

Do We Need Adventist Megachurches?

By Clinton Wahlen

Megachurches have become big business according to *Forbes* magazine: raking in over \$8.5 billion a year in the U.S. alone. Defined as churches with over 2,000 attendees a week, the average megachurch income was \$6.7 million in 2007. The Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, the largest megachurch in the U.S., boasts a budget of \$70 million and weekly attendance of 43,500. Leasing the former home of the Houston Rockets basketball team, the church spent \$95 million just to make the facility *feel* like a church, putting wall-to-wall carpet underneath the 14,000 seats. “Twin waterfalls book-end a stage that rises and falls before a circling gold globe and a pulpit.”¹ Even the financial crisis seemingly has not had much of an impact on these churches.

Of course, large churches are not new. They have long been established in the major cities and many great European cathedrals have seating capacities over 10,000. St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, for example, can potentially seat 13,800 while St. Peter’s in Rome has a capacity of 29,000.² The largest megachurch in the world is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul led by David Yonggi Cho. Founded in 1958, the church has a total seating capacity of 25,000 and now claims a current membership of about 800,000.³ But is bigger really better? Are more members, more money, more capabilities always “more” or is something lost in the process?

More to the point, how should we as Adventists relate to the megachurch movement? This raises an even more basic question: what is “church”? Is it something we “do,” somewhere we “go,” or something we “are”? All these definitions—as worship, as a building, as a congregation—and more have been given. What did Jesus intend by “church” (*ekklēsia*, Matt 16:18; 18:17) and what does the NT mean by the term? These questions are increasingly crucial in an age where the church has been struggling to remain relevant to the world around it.

The Biblical Concept of “Church”

How the term *ekklēsia* came to mean “church” is debated.⁴ In the New Testament it may refer to a local congregation or, more comprehensively, to the church as the totality of Christians everywhere. The word is used over 100 times in the Septuagint, usually as a translation of *qāhāl* (“assembly,” e.g., Deut 9:10),⁵ the Hebrew term that seems to be behind the Christian usage.⁶ In its most basic sense, therefore, the church is a gathering of people in a particular place.⁷ Is its size important?

From its earliest beginnings, the church was conceived along the lines of a spiritual family (Mark 3:31-35; Matt 23:8; John 8:34-36) so that terms such as “brothers,” “sisters,” and “little children” could be used affectionately to refer to fellow church members who have close fellowship with one another.⁸ Gatherings in homes, already an important aspect of Jesus’ ministry, continued to be important as venues for the church (e.g., Rom 16:5, 23; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2; 2 John 10). While some might argue that this practice may have been merely out of convenience or necessity, the importance of the family as a metaphor for the church, even in connection with church officers (1 Tim 3:4, 5, 12), suggests this was not the only or even a determinative factor. Other images such as “little flock” and “remnant” likewise suggest a small number.⁹

The largest “Christian” gatherings in the New Testament that number in the thousands are those of Jesus teaching and feeding the multitudes (Mark 6:44; 8:9) and on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). However, these were unique, unrepeated gatherings, as was the assembly on one occasion of more than 500 witnesses to the resurrection (1 Cor 15:6). The fact that megachurches divide their members into much smaller groups reflects the importance of close fellowship that is not possible once a church grows beyond a certain size. This is also why Jesus considered a not overly large circle as His “church” (which included a significant contingent of women followers, Luke 9:2-3) who also heard many of His teachings. The twelve, on the other hand, were being disciples—prepared for leadership—and it is to these that Jesus entrusted instruction not given to the

larger group. We see a similar pattern in Paul's training of leaders who would oversee the congregations he established and who spread the gospel to the surrounding areas.

A Closer Look at Megachurches

Rather than following the biblical model, megachurches “have become like corporations, competing for market share by offering social centers, child-care programs, first-class entertainment and comfortable, consumer Christianity.”¹⁰ Of course, there is nothing wrong with meeting societal needs, but as churches become mega-sized there is a tendency for the pastors to see themselves less like “shepherds of the flock” and more like CEOs whose job is to cast the vision and motivate people to carry it out.¹¹ The Yoido Full Gospel Church lists 698 pastors (171 of which are ordained), 19 regional sanctuaries, and 151 prayer houses.¹² This is really a denomination disguised as a church. In order to preserve the element of fellowship and discipleship, it is divided into more than 25,000 “cell groups” or congregations averaging about 30 members each.¹³

Authors of the most thorough study to date of megachurches in America attribute their rise to a changing American culture in which megainstitutions are increasingly prevalent, thus making “more appealing” the megachurch form of church organization: “Since the 1950s, hospitals, schools, stores, factories, and entertainment centers have all grown to megaproportions; therefore why shouldn't churches?”¹⁴ These authors also enumerate many positive characteristics of the megachurch, including intentionality in ministry, a clear congregational identity and mission, and “professional-quality” worship services that are entertaining. But, because of size, the megachurch also scripts member involvement, institutionalizing every aspect of church life from greeting and seating to indoctrination and involvement. “Nothing is left to chance. . . . The megachurch assumption is that contemporary individuals do not interact unless forced to and are relative strangers to those they meet.”¹⁵ In addition, in order to appeal to the contemporary culture “there are low, and often almost no, boundaries between where the church's ministries start and the world's influences end. The distinctions between secular and sacred are often minimal at best.”¹⁶

One unlikely critic of the megachurch movement is David Platt, who was once described as “the youngest megachurch pastor in history.” He writes in his recent book: “Soon I realized I was on a collision course with an American church culture where success is defined by bigger crowds, bigger budgets, and bigger buildings. I was now confronted with a startling reality: Jesus actually spurned the things that my church culture said were most important.”¹⁷ Further, he argues, “success in the kingdom of God involves moving down, not up.”¹⁸ Platt pondered his time with churches in difficult parts of the world where it is dangerous and costly to be a Christian in comparison with the plush and plump life of his new megachurch: “I could not help but think that somewhere along the way we had missed what is radical about our faith and replaced it with what is comfortable. We were settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves.”¹⁹ At the same time, Platt still serves as senior pastor of the Church at Brook Hills with a weekly attendance of 4,300.²⁰

Adventists and the Megachurch Movement

What are we to make of the megachurch movement and what lessons can we learn? First, relatively few Adventist churches in North America fit within the megachurch category. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research, which maintains a database of megachurches in the United States, lists only eight Adventist churches. Their average weekly attendance ranges from 1800 to 3000, but all of these are either connected with or located in close proximity to Adventist institutions.²¹ Judging from membership records, ten other Adventist churches may enjoy an average weekly attendance that could qualify them as a megachurch, but again most if not all are connected to large Adventist institutions.²² And in these institutional settings, such large churches have much to offer. Furthermore, they do not fit the megachurch pattern described by Hartford—an observation that points up a major flaw of the study. While the study recognizes that megachurches are not

monolithic (i.e. they come in many different sizes and exhibit widely different personalities and practices), the statistical analysis tends to flatten out the sizeable differences among them. So, for example, many established mainline churches that are very large bear little resemblance to the megachurch pattern the study describes. The same could be said of large Adventist churches connected with institutions. These are not really megachurches in the Hartford mold. It would have been better for the researchers to analyze *separately* the different *types* of megachurches, rather than lump them together.

There have been only a few deliberate Adventist attempts to grow megachurches and none have been successful. They have only divided and decimated existing congregations and have sometimes broken ties with the denomination altogether.²³ Why can we not point to a single example of a truly *Adventist* megachurch? Various factors, including local and specific ones, are no doubt involved in these cases. However, there are more fundamental forces at work too. The notion that methods and practices can be theologically neutral is a myth. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the methodology churches employ *always* springs from theology. The two are inseparable and each directly affects the other. So we need to consider the theological factors at work in the megachurch movement as well as other reasons for concern.

1. Generic message. In order to attract the most people the message is tailored to avoid offense and underscore the themes all Christians share. “Thus doctrine should be downplayed, especially if it is distinctive and may lead those we want to reach to feel uncomfortable or excluded.”²⁴ Sermons may tend to avoid or seriously dilute topics important to Adventists like the sanctuary, the Sabbath, the Spirit of Prophecy, the state of the dead, and the health message. Many lifestyle values are also virtually ignored as “eighteenth-century holdovers.”²⁵

2. Little real evangelism. Some large churches may grow by drawing Adventists from other congregations. This is nothing new—over a hundred years ago Ellen White mentioned this phenomenon, lamenting the threat it posed to the prosperity and even the life of smaller churches:²⁶ “It would be vastly better for their children, for themselves, and for the cause of God if they [Adventists] would remain in the smaller churches, where their help is needed, instead of going to the larger churches, where, because they are not needed, there is a constant temptation to fall into spiritual inactivity.”²⁷ Even the pastor of one of the largest churches in America wonders whether megachurches are “just taking people from other churches because we have a cooler church.”²⁸

3. Spiritual decline. As the statement quoted from Ellen White indicates, larger congregations encourage inactivity because, as churches grow larger, only a select few are willing and/or considered capable enough to actively lead out. Worship begins to take on more elements of “performance,” especially with the growing prevalence of videotaping or even live streaming of worship services. Ellen White likened Adventists in these large churches to thickly-planted trees that become “dwarfed and sickly” because they have no room to grow. They also act as “dead weights,” increasing the burdens on those who are active.²⁹ Even “the youngest megachurch pastor in history” questions the focus in many large worship services: “When we gather in our church building to sing and lift up our hands in worship, we may not actually be worshipping the Jesus of the Bible. Instead, we may be worshipping ourselves.”³⁰

4. Erosion of sacred funds. Very large facilities are not only expensive to buy or lease, they are even more expensive to operate. Comfort costs money. That is one of the reasons most megachurches hold four or more services over two or three days.³¹ According to *Forbes* magazine, only about 25% of total megachurch income is spent on ministry/mission work; the rest covers salaries and building costs.³² With greater size comes greater wealth but also many more expenses simply for infrastructure and operation and thus the tendency to feel that a greater share of the offerings need to remain at the local level. One Adventist pastor now even argues that some tithe monies are best kept there.³³

5. Minimizing standards for baptism. Two tendencies which often reinforce each other in order to secure larger numbers: the identification of “core” doctrines from among our 28 fundamental beliefs as if the other beliefs were not as crucial and the idea that baptism into Christ is separate from church membership. But, by definition, the fundamental beliefs are just that: what Adventists consider of fundamental importance to faith. And Paul is clear that there is just one baptism, which is baptism into Christ’s body the church (Eph 4:4-5; 1 Cor 12:13).

6. Profanation of worship and even of the Sabbath. If “the distinctions between secular and sacred are often minimal at best”³⁴—and this observation may largely explain why some efforts at “contemporizing” worship seem offensive to many Adventists—then the essence of worship itself is being changed, even “profaned” (i.e. cheapened and secularized). In such a case, we must ask, with Platt, whether we are still worshipping God or whether we are merely worshipping ourselves. And if worship is more profane than holy, then are we really keeping the Sabbath holy? Further, if keeping the Sabbath holy appears to be less of an issue in certain places, I would not be surprised if it turns out to be in some way related to our recent experimentation with contemporary worship forms.

Conclusion

As tempting as it might be to consider megachurches as evidence of success, there are many reasons to give us pause. Despite the obvious attraction of large facilities, resource-rich worship services, and the reassurance of “strength in numbers,” these gains are frequently more than offset by serious theological problems and other drawbacks, including fewer *active* members, cannibalization of smaller churches, and the tendency to aim for the least common denominator. The following insightful statement provides much food for thought:

It is the virtue, intelligence, and piety of the people composing our churches, not their numbers, that should be a source of joy and thankfulness.³⁵

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¹ Jesse Bogan, “America’s Biggest Megachurches,” *Forbes*, June 26, 2009; online: http://www.forbes.com/2009/06/26/americas-biggest-megachurches-business-megachurches_slide_2.html. Churches with a weekly attendance over 10,000 have also been labeled “gigachurches.”

² Larger seating capacities (25,600 and 54,000 respectively) are given in Frank Eugene Kidder, *The Architects’ and Builders’ Handbook: Data for Architects, Structural Engineers, Contractors, and Draughtsmen* (17th ed. enlarged; New York: Wiley, 1921), 1654, but assume an area of only 19.7 inches square per person (about 2.7 sq. ft.). These capacities have been recalculated based on five square feet (about 0.5 sq. m.) per person.

³ Rev. David Yonggi Cho Profile, “The Church in Yoido and Its Phenomenal Growth”; online: <http://english.fgtv.com/drcho/Profile4.htm>; accessed September 8, 2010. For the seating capacity see “History. III. The Church at Yoido”; online: <http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/History3.htm>, accessed September 14, 2010.

⁴ As a Greek technical term, the word refers to a voting assembly of free men to conduct civic affairs (cf. Acts 19:32, 39-40). Important works include: R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church: A Study of the Idea of Ecclesia in the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1938); Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (NTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament* (London: Burns & Oates, 1974); Raymond F. Collins, *The Many Faces of the Church: A Study in New Testament Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 2003).

⁵ Used with a similar meaning is *synagōgē* (Lust, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 182). *Qāhāl* appears in the Qumran materials as a self-reference (e.g. 1QSa II.4 “the assembly of these,” 4Q448 B.3 “the whole assembly of your people”).

⁶ So (variously explained) Jürgen Roloff, *EDNT*, 1:411; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 78-79, pointing out similarities as well as the significant differences between the Christian notion of “church” and the numerous voluntary associations or clubs of the Roman empire.

⁷ Cf. Raymond F. Collins, “Church, Idea of the,” *NIDB* 1:643-55, citing, e.g., 1 Thess 1:4; 2:14; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1: The church is “those who have been called and chosen as a result of the preaching of the gospel, which they had accepted” (644).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 645, 652, 655.

⁹ On the origins of the Christian notion of remnant see Clinton Wahlen, “The Remnant in the Gospels” in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant* (Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology 1; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), 61-76.

¹⁰ David Brooks, “The Gospel of Wealth,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2010, A25.

¹¹ S. Joseph Kidder, “The Biblical Role of the Pastor,” *Ministry*, April 2009, 19.

¹² Yoido Full Gospel Church, “Organization”; online: <http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/Organization.htm>; accessed September 8, 2010.

¹³ Lee Siew Hua, “Megachurch: S.Korea.”

¹⁴ Scott Thumma and Dave Travis. *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America’s Largest Churches*. J-B Leadership Network Series. 2007, 14. The first chapter of the book is available online: http://media.wiley.com/product_data/excerpt/77/07879946/0787994677.pdf; accessed September 14, 2010.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Multnomah, 2010), 2. His book is on the *New York Times*’ bestseller list (No. 4 in their “Paperback Advice” section on September 9, 2010). Contrast Cho’s view that “individual large churches are like little pebbles to Jesus” (Lee Siew Hua, “Megachurch: S.Korea,” *The Straits Times*, July 17, 2010; online: http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/World/Story/STIStory_554639.html; accessed September 8, 2010).

¹⁸ Platt, 80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ Brooks, A25.

²¹ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Megachurch database listed by denomination; online: http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*%&sb=2; accessed September 8, 2010. Database compiled by Scott L. Thumma, Professor, Sociology of Religion/Web and Distance Education. The eight churches listed by Thumma (with attendance/membership figures) are: Loma Linda University Church of SDA (3000/5931), Collegedale SDA (2800/3289), Forest Lake SDA (2500/3622), Atlanta Berean SDA (2500/3294), College View SDA (2200/2135), Sligo SDA (2000/2983), Campus Hill (2000/1412), Walla Walla City SDA (1800/842). The above membership information was obtained from Sherri Ingram-Hudgins and Barbara Trecartin of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists (NAD) on September 9, 2010.

²² In addition to the eight churches listed by Hartford, the NAD database (see previous note) has the following churches with more than 2000 members: Pioneer Memorial (3596), Chicago Shiloh SDA (3279), Atlanta Maranatha (3032), Keene SDA (2988), Oakwood University Church (2828), La Sierra University Church (2694), Walla Walla University Church (2376), Azure Hills SDA (2056), Detroit City Temple SDA (2024), and Arlington SDA (2010). In email correspondence (dated September 13, 2010), Thumma indicated that his figures for Adventist congregations are from 2004 and that he plans to survey these other Adventist churches also for the next update of the database.

²³ Ed Christian, “Why Don’t Adventists Grow Megachurches?,” *Adventist Review*, October 16, 2003, 13. One example of a 1,000 member congregation is given in Jay Gallimore, “Can the Church Be ‘Relevant’ and Thrive? (part 1),” *Ministry*, April 2003, 17. Other examples may be found in the experience of the Adventist churches experimenting with congregationalism mentioned in Alita Byrd, “The Year of SDA Congregationalism,” *Spectrum* 26/4 (January 1998): 3-10, some of which now hold regular Sunday services.

²⁴ Gallimore, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:184.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6:198.

²⁸ Bogan, “America’s Biggest Megachurches.”

²⁹ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 8:244; 2:114. In the Battle Creek church many were “fast becoming withered branches” (*ibid.*, 116). According to the “Membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Battle Creek Michigan as it stood April 15, 1894,” the total was 1,521. By the time of the “1901 Directory of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Battle Creek Michigan with Sabbath School and Societies,” p. 6, the membership totaled 2,050, also noting that “the usual Sabbath congregations number about 2,000.” Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, Maryland.

³⁰ Quoted in Brooks, A25.

³¹ Scott Thumma, Dave Travis, and Warren Bird, “Megachurches Today 2005: Summary of Research Findings,” 2; online: <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday2005summaryreport.pdf>

³² Ibid.

³³ See J. David Newman, “Tithe—Sacrificing the Sacred Cow: Squeezing the Local Church,” *Adventist Today*, Fall 2009, 11-17, whose opening sentence is: “Church growth is suffering in North America because local churches are not allowed to spend tithe.”

³⁴ Thumma and Travis, 16.

³⁵ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:31-32.

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