highest for “a lot of emphasis” were international/global ministry activities (mission trips) chosen by 70% of megachurches, community service activities at 60%, religious education for adults at 50%, young adult (ages 18-34) activities or programs at 38%, recovery ministries at 38%, and special needs ministries at 30%.

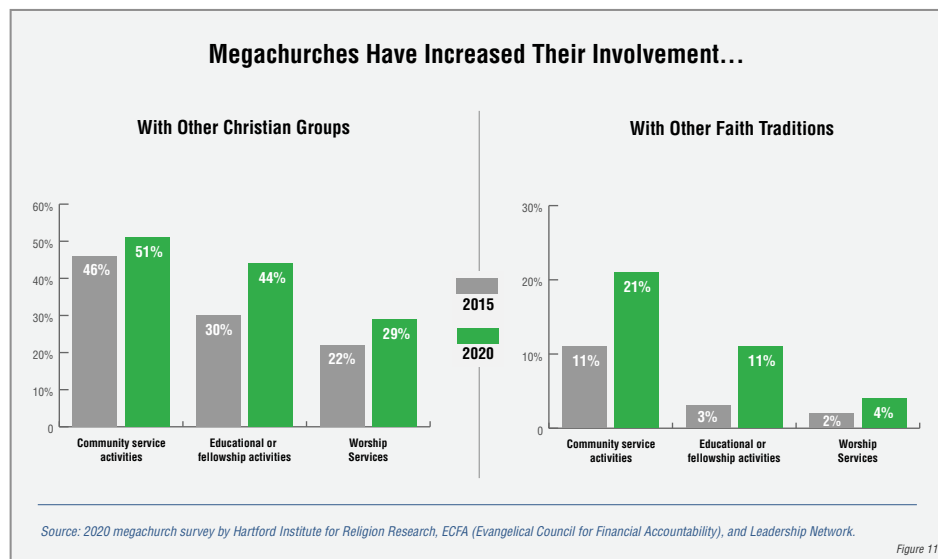
In short, having greater percentages of one’s congregation participating in small groups and in other programs offered more benefits than just growth of the church. It created a climate of improved spiritual development for the congregation on many levels.

Megachurches Are Increasingly Involved in Community Service

In recent years, many megachurches have exited their buildings—and long



before the pandemic! As Figure 10 shows, an astounding 89% agree or strongly agree with the statement, “Our congregation is actively involved in our local community.” In a different question, 60% of megachurches said they put a lot of emphasis into community service programs or activities.



In this community involvement, megachurches are not going it alone, as they have been accused of in the past. They’re participating in these efforts both with other Christian groups and also with other faith traditions. The survey shows a sizable increase between 2015 and 2020 in engaging with other Christians and other faith traditions through educational or fellowship activities as well as community service activities. The area that megachurches are most likely to indicate cooperative efforts is community service activities. Between 2015 and 2020 their involvement with other Christian churches increased from 46% to 51%, and with other faith traditions from 11% to 21%, as Figure 11 shows.

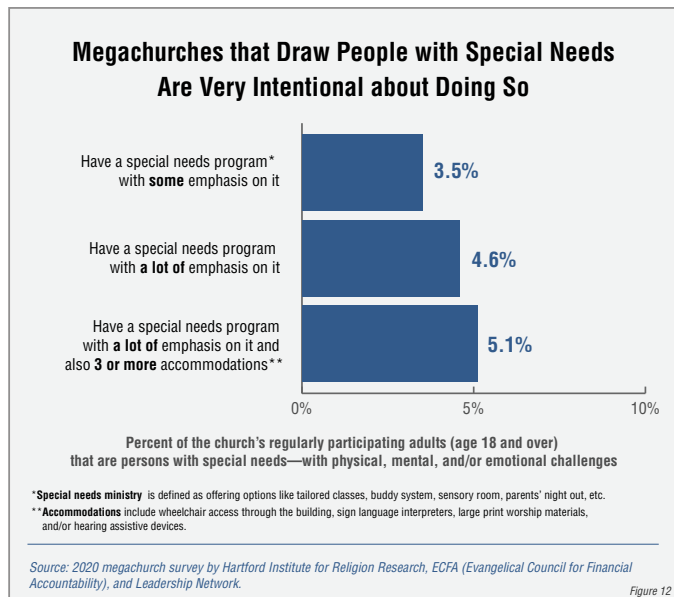
Such ecumenical cooperation is typically found in churches more along the liberal side of the theological spectrum. Yet according to the 2020 survey, only 7% of megachurches describe themselves as liberal, moderate, or progressive. The remaining 93% select more conservative identity labels like evangelical (65%), missional (12%), Pentecostal (7%), charismatic (5%), or seeker (4%). While ecumenical cooperation is most commonly found in mainline denominations, these non-mainline and often non-denominational megachurches are following suit in their collaboration efforts for the benefit of their local communities.

These megachurches most highly involved in their local community tend to rate themselves as having more people who volunteer regularly at the congregation and of having more adults involved in a small group. They also see themselves as being more innovative, as having a clearer sense of mission and purpose, being more spiritually vital and alive, being more willing to change to meet new challenges, and striving more to be diverse. These congregations who are most engaged with the community also claim to place a greater emphasis on talking about one’s faith with those who are not a part of their congregation, living out one’s faith in all aspects of daily life, and being intentional at incorporating new people into the congregation.

From these findings, it’s clear that a strong correlation exists between involvement in one’s local community and evangelism, which also enriches the vitality of the congregation itself.

Many Megachurches Place Major Emphasis on Special Needs Ministry

Megachurches generally have more resources of space, volunteers, and talent than do smaller churches, enabling them to address critical opportunities on a scale that most smaller churches cannot. Nowhere is this truer than in addressing the needs of children and adults with disabilities. Our survey asked very large churches about various approaches



to creating a better worship experience for adults with diverse needs. What we found was revealing. On average, the megachurches surveyed said that 4% of their adult participants have physical, mental, or emotional special needs. However, 10% of megachurches claimed between 10% and 30% of their adult participants in this special needs group.

Figure 12 illustrates the increased impact that churches can have on adults with special needs if they are both intentional and offer various accommodations. Certainly the same applies for churches that focus on children and youth with special needs.

When asked what emphasis they put on a special needs ministry, a third of megachurches indicated a lot of program emphasis, with 53% some emphasis and only 17% having none.

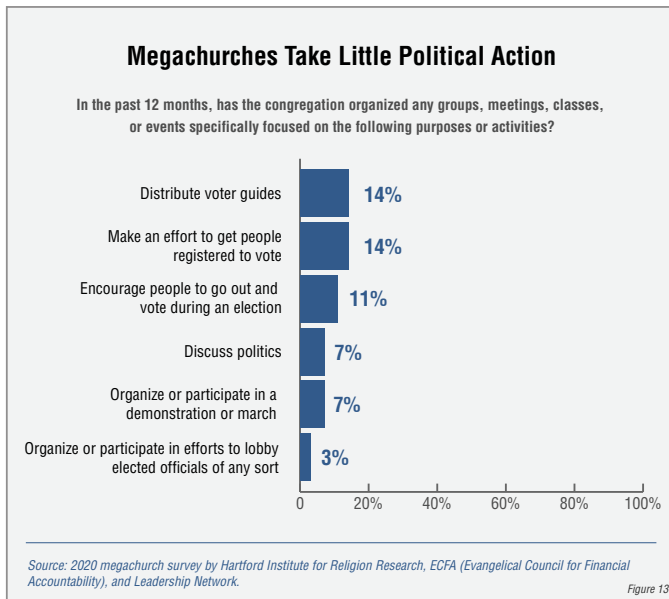
The actual accommodations we asked about included wheelchair access throughout the building with nearly 100% doing this. Nearly half (48%) had hearing assistance devices, slightly less (44%) offered sign language interpretation, and just 15% provided large print worship materials. But with the extensive use of projection screens for biblical texts and song lyrics, printed material might not be a necessity. Respondents offered other ways they address this population, such as with closed captioning, earplugs for auditory sensory issues, quiet rooms, gluten-free Communion, and fragrance-free spaces in the sanctuary.

Having these accommodations in the congregation are likely conducive to attracting more persons with special needs. Having any of these components in the church increased the percentage of adults with special needs. However, as we have seen elsewhere in this report: intentionality matters. A serious effort to provide diverse assistance and strongly emphasize a special needs ministry raises the percentage of that population in the congregation by a half to 1%. While that percentage increase doesn't seem like much, in most megachurches that represents 50 to 100 children and/or adults who are welcomed and engaged in the life of the congregation.

Which came first—the accommodations or the special needs ministry? Or did they grow together? Our survey didn't ask. Is an emphasis on special needs more of a growth strategy or a motive of justice, hospitality, and compassion? Or all together? We don't know. If the church's service to the special needs community developed like most other ministries, it started out of necessity and then once it begins to flourish, it became a strategic outreach.

Megachurches Overwhelmingly Avoid Political Action

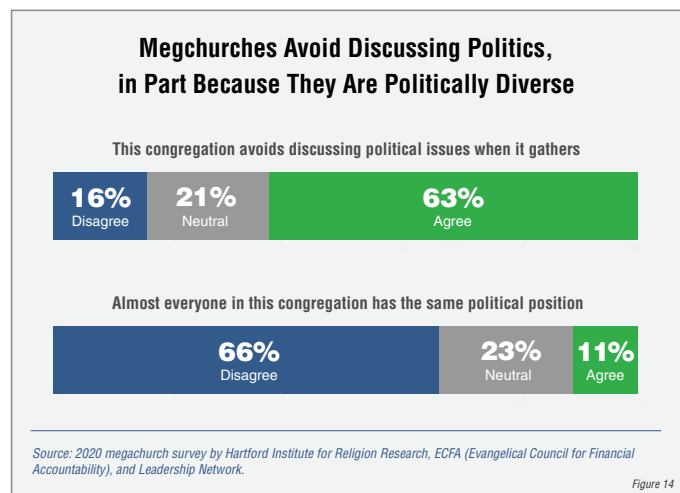
In the build up to the national election, much was said about the role of megachurches in the race for the presidency. A few of the nation’s roughly 1,750 megachurches have garnered the bulk of this attention. However, our research finds that megachurches as a whole claim to be involved in very little overt political action.



Megachurch key informants, often the senior pastor or key leader, were asked, “Thinking about the past 12 months, has your congregation organized any groups, meetings, classes, or events specifically focused on 6 political purposes or activities?” Less than 20% of megachurches did any of the 6 political activities we named (and only 4 churches in the survey were engaged in all 6). Of these 6 activities (see Figure 13), the highest-scoring choices “distribute voter guides” and make “an effort to get people registered to vote” received affirmative responses from just 14% of the

megachurches. Efforts to get out the vote garnered just 11% affirmation from the responding megachurches. Therefore, it is not surprising that when asked, only 20% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their congregation is politically active.

Also contrary to popular stereotypes, our survey indicated that megachurches are not purely monolithic voting blocks of political action (see Figure 14). On the one hand, 63% of megachurch respondents agree, with 23% of these strongly agreeing, that “this congregation avoids discussing political issues when it gathers.” On the other hand, 66% disagree, with 30% of these in strong disagreement, that “almost everyone in this congregation has the same political position.”



Surprisingly given this implied diversity of opinion, megachurches report little congregational conflict over political issues—but perhaps that’s because they largely avoid discussing political issues! When asked if “this congregation has experienced recent conflict over political issues,” the vast majority (71%) disagree. A further 20% “neither agree nor disagree” and only 9% agree. However, if limited to the 1 in 5 megachurches that say they’re politically active, the level of reported congregational conflict rises considerably. Likewise, the level of congregational conflict rises for those megachurches that don’t share the same political position and to a lesser extent that discuss political issues when the congregation gathers.

The Role of Megachurch Pastors Cannot Be Emphasized Enough

The public perception of megachurch pastors is too often shaped by isolated examples that grab the headlines. These might include Pastor A who teaches that COVID-19 is a hoax and then gets the virus, Pastor B who gets taken to jail after refusing to pay taxes, or Pastor C who is accused of sexual misconduct. Anything that's both high-visibility and unusually sensational—and/or blatantly hypocritical—will grab the headlines.

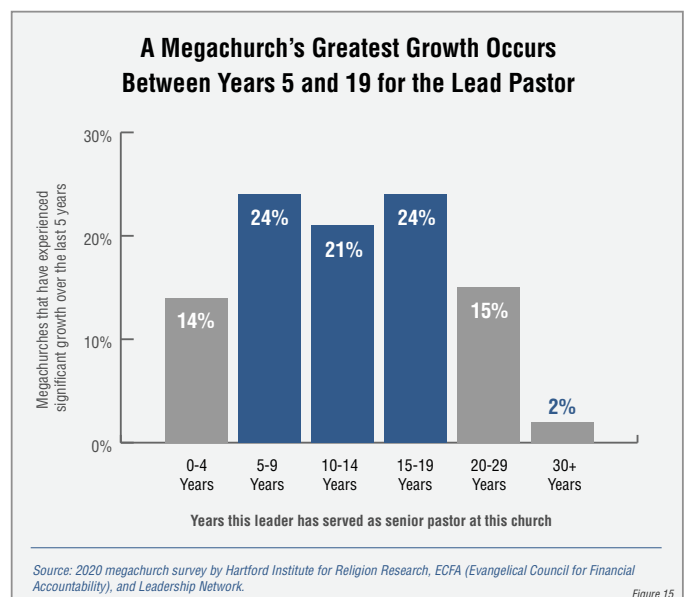
However, these extremes simply don't represent the vast majority of megachurch pastors. By and large, megachurch pastors are long-time servants of their churches. They keep the church's focus on spiritual vitality, having a clear purpose, and living out that mission. And they eventually finish well.

Specifically, the typical megachurch pastor is white—but see the previous section on most megachurch congregations being multiracial. This top leader is also male—and while we know from other research that the vast majority of megachurches are led by males, a good many of these leaders are positioned as husband-wife senior clergy couples. The average senior leader is 53 years old—the youngest in the survey sample is age 33 and the oldest is age 83. And whether known as senior pastor, lead pastor or another title, he or she has been senior/lead pastor at the church for 15 years (the longest serving in the survey has led for 46 years and the newest became senior pastor in 2020). Only 5% currently serve as a chaplain in some capacity, such as through a local hospital, athletic team, or law enforcement group.

In terms of education, this year's survey asked specifically about the Master of Divinity degree (MDiv), which is the most common degree that prospective pastors pursue—and about half (45%) have received it. In the past we had not specifically asked educationally about the MDiv by itself. Previous megachurch surveys asked the education question in a different way, inquiring both about the Masters (including MA and MDiv) and Doctoral degrees (PhD and DMin). For these previous years, roughly 75-80% of senior clergy indicated they had advanced degrees at these levels.

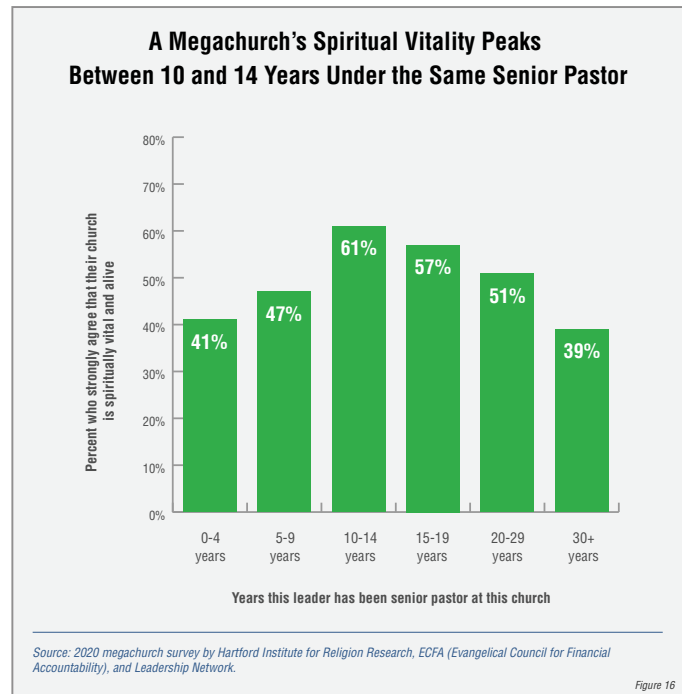
Leading a church of thousands of attenders, including several layers of paid staff, is undoubtedly hard work. Yet three quarters (73%) regularly schedule and take a day off each week from all paid employment and half (49%) have had a sabbatical during the past decade.

The majority of megachurches are still led by the person who was leader during the church's most significant growth. In 2020, we found that 73% of current senior leaders were in charge during this dramatic growth period. Our past surveys have shown this to be the case for approximately 80% of megachurches, but this percentage perhaps is beginning to decline given an increased number of succession handoffs to



younger leaders and with the rate of new megachurches appearing to slow. After all, 25% of current megachurch leaders are 59 years old or older, and 5% are above the age of 65. Future surveys will shed light on this possible trend.

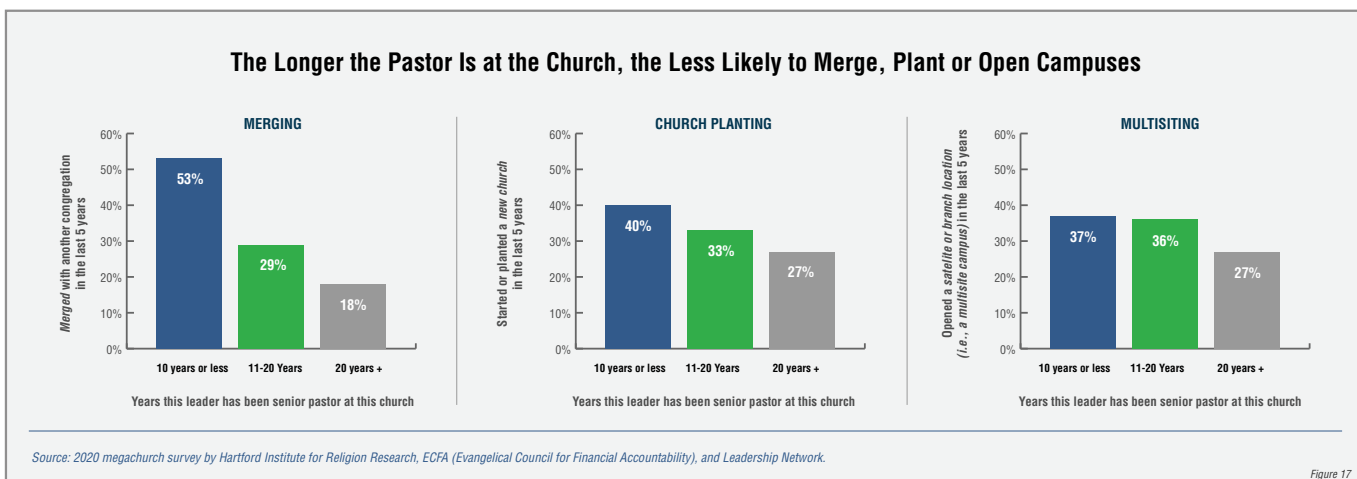
It is apparent in our survey that both the age of the senior leaders and especially their tenure at the church are important factors in the life of the congregation. Figure 15 shows the relationship between the peak growth period of a megachurch and how long the present senior pastor has been serving at that church. The years of greatest growth are clearly between years 5 and 19 for most megachurch pastors.

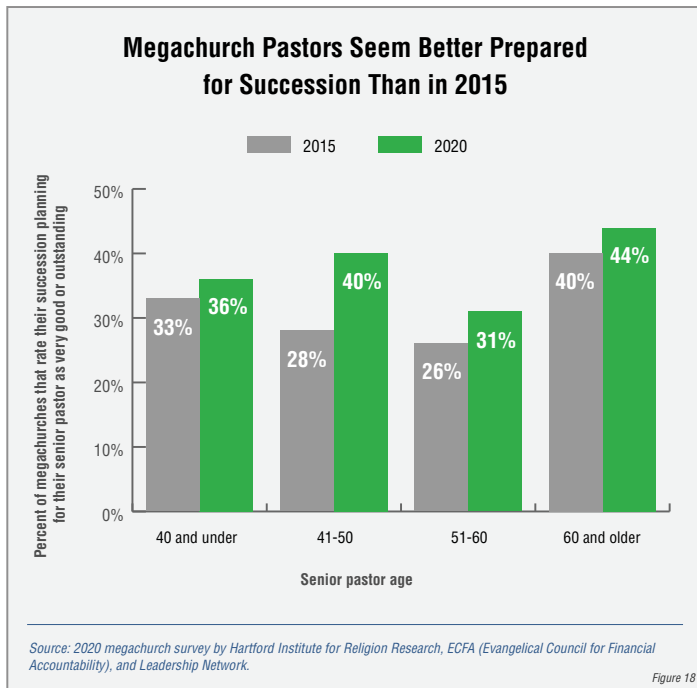


It isn't just numeric growth that is affected by the length of pastoral tenure but also a congregation's sense of spiritual vitality as assessed by its leadership. Figure 16 is headlined "A Megachurch's Spiritual Vitality Peaks Between 10 and 19 Years Under the Same Senior Pastor." We could have titled it with a more sobering tone: "After 15 Years with the Same Senior Pastor, a Megachurch's Spiritual Vitality Begins to Wane." The gist is that the period between 10 and 15 years of a pastor's tenure produces the most spiritually vital congregational dynamic. Prior to and after that point, it is a less robust picture, on average. We asked the same question in 2015, with very similar findings.

Further, Figure 17 indicates that the longer the pastor is at the church, the less likely the church is to be involved with a merger, plant new churches, or open new campuses. Mergers especially are most likely to occur in the senior pastor's first 10 years.

At some point, pastoral succession will occur—whether moving to work in another context such as another church or denominational leadership, moving to a new role in the same church such as an ambassador to the church's missionaries, moving to retirement, or in some





cases facing death. Whatever the pastor’s age or stage, our survey asked, “How would you rate efforts at planning for the senior pastor’s eventual succession from this church, relative to where you feel that planning should be at this point?” Across all survey participants, 10% said poor, 22% fair, 32% good, 24% very good, and 12% outstanding.

Figure 18 indicates that the older the pastor, the more likely to rate the succession planning as “very good” or “outstanding”—the top two of the five choices offered. Our 2015 survey identically asked about succession planning, and the comparisons in Figure 18 show decided progress overall in how

megachurches are giving attention to this issue.

When the “growth era” pastor does move on, the church looks remarkably different under a successive pastor. We tend to assume these recent-growth churches are special and are guaranteed ongoing growth—that the church has locked into a winning formula that will continue into its future. The research shows otherwise. Successor pastors generally tend to face a situation of stagnation, decreased numerical success, and a church culture of diminished creativity.

While this transition isn’t entirely a picture of decline and despair, it does lead to many challenges. Figure 19 itemizes a dozen comparison points between the situation faced by “growth era” pastors and those pastors who come after that peak growth. The most overt contrast is in the growth rate over the most recent 5 years: 42% under the growth-era pastor compared to 12% under those who follow. The pastor of growth has distinct advantages as the “holder of the charisma mantle”—the person who brought about the significant positive change. Even though pastors of growth are on average older, the churches they lead have a clearer sense of mission and purpose, have greater spiritual vitality, and are more willing to change compared to the megachurches led by subsequent pastors after the growth. This “after pastor,” while on average younger, was surrounded by a congregation where the average age is older, with less giving, a larger budget to support, greater staff salaries, and a bigger building. It’s a church that is less willing to change, with less clear vision and with a lower level of spiritual vitality than when the “growth era” pastor was leading.

Spiritual Vitality in Megachurches Shows Up in Distinct Practices

A congregation that “strongly agrees” its worship is “spiritually vital and alive” is different from all other churches. This pattern has shown up for all 20 years of this survey series. It has held firm for both megachurches and other churches of all sizes.

Many Dramatic Differences Surface When Comparing the Growth-Era Pastor with the Pastors Who Follow

	Growth-Era Pastor	Later Pastor
Growth rate over last 5 years	42%	12%
2020 attendance (pre-pandemic)	3,873	4,451
Current year church budget, in millions	\$6.6	\$8.4
Seating capacity where primary services are held	1,508	1,800
Percentage of the congregation that's older, specifically adults age 65 or higher	14%	19%
Median giving per capita	\$1,725	\$2,015
Senior pastor's age	54	48
Years senior pastor has served here as senior pastor	22	6
Percent of budget to total staffing costs	48%	52%
Agreement on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) that:		
“our congregation has a clear mission and purpose”	4.8	4.5
“our congregation is spiritually vital and alive”	4.5	4.3
“our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges”	4.3	4.1

Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

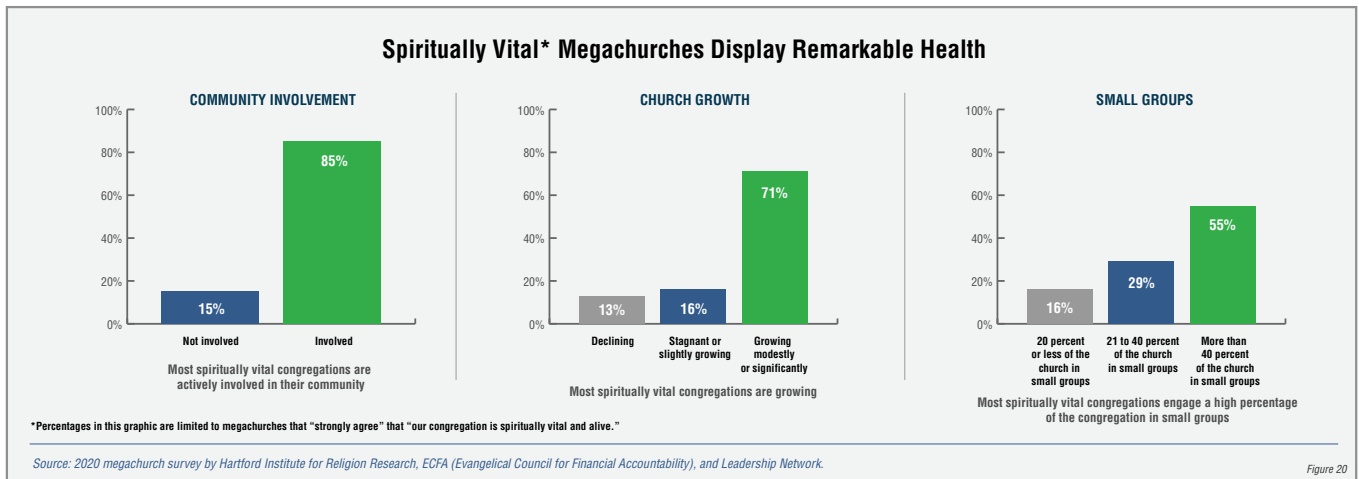
Figure 19

But what does “spiritually vital and alive” mean? In the question above, survey takers give it their own definition. But review of other survey questions identifies a matrix of specific qualities that combine into a tangible sense of spiritual health, organizational optimism, and congregational vitality. Spiritual vitality includes a clear purpose and mission, a willingness to change, a greater level of volunteering, a greater openness to incorporating newcomers into the congregational life, and greater congregational activity in the community and globally.

The results of being spiritually vital and alive are exhibited in more new people at church, along with a sense of energy and thriving as a faith community. The most visible result is that the most spiritually vital megachurches are growing on average of 45% in last 5 years, while the others grew at 25% during that same time.

The following three figures demonstrate the various aspects and outcomes of increased spiritual vitality and its corresponding personal spiritual practices.

Significant attendance growth is not the only benefit of cultivating a spiritually vital congregation. Figure 20 examines the pattern of megachurches that rate themselves as spiritually vital at the highest level—those that “strongly agree” that their church should be described as “spiritually vital and alive.” It shows that those highest-level spiritually vital



churches also overwhelmingly engage in community involvement, have greater growth rates, and have a larger percentage of their congregation involved in small group participation. Each of these three areas have already been covered by separate sections in this report, but their back and forth interplay with spiritual vitality cannot be overemphasized. For example, it's clear that a strong correlation exists between involvement in one's local community and evangelism which also enriches the vitality of the congregation itself. Likewise, strong agreement that one's church is spiritually vital and/or is willing to change to meet new challenges is highly correlated with growth.

Figure 21 continues this exploration by comparing those highest spiritually vital churches with all the other megachurches across 15 characteristics. Some of these distinctions are dramatic and others less so but in fact all of these comparisons are statistically significant and offer evidence of a marked difference between these two groupings of churches. One example: megachurches that rate themselves as spiritually vital at the highest level are far better at incorporating newcomers into the congregation than are those claiming a lower level of spiritual vitality. Taken together, the matrix of positive characteristics that correspond to strongly agreeing that one's church is spiritually vital and alive are undeniable. These spiritually vital congregations distinguish themselves both from smaller churches but also from other vibrant megachurches.

It isn't just a matter of describing one's church as spiritually vital that makes it so; an intentional emphasis on personal spiritual practices has a profound effect on the congregation's functioning. We created a scale encompassing these 7 family and personal religious practices: regular worship attendance, tithing, personal Scripture study, devotional prayer, talking about one's faith with those outside the congregation, parents talking with children about faith, and living out one's faith in all aspects of daily life.

Figure 22 shows the remarkable differences between megachurches with the highest level of emphasis on these practices and those with lower levels. Increased emphasis on these personal practices strongly corresponds with megachurch participants who are more involved in recruiting new people and involved in small groups. Megachurches with more emphasis on these practices are more willing to change to meet new challenges, have a greater sense that the congregation is spiritually vital and alive, are more actively involved in service projects in the community, and demonstrate a more clear sense of mission and

purpose. These spiritually vibrant megachurches place stronger emphasis on Bible study, community service, and mission trips, and are more likely to affirm that the congregation is in excellent financial health.

Megachurches That Rate Themselves as Spiritually Vital at the Highest Level Look Very Different from Other Megachurches		
	Megachurches with high spiritual vitality*	All other megachurches
Overview		
Congregation's growth rate in the last 5 years	45%	25%
Percent of the congregation new to the church in the last 5 years	36%	33%
Percent of the congregation that volunteer regularly at church	35%	33%
On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high)		
Participants are involved in recruiting new people	3.9	3.4
The congregation is good at incorporating newcomers into the congregation	4.5	3.9
The congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges	4.6	4.1
The congregation is actively involved doing service projects in the local community	4.6	4.2
Church leaders emphasize regular worship attendance	4.6	4.4
Church leaders emphasize tithing (giving 10% or more of one's income)	3.9	3.5
Church leaders emphasize personal religious practices of prayer, meditation, Scripture study and/or devotions	4.5	4.2
Church leaders emphasize talking about one's faith with those who are not part of the congregation	4.3	3.9
Church leaders emphasize parents talking about faith with children	4.4	3.9
Church leaders emphasize living out ones faith in all aspects of daily life (work, family, civic engagement)	4.7	4.3
Worship services are innovative	4.1	3.6
Worship services are joyful	4.7	4.3

*"High spiritual vitality" indicates that the survey taker "strongly agreed" that the congregation "is spiritually vital and alive." The survey was scaled with five options from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

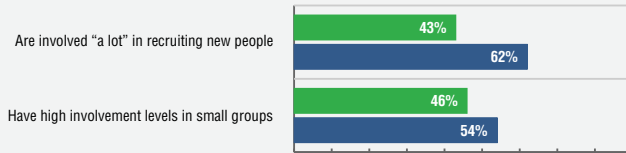
Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Figure 21

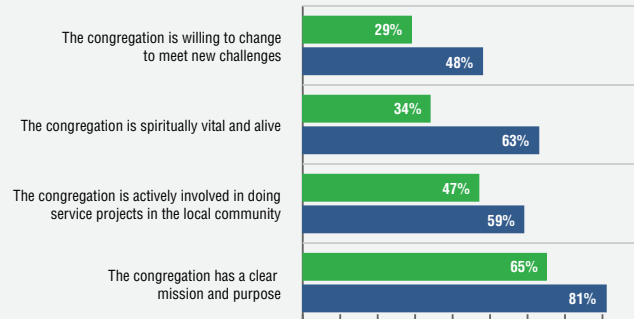
Megachurches that Emphasize Traditional Spiritual Disciplines* Seem to Stand Apart

■ Lower churchwide emphasis on religious practices
■ Highest churchwide emphasis on religious practices

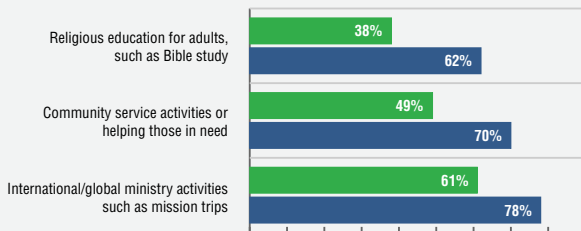
Megachurch Participants



Megachurch Congregations: Strongly Agree That...



Megachurch Congregations: Place a Lot of Emphasis on...



Megachurch Congregations: Describe...



*Religious practices were calculated by scale that includes high levels of worship attendance, tithing, personal Scripture study, devotional prayer, talking about one's faith with those who are not part of your congregation, parents talking with children about faith, and living out one's faith in all aspects of daily life.

Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Figure 22

Security Is Important, But It Has Always Been for Most Megachurches

Public violence is an unfortunate fact of life these days, but given the multiple well-publicized shootings at churches over the past few years, the survey asked about the lengths that megachurches went to in order to keep their congregational members physically safe. Indeed, nearly half (48%) reported that their congregation was "very concerned" about personal safety and security when they gathered and another 45% were "a little" or "somewhat concerned", with only 7% of megachurches "not at all concerned" with security when gathering.

Not surprisingly, the churches with the least concern also implemented the least security measures. Those with the highest levels of concern were most likely to add security just in the past few years, since 2015, rather than previously. Yet over half of all megachurches had volunteer security teams, and alarm systems, and nearly half used cameras prior to the publicized church shootings. In the past 5 years since 2015, however, over 80% use all three, with two-thirds also employing professional security teams and roughly a third are taking the additional precaution of locking doors during services.

We also asked a battery of questions about another dimension of security

related to infants and children. This aspect of safety was even more impressive. Whether it was instituting check-in procedures, background checks, and safe conduct training for volunteers, or general safety and security education for those working with children, nearly three-quarters of churches had begun these practices well before 2015 and nearly 100% had implemented these procedures in the last five years.

It is clear that the security of children has long been a significant priority for megachurches. However, in recent years that caution has extended to adults and especially to gathered events like worship.

Megachurch Finances Increase with Engagement and Trust

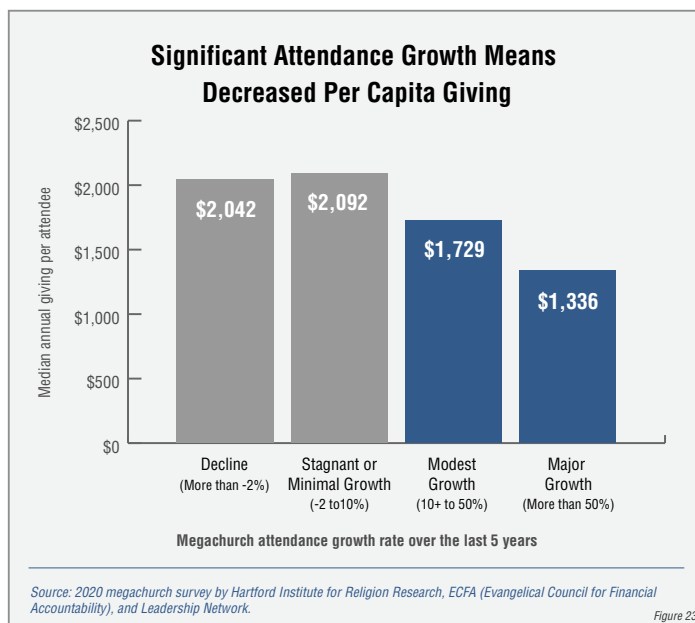
A megachurch, like most churches of all sizes, is funded largely by the donations of those who call that church home. In the minds of many people, megachurches are funded heavily by TV donations, conferences, and product sales, but in reality an average of 96% of a megachurch’s total budget comes from participant contributions (and about half of this amount coming from online giving—with 90% of megachurches using online giving before the pandemic began, with details in the next section). Excluding one-time capital campaigns, the next largest amount—2%—comes from rental income, such as from renting out the chapel for weddings or the church parking lot for commuter parking (these and other types of income unrelated to the mission of the church could be taxable income to the church). For most churches, any remainder might come from an endowment, investments, and other random sources.

The average megachurch budget is \$5,300,000 (median). Of that, exactly half (50%) on average goes to staffing costs (staff salaries and benefits for clergy and non-clergy). Of the remainder, 20% goes to buildings and operations (e.g. utilities, mortgage, insurance), 15% to program support and materials (e.g. education, evangelism), 11% to mission and benevolence (including denominational assessments), and 4% to all other expenditures. This breakdown is quite similar to other-size churches.

Our survey analysis also explored the various influences related to variations in giving. We determined per capita giving as the average giving per person, based on dividing the weekly worship attendance average into the church’s total annual budget.

Figure 23 is titled “Significant Growth Means Decreased Per Capita Giving.” We could also have titled it “When a Megachurch’s Annual Growth Exceeds 10%, Per Capita Giving Doesn’t Keep Up” for the reasons explained below. However we say it, the faster the church is growing, the less people give. Thus, per-person giving is far greater in churches that are declining, stagnant, or who have only very slight growth. In fact, the more the decline, the larger the per-capita giving amount.

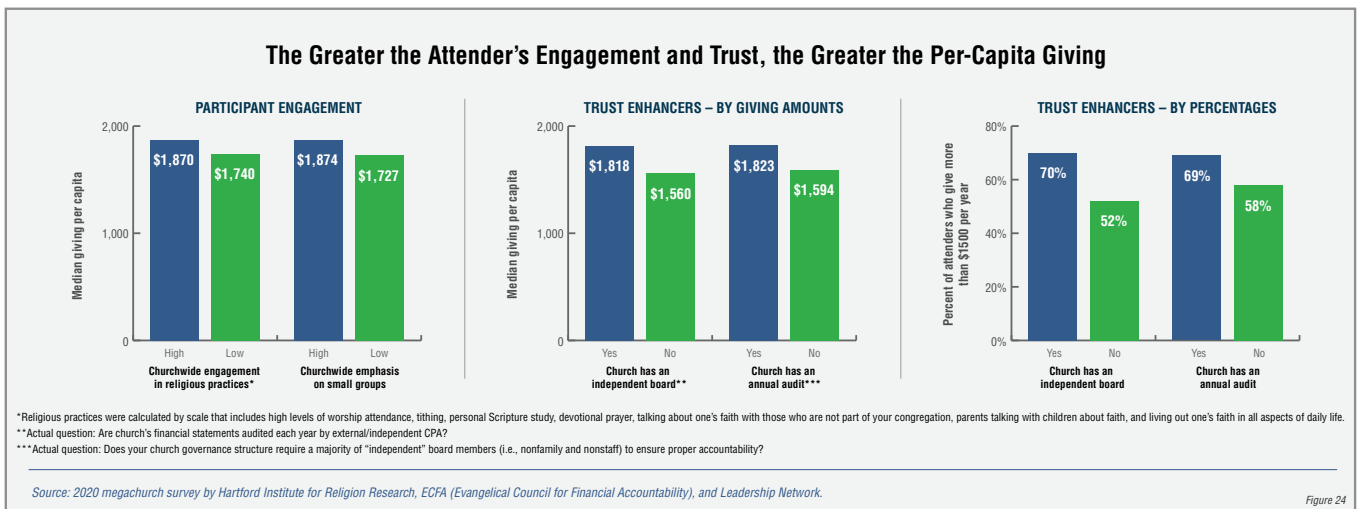
This sounds sad, but it’s very understandable. The larger the church, the less pressure to give financially. The greater number of people contributing puts less pressure on any individual to contribute their share because they assume someone else will contribute if they don’t. Plus, the appearance of “success” through a large building, many staff, and great worship communicates a message that the church already is doing well—they have all they need and they don’t need “my” money. Additionally, rapid growth brings new people who are less committed (at least initially) and who have not captured the church’s vision (at



least, not yet) so are likely to give less. The new people are often young families and single adults, who have less money to give because their earning potential in the marketplace is lower or they have other demands for their income.

What then increases a church’s giving? As Figure 24 illustrates, the greater the emphasis on religious practice, the greater the per-capita giving. Also if a greater percent of the congregation is in small groups, per capita giving goes up dramatically.

From an integrity and trust-building perspective, if the church has an annual audit performed, per capita giving goes up. Likewise, if the majority of its governance board is independent (i.e., a majority of the board is both non-family and non-staff), per capita giving goes up. What it comes down to is this: if a church is building member commitment through an emphasis on personal practices of spiritual growth, through involvement in the life of the congregation through attendance and small group, and through reinforcing the commitment to of fiscal integrity and trust, the per capita giving is likely to increase.



Megachurches Were Better Prepared for the Pandemic’s Shutdown

Will the pandemic, including its financial implications, change the popularity of megachurches? We don’t know, but virtually every state has lifted its public-meeting restrictions in stages, allowing small meetings first and large-crowd gatherings somewhat further into the future.

What we do know from our data is that a majority of these megachurches participated in the survey in the weeks leading up to the mid-March shutdown. We compared responses of the 96% of megachurches that participated pre-pandemic to the 4% that participated after public gatherings were prohibited. We encouraged this handful of churches to respond as if it was pre-pandemic, but still we saw at least one statistically notable distinction between the two groups. The one area surfacing sizable differences was technological—that of the role of online worship, online attendance, and percent giving through online means, all of which predictably rose dramatically after the pandemic began even though we encouraged these churches to disregard their present pandemic situation for more accurate comparison. However, it is very significant when thinking about megachurches and their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and mandated social distancing measure to note that prior to the pandemic most megachurches were prepared for the social isolation order far better than

most smaller churches. Pre-lockdown, all but 16% of surveyed megachurches were already live streaming and over half (54%) online worship services (i.e., more than just watching sermon video streaming), with 16% more thinking about it. Also 92% used online giving “a lot,” with the rest (8%) saying that have “some use.” Overall, more than half (52%) of their annual income came from online giving pre-COVID-19. Further, going into the pandemic period, 42% said their financial state was excellent and another 42% reported it was good. Finally, the vast majority of megachurches had already relied on the multisite and small group meeting strategies to create intimate smaller congregations within the larger megachurch. We may have to wait a few years to see the full impact of the pandemic, but based on their position of strength at the beginning of the year, megachurches are likely to weather this virus storm well as long as their leadership remains wise and cautious.

What to Do with These Trends?

Reports like this not only identify important trends and potential benchmarks. They also raise questions and prompt discussion. Churches of all sizes can ask, “What can we learn—both positively and negatively—from these developments in America’s largest churches?” For those who want to take action, here is what we see as the biggest implications coming out of our analysis of this study:

- One component of creating greater diversity, and especially racial diversity in your church, is to be more intentional about how you value diversity, along with incorporating other strategies.
- If your church is growing, consider all the ways your impact can expand. Consider this impact: 68% of rapidly growing churches have started a new church in the last 5 years or are planning to do so.
- Realize that successful outreach to and engagement with one’s surrounding local community requires a fundamental reorientation of attitude within your congregation itself. Outreach beyond the walls also requires a welcoming spirit and an embrace of diversity within the church.
- Don’t miss the simplicity of church involvement in the community. The payoffs are huge, from community impact to growth and spiritual vitality in the church.
- To enhance your church’s spiritual vitality, make small groups more central and also work to get a greater percentage of your people involved in them.
- Understand that political activity and discussions within the context of the congregation might come with increased levels of conflict, including running afoul of IRS laws on prohibited political activity.
- Understand that per capita giving is impacted positively in environments where there is an emphasis on personal spiritual practices, regular church attendance, involvement in a small group, and reinforcement of the commitment to fiscal integrity and trust.
- All leaders, including megachurch pastors, peak and decline in effectiveness unless they’re rethinking who they are and creating a new reality. There’s an ideal period between 5 and 20 years (for smaller congregations it’s more like a 7-year span from year 2 to 8), an optimal season of leadership, and after that tends to be a routinizing of patterns. Take advantage of this period of ministry effectiveness, or better, cultivate a culture of continual reinvention.

- The most successful long-time clergy reinvent the church every few years, or birth several other churches or campuses within the church. Otherwise, they eventually stagnate and slowly decline. Most importantly, congregation growth happens in many ways. It is not just about getting larger attendance but also broadening your scope of ministry through additional service times, multiple locations, planting other congregations, seeking mergers with other churches, and having an attitude of expansion that extends beyond your own ministry.

From 2015 to 2020 and Beyond

Overall, how does this pre-pandemic glimpse into the state of megachurches compare to what we learned from surveys in 2015, 2010, 2005, or 2000? By asking many of the same questions year after year, we've been able to see some decided shifts. (And readers are most welcome to access earlier research reports, such as our 2015 illustrated report titled "Recent Shifts in America's Largest Protestant Churches," at hartfordinstitute.org or leadnet.org. The appendix to this report shows the entire 2020 survey itself, with response frequencies for each question.) Likely, we will repeat a version of this survey in the next year or two for a post-pandemic glimpse of how megachurches have fared during COVID-19.

Looking at the trends across the past decade or more, it turns out that some trends are reversing. Most notably is the lack of succession readiness, which is reducing as Figure 18 showed. The level of openness to discuss succession has gone from being "the Elephant in the Boardroom" as a 2004 book title described it, to being a more comfortable discussion of what's "Next," as a 2020 book title described it. Net result: there's a noticeable movement with boards and pastors taking appropriate steps to prepare for inevitable succession.

Other trends that surfaced in the past have accentuated and intensified. These especially include the growth of multisite, of the centrality of small groups, and of multiracial megachurches, as Figures 2-5 and 7 showed.

Finally, other trends have not varied. Issues associated with spiritual vitality, a strong sense of mission and purpose, per-capita giving, and openness to change have all stayed the same, as Figures 20-24 showed. These tried and true correlations seem to be unchanging dynamics in large churches, and perhaps in churches of all sizes.

Meanwhile research departments—such as at the Hartford Institute and ECFA—will continue to develop best-practice insights, tools, templates, and other helps designed to resource churches and other Christ-centered nonprofits, enhancing their God-given missions. How to get started? Just go to hartfordinstitute.org and ECFA.church/resources.

About Hartford Institute for Religion Research



HARTFORD INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGION RESEARCH

Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research (hartfordinstitute.org), founded in 1981, has an international reputation as an important bridge between the scholarly community and the practice of faith. Its

work is guided by a disciplined understanding of the interrelationship between the life and resources of American religious institutions and the possibilities and limits placed on those institutions by the social and cultural context in which they work.

About ECFA



The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA.org), founded in 1979, is an accreditation agency dedicated to helping Christian churches and ministries earn the public's trust through adherence to Seven Standards of Responsible Stewardship™. ECFA's mission is enhancing trust in Christ-centered churches and ministries. It equips for financial integrity through useful, helpful and timely resources including surveys, eBooks, videos, webinars, eNewsletters and Knowledge Center documents.

About the Authors



Warren Bird, Ph.D., is Vice President of Research and Equipping for the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA.org), developing a stream of helpful studies and reports for free download at ECFA.church/surveys. Previously he served as Research Director for 13 years at Leadership Network. With background as a pastor and seminary professor, he is author or co-author of 33 books for ministry leaders including *Viral Churches:*

Turning Church Planters into Movement Makers; Next: Pastoral Succession that Works, expanded and updated edition; and *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, expanded and updated edition. Contact him at warren@ecfa.org



Scott Thumma, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Hartford Seminary and leads its D.Min. program. He is director of Hartford Institute for Religion Research and co-leads the Faith Communities Today research project. Scott has published many articles and chapters in addition to co-authoring three books, *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants*, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What*

We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches, and *Gay Religion*. His research focuses on megachurches, the rise of nondenominationalism, and the impact of the internet on congregational dynamics. Contact him at sthumma@hartsem.edu

Endnotes

¹ The survey was conducted as part of Faith Communities Today (faithcommunitiestoday.org), a network of similar studies designed to research all expressions of American religion. The megachurch survey was fielded from late January until May 2020. The megachurch survey across time (2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and now 2020) has repeated many of the same questions, enabling us compare changes over time. For the 2020 version, the 582 key informant responses from these megachurches (we included several churches with attendances of 1,800-1,999 in this analysis since attendance variations of a few hundred happen frequently for such large churches) represent a 33% response rate from the roughly 1,750 U.S. megachurches, with about 95% of the responses received prior to the late-March pandemic shutdown of in-person worship services.

The results from these 582 megachurches have been weighted to represent the total 1,750 megachurch population with a 3% +/- margin of error. All the findings we report have a .05 or greater statistical significance.

Both ECFA (ECFA.church/surveys) and the Hartford Institute (hartfordinstitute.org) released branded copies of this report. The contents of both reports are parallel but not identical. The findings from U.S. churches of all sizes plus findings from other U.S. faith groups will be released in early 2021 by Faith Communities Today.

² The all-churches study has been popularized by Michael Emerson, Kevin Dougherty, and Mark Chaves, using the National Congregations Study directed by Mark Chaves of Duke University. For further details, see <http://multiethnic.church/released-new-2020-statistics-on-multiracial-churches/> and [National Congregations Study, https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/](https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/).

NOTE: Portions of this report were excerpted with permission and published in *Outreach* magazine, Sept-Oct 2020, under the title “Megatrends: What’s Shaping the American Megachurch—and Why Does It Matter to Churches of All Sizes?”

Download additional copies of this report at
hartfordinstitute.org.

Appendix

The Megachurch Survey Itself: What 582 Churches Said

NOTE: 95% of the survey were received pre-COVID (before the late-March shutdown of in-person meetings). Also, percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Worship

Please estimate the total average attendance at all campuses (including children) at all of your regular weekend worship service(s):

	Currently	5 Years Ago
Mean	4,092	3,408
Median	2,779	2,400

Rate of change in attendance

Mean	33.6% growth in 5 years
Median	20% growth in 5 years

	Percent
Decline by -10% or more	9.8
Decline by -2.1% to -10%	9.3
Stable between -2% and 2%	6.9
Increase 2.1% to 10%	10.9
Increase 10.1% to 50%	43.7
Increase 50.1% to 100%	13.5
Increase 100.1% or more	6.0

Average Attendance Grouping	
1,800-2,999	56%
3,000-3,999	15%
4,000-4,999	10%
5,000-9,999	14%
10,000 or more	5%

Does your church offer worship services in multiple locations (satellite, off campus, multisite)?

Yes	70%
No	17%
Not yet, but thinking about it	10%
We did but discontinued this approach	3%

How many site locations do you have?	
2	28%
3	23%
4	19%
5	11%
6	10%
7	9%

How many total weekend worship services do you offer in all your locations?	
Mean	7.6
Median	6

Do you offer an online campus worship experience (i.e., more than just watching sermon video streaming)?	
Yes	54%
No	30%
Not yet, but thinking about it	16%

In what Region is your church's primary place of worship physically located?	
Northeast	9%
South	49%
Central	19%
West	23%

Dominant Race of the Congregation:	
White	40%
Black/African American	2%
Multiracial (20% or more diversity)	58%

What is the seating capacity where your primary services are held?	
Mean	1,581
Median	1,200

Is your church a part of a network, fellowship, or association?	
Yes	51%
No	49%

Top mentioned Willow Creek Association n=69, ARC n=51, Northpoint n=9, Acts 29 n=7.

How often are the following a part of your church's regular weekend worship services?					
	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Includes choir	43%	27%	13%	9%	8%
Video segments shown during worship	3%	11%	20%	34%	32%
Image magnification projection of the preacher	11%	5%	3%	6%	75%
Interactive use of social media during sermons	22%	40%	19%	10%	9%
Includes communion	1%	5%	38%	40%	16%

Does your congregation provide the following accommodations?		
	Yes	No
Wheelchair access through the building	99%	1%
Sign Language interpreters	44%	56%
Large print worship materials	15%	85%
Hearing assistive devices	48%	52%

How well do the following describe your church's largest weekend worship service?					
	Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Well	Very well
Reverent	8%	24%	38%	23%	7%
Contemporary	1%	2%	7%	31%	59%
Formal ritual or liturgy	60%	28%	9%	2%	1%
Thought-provoking	0%	1%	14%	40%	45%
Innovative	1%	7%	28%	41%	23%
Joyful	0%	1%	7%	42%	50%
Informal	1%	4%	17%	32%	46%

Participants

Overall, how many persons (including children) regularly participate in worship or other religious activities in your congregation?	
Mean	5,982
Median	4,200

Of the above regular participants, what percent are in each of the following age groups?	
children (ages 0-12)	18%
youth (ages 13-17)	11%
young adults (ages 18-34)	19%
middle adults (ages 35-64)	38%
senior adults (ages 65 and older)	15%

Of the above regular participants, what percent are in each of the following categories?	
White (non-Hispanic)	72%
Black or African American (non-Hispanic)	11%
Asian (non-Hispanic)	4%
Hispanic or Latino(a)	10%
American Indian/Alaska Native (non-Hispanic)	1%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	1%
Multiracial	5%

The percentage of megachurches that have 20% or greater level of racial diversity?	58%
---	-----

Of all regularly participating adults (age 18 and over), what percent would you estimate:	
Are female?	56%
Are college graduates?	56%
Are new to this congregation in the last five years?	35%
Volunteer regularly at the congregation?	34%
Are immigrants (0-5 years in the U.S.)?	5%
Are persons with Special Needs (physical, mental, emotional challenges)?	4%

Overall, to what extent are your congregation's regularly participating adults involved in recruiting new people?				
Not at all	A little	Some	Quite a bit	A lot
0%	9%	38%	40%	13%

Mission and Identity

Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
(Check one on each line.)

<i>our congregation?</i>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Has a clear mission and purpose	1%	0%	3%	22%	74%
Is striving to be diverse (e.g. racially, ethnically, socio-economically)	1%	5%	16%	42%	36%
Is good at incorporating new people into the congregation	0%	3%	11%	55%	31%
Is spiritually vital and alive	0%	1%	3%	47%	49%
Is willing to change to meet new challenges	0%	1%	8%	52%	39%
Is actively involved in our local community	0%	2%	9%	36%	53%

Since 2010, has your congregation experienced any of the following?

	No	Yes, in 2010-2015	Yes, in 2016-2020	Planning Soon
Merged with another congregation	78%	5%	16%	1%
Split into two or more congregations	96%	12%	2%	0%
Helped start or plant a new congregation	30%	18%	48%	4%
Opened satellite or branch location(s)	27%	22%	47%	4%
Changed the name of the congregation	84%	6%	8%	1%
Changed denominational affiliation	96%	2%	1%	1%
Left a denomination (to become independent or unaffiliated)	96%	3%	1%	0%
Joined a denomination (no longer independent or unaffiliated)	99%	1%	0%	0%

What is your church's specific denomination or faith group?	
Nondenom	40%
SBC	15%
AOG	5%
IndepCOC, UMC, EF, Converge, CMA	2%
other groups	1% or less

Whether part of a denomination or independent, Is your church a part of a network, fellowship, or association (e.g., ARC, , Acts 29)?	
Yes	51%
No	49%

What networks listed the most times? Willow Creek Association - 69 times, ARC - 51 times, Northpoint - 9 times, Acts29 - 7 times, and many others listed 1-4 times.

If your church is nondenominational or independent, was it founded that way?	
Yes	60%
No	40%

Which label comes closest to describing the theological outlook of the majority of your regularly participating adults?	
Fundamentalist	.3%
Pentecostal	7%
Moderate	5%
Progressive	2%
Missional	12%
Evangelical	65%
Charismatic	5%
Liberal	0%
Seeker	4%

Programs and Functioning

Does your congregation have any of the following programs or activities? If “Yes,” how much emphasis is given to the activity? (Check one on each line.)			
	No	Yes	
		Some emphasis	A lot of emphasis
Religious education for adults (e.g., scripture studies)	5%	45%	50%
Sports groups	50%	38%	12%
Recovery ministries	8%	54%	38%
Community service activities	2%	38%	60%
Young adult (18-34) activities or programs	8%	54%	38%
Senior (65+) activities or programs	23%	55%	22%
International/Global ministry activities (mission trips)	0%	30%	70%
Social justice/advocacy groups	42%	42%	16%
Preschool and/or daycare center	58%	18%	25%
Elementary (Primary) school	77%	6%	17%
High (Secondary) school	81%	5%	14%
Special needs ministry	17%	53%	30%

Many churches make use of small groups for fellowship, spiritual nurture and religious education (in addition to church school or mission groups, etc.). Which statement best describes the situation in your church?	
Such groups do not exist within our church	0%
A few such groups meet, but they are not central to our church’s program	11%
We have many such groups; they are central to our strategy of Christian nurture and spiritual formation.	89%

What percentage of the adult participants are typically involved in a small group?

Mean	45%
Median	42%

How much does your congregation emphasize the following personal and family religious practices? (Check one on each line.)

	Not at all	A little	Some	Quite a bit	A lot
Regular worship attendance	0%	1%	9%	34%	56%
Tithing (giving 10% or more of one's income)	2%	10%	32%	34%	22%
Personal religious practices	0%	1%	14%	40%	45%
Talking about one's faith with those who are not a part of your congregation	0%	4%	22%	38%	36%
Parents talking with children about faith	0%	2%	20%	41%	37%
Living out one's faith in all aspects of one's daily life (e.g., work, family, civic engagement)	0%	1%	9%	31%	59%

During the past 12 months, has your congregation been involved in any of the following activities with other faith groups? (Check all that apply on each line.)

	No	Yes	
		With Other Christian Groups	With Other Faith Traditions
Worship Services	51%	29%	4%
Educational or social activities	32%	44%	11%
Community service activities	19%	51%	21%

To what extent is your congregation concerned about personal safety and security when you gather?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Very
7%	18%	27%	48%

Does your congregation use, or do, any of the following regarding security when you gather for services? (Check all that apply.)

	No	Yes, before 2015	Yes, since 2015
Alarm systems	13%	55%	24%
Security cameras	7%	46%	41%
Locking doors during services	52%	16%	18%
Volunteer security team or ministry from congregation	4%	53%	38%
Paid, professional security personnel	25%	37%	28%

Does your congregation use, or do, any of the following? (Check all that apply.)

	No	Yes, before 2015	Yes, since 2015
Check-in procedures for infants and children	0%	76%	22%
Background checks for volunteers with children	0%	77%	21%
Safe conduct training for those working with children	1%	70%	26%
Training on general safety and security	5%	63%	26%

Thinking about the past 12 months, has your congregation organized any groups, meetings, classes, or events specifically focused on the following purposes or activities?

	No	Yes
To discuss politics	93%	7%
An effort to get people registered to vote	86%	14%
To get out the vote during an election	90%	11%
To organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials of any sort	97%	3%
To organize or participate in a demonstration or march either in support of or opposition to some public issue or policy	93%	7%
Distribute voter guides	86%	14%

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
(Check one on each line.)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Almost everyone in this congregation has the same political position	30%	36%	23%	10%	1%
This congregation has experienced recent conflict over political issues	38%	33%	20%	8%	1%
This congregation avoids discussing political issues when it gathers	4%	12%	21%	41%	23%
This congregation is politically active	20%	22%	38%	18%	2%

During the past 5 years, has your congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts? *(Check all that apply.)*

No	29%
Yes, but it/they were not serious	29%
Yes, and in at least one instance some people left	25%
Yes, and in at least one instance some people withheld donations	13%
Yes, and in at least one instance, a clergy leader or staff member left	18%

Leadership

Please describe the **senior** or **sole clergy leader** of this congregation (if co-leaders, answer only about the oldest co-leader).

Age: average age 53 years old, span 33 years to 83 years old

Leader's race/ethnicity *(check all that apply):*

White (non-Hispanic)	94%
Black or African American (non-Hispanic)	3%
Hispanic or Latino(a)	1%
Asian (non-Hispanic)	0.3%
Multiracial	1%
Other	0.7%

In what year did the senior leader start serving this congregation?

Median	2005 <i>(span 1974 to 2020)</i>
--------	---------------------------------

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

Yes	73%
No	27%

Which of the following characteristics apply to the clergy leader of this congregation? (Check either “yes” or “no” for each characteristic.)

Yes - Serves as a chaplain	5%
Yes - Has an MDiv degree	45%
Yes - Has had a sabbatical within the last 10 years	49%
Yes - Regularly schedules and takes a day off each week (from all paid employment)	73%
Yes - Is a first generation immigrant	1%

How would you rate efforts at planning for the senior pastor’s eventual succession from this church, relative to where you feel that planning should be at this point?

Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Outstanding
10%	22%	32%	24%	12%

Technology

Does your congregation use any of the following technology? (Check one on each line.)

	No	Yes		
		A Little	Some	A Lot
App(s) (e.g. congregational or denominational)	11%	8%	24%	57%
Facebook	1%	3%	21%	75%
Twitter	22%	19%	30%	29%
Blogging	42%	26%	21%	11%
Texting	7%	25%	40%	28%
Live streaming of worship service/sermon	16%	2%	7%	75%
Electronic/ACH/online giving	0%	0%	8%	92%
Other technology used that you believe is important to your congregation (please describe): Results to be released later				

Do you track how many people watch the live stream of your worship service/sermon?	
No, we don't do live-streaming	18%
No, we don't keep track of online audiences	10%
Yes (<i>please provide an approximate average number—median 658, mean 2,607</i>)	72%

Approximately, what percentage of your regular monthly giving is received through online giving?	
Mean	52%
Median	50%

Finances

What was the approximate dollar amount of your congregation's total budget for 2019?	
Mean	\$7,011,563
Median	\$5,300,000

Approximately, what percentage of your congregation's annual income are from the following? (<i>Median figures</i>)	
Participant contributions (e.g. tithes, offerings, dues)	96%
Fund raising events	1%
Rental income	1%
Endowments	1%
Investments	1%
School tuition	1%
Capital campaign income	3%
Other income	1%

What was the total amount of money your congregation spent in your most recent fiscal year? (Do not include funds for capital improvements or primary/secondary schools.)

Mean	\$7,331,699
Median	\$5,302,235

Approximately, what percentage of your congregation's annual expenditures in your most recent fiscal year were for the following? (Median percent)

Total staff salaries and benefits (clergy and non-clergy)	50%
Buildings and operations (e.g. utilities, mortgage, insurance)	20%
Program support and materials (e.g. education, evangelism)	15%
Mission and benevolence (include denominational assessments)	11%
All other expenditures	5%

How would you describe your congregation's financial health today and five years ago? (Check one in each column.)

	Today	Five years ago
In serious difficulty	0%	1%
In some difficulty	2%	6%
Tight, but we manage	14%	21%
Good	42%	42%
Excellent	42%	30%

Are church's financial statements audited each year by external/independent CPA?

Yes	78%
No	20%
Don't Know	2%

What Board format does your church have to guide the congregation and assist the senior pastor?	
An internal board of members	80%
An external board	4%
A mixed board of members and external persons	7%
Both an internal board and an external board	5%
A different board configuration	4%

Does your church governance structure require a majority of “independent” board members (i.e., nonfamily and nonstaff) to ensure proper accountability?	
Yes	76%
No	20%
Don't Know	4%

What are your top 2 concerns about the future of your church’s ministry?
Results to be released later

What are the top 2 aspects of your church’s ministry that you are most proud of?
Results to be released later



hartfordinstitute.org