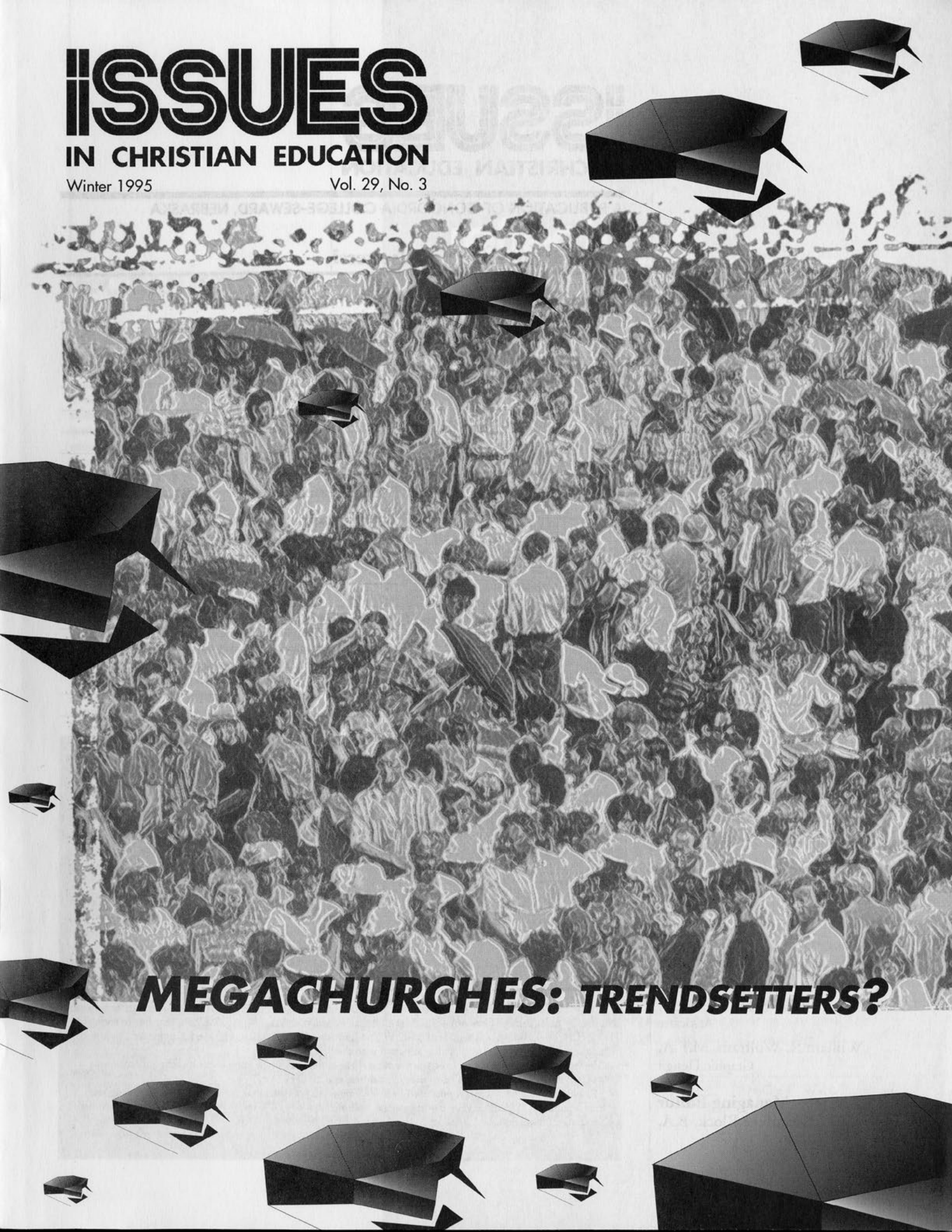


ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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MEGACHURCHES: TRENDSETTERS?

ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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Megachurches: Trendsetters?

3 Reflections

Orville C. Walz, President

3 Editorials

6 Megachurch and the Real Issue: Mega Grace

Kent R. Hunter

12 Megachurch: Is Bigger Better?

W. Theophil Janzow

18 When Small Is Not Better

Robert Scudieri

21 The Growth of the Church: The Means of Grace
and the Use of Means

Samuel H. Nafzger

27 Book Reviews

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editorials

When Different is Average

FIRST, I'LL DECLARE MY BIAS. The Synod I serve, Lutheran Church—Canada, is, for the most part made up of what would be called "small congregations." Of our 330 congregations, only 16 have more than 500 communicants, and only one has more than 1000. Our congregations average 180 communicants and 243 baptized members. The average Sunday morning attendance is 88.

For us, "small congregations" are average congregations.

When it comes to congregations, small is not necessarily beautiful, even as big is not necessarily better. But there are certain characteristics within small congregations that tend to be overlooked in our natural inclination to think of large congregations as more ideal.

First, consider some myths. One is that small congregations are more closely knit and friendlier. That may be the view of those already on the inside, but it is often much more difficult for new members to be welcomed into a small congregation (unless they are related to someone) than it would be into a less closely-knit group.

Another myth: it is easier to get things done when you don't have a complicated decision making structure. Many years ago, while serving a small rural congregation, I tried to get the congregation to use envelopes (that's right!) and to make annual pledges. The stewardship chairman, a young man about my own age, was easy to convince. We took it to a voters' meeting. One man made a speech, and the whole idea was killed. Even the stewardship chairman voted against it. When I asked him about it later, he explained, "That man is my uncle. He co-signed my loan at the bank when I bought my farm. There was no way I could contradict him." Blood is thicker than water!

But there are some strengths in small congregations. Small congregations, especially older rural ones, are amazingly hardy. I recently preached at the 50th anniversary of a small country congregation in southwestern Saskatchewan. Last year the average attendance was nine. On the day of the anniversary there were about 150 people present. But when visitors were later introduced, it was obvious that these people had come from all over western Canada. Only twelve were from the community. The following Sunday there would again be about nine people. And they would continue to be there till the last one died!

continued on page 4

reflections

"*Bigger is Better!*" At least that is what those involved in marketing often would have one believe. Is this also true with regard to the numerical size of Christian congregations? Are megachurches trendsetters, or simply consumer profiteers? The purpose of this edition of *Issues in Christian Education* is to attempt an assessment of the megachurch movement, highlighting what can be learned from very large congregations, identifying limitations of the movement, and seeing the movement as a call to congregations to focus on the basics.

Kent Hunter, a church growth consultant, makes the following points: growth and numbers are not the point, as cancer grows fast, too; the church growth movement focuses on removing roadblocks that hinder the Gospel moving clearly to people; our forefathers were clear that being Lutheran is grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone, but some seem to have added to this definition; and Jesus did not limit himself to one form or method of evangelistic strategy.

As Lutheran sociologist Ted Janzow suggests, we seem to want to "have our cake and eat it, too." He asks: "What in the megachurch movement ought to give Lutherans serious pause and activate some attention-getting warning bells?"

Mission executive Robert Scudieri says that since 1973 the average size of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod congregations has declined steadily as has average total church attendance. Weekly LCMS church attendance has dropped below one million. He pleads that we not consider smaller as better when a congregation has opportunity to share the wonderful message of salvation with others, but refuses to do so.

In the fourth article, Sam Nafzger contends that in discussing "the growth of the church," extreme care must be taken to distinguish between what Lutherans refer to as the Means of Grace (the Gospel in Word and Sacrament) and the means of getting the Gospel out. Failure to do so, he says, results in the confusion of Law with the Gospel which leads to synergism, or it results in apathy and indifference.

I personally found the contributions of the authors of the major articles, the editorial writers, and the book reviewers helpful and defining. It is my prayer that our readers will have a similar experience.

Orville C. Walz, President

editorials

continued from page 3

Small congregations also provide an excellent training ground for young pastors. The average candidate dreams about a nice, mid-sized suburban parish for his first call. But in a small congregation, he will learn how to work with people, instead of how to work with organizational systems. He will learn something about patience, about planting before expecting a harvest. And he will learn humility as he realizes he is not really the best thing that happened to the church since Luther. He is but one more candidate that this congregation, on behalf of the church, has to wean and train. He will learn that knowledge may come from being with books, maturity comes from being with people, but wisdom comes from being with God.

In summary, a small congregation is neither better nor worse than a large one. It is just different.

Edwin Lehman, President
Lutheran Church—Canada

Scratch Where it Itches

IT IS COMMONLY CONCEDED that metropolitan America is post-Christian in its worldview—a foreign culture. A fellow missionary once told me that the way to give the Gospel a hearing in a foreign culture is to make sure you find a way to “scratch where it itches.” It is within this post-Christian context that a phenomenon known as the megachurch has come into prominence. The *New York Times* has classified a megachurch as any congregation with over 2,000 members, and in his book, *Racing Toward 2001—The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future*, Russell Chandler quotes various authors who compare the megachurch to a shopping mall—a one-stop complex designed to meet all religious needs in one place. Are megachurches the trend-setters for the 21st century in metropolitan America? There is no simple answer to that question.

I have visited numerous megachurches and have analyzed them by asking the question, “What can I learn that can be helpful in my ministry?” These are some of the things that I have learned about the megachurch:

1. The megachurch is a missionary method. Megachurches have grown “humongous” because they have this ability to scratch where it itches.
2. Megachurches are culturally compatible in language, music, and organizational style with middle class metropolitan America.
3. Megachurches have a passion for people. The spiritual, psychological and physical needs of people are of such concern that these seven-day-a-week churches seem to

make people, rather than program, the focus of their ministry.

4. Megachurches are urgent about outreach. Urgency for the “lost” to know Christ as Savior and Lord is always evident. Talking to friends, acquaintances, co-workers and neighbors about the faith and their church is standard practice.

5. Megachurches faithfully trust their members to be involved in ministry. They see themselves more as an organism than as an organization and allow God's Word to flow freely. The priesthood of all believers is active in small-group Bible studies, focusing on prayer, problem-solving, social interaction and fellowship. They are not controlled by boundless by-laws but allow diversity to define their organizational structure.

6. The megachurch is purposeful and proactive. It works intentionally to meet needs, to scratch where people itch, and in so doing to give the Gospel a hearing.

In many ways the megachurch mirrors the missionary method of the greatest missionary of all, St. Paul, who declared, “Though I am free and belonging to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible. . . I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. . . I do all this for the sake of the Gospel” (I CORINTHIANS 9).

If megachurches provide an opportunity for the Gospel to gain a hearing for the means of grace, that is, the Word and Sacraments to work, they will be bountifully blessed. If we of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod do not scratch where it itches, we will have failed in large part to be Christ's ambassadors, and God will not be able to make His appeal through us (II CORINTHIANS 5:20).

David L. Block, Pastor
Divine Shepherd Lutheran Church
Omaha, Nebraska

One Hopeful Facet of Megachurch: Metachurch

TWO SOURCES OF INFORMATION about the metachurch that seem to be current and helpful to congregations are found in a book by William J. McKay, writing for the Stephen Ministries, and in a second book by Carl F. George who has been a church consultant and an administrator at the Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth. The simplest definition of the metachurch relates to organizing the congregation in such a way that individuals are continually stimulated to grow as disciples and to utilize their spiritual gifts in a

variety of ministry and/or service areas. An even simpler definition is that the metachurch is a ministry with small groups as the basic structure.

Metachurch is often equated with larger congregations. About two years ago, I was sending information about a metachurch conference, and office people suggested that the secretary must have misunderstood my dictation because they were sure that the intent was “megachurch.” In actuality, if metachurch is exemplified in a fully functioning ministry cell, then many of our smaller congregations may be models of this concept of ministry as well. One emphasis I wish to make is that metachurch does not necessarily mean great size, even though the church that is lauded for using this approach is located in Seoul, South Korea, under the leadership of Dr. David Cho, and has an active involvement of more than 650,000 people as reported in 1993.

In the Fall 1994 issue of this publication, the focus was on *Paradigms of Worship: What's the Question?* The discussion lifted up many of the issues that people are addressing related to changes in worship as an effort to reach the lost, unchurched, non-involved individuals in our parishes and communities. In a Bible class discussion where this issue was used as a resource, one pre-seminary student indicated that after careful reading of that document, he was aware of the concerns but not very aware of how to deal with them effectively. It is my belief that the metachurch paradigm is a valid approach for many congregations in their efforts to minister effectively to their constituencies.

Carl George has indicated that the “congregation” paradigm that was inherited from our forefathers is not functioning very effectively in the Christian church in North America today. His analysis is that the lack of effectiveness comes from not being prepared to help people cope with the great turmoil they experience in their personal lives. Quality caring is what they need, and so they are attracted to spiritual organizations or individuals who seem to have a spiritual connection and are ready, willing and able to provide that kind of caring. The conclusion is that if individual Christians and congregations do not respond to people and their needs, then they will turn to self-help psychology, cults, Eastern religions, and strange philosophies to satisfy their spiritual needs. This phenomenon is happening in our midst today, especially in younger generations.

Carl George has worked with the evangelism and mission executives of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the pastors of congregations who are ready to implement the metachurch philosophy or approach in their congregations. He has worked out a training program over the past three years which has been entitled “Developing Leadership for Ministry.” The unique facet of this approach seems to be developing spiritual leaders within each of the small groups while

carrying out many of the necessary functions that we expect to happen in a congregation.

What intrigues me about the metachurch concept is that it seems to be an effective approach to include new Christians in a nurturing and supportive group of Christians at a time when this is needed. Thus, the small group ministry can answer many of the questions which are raised about effective outreach, Christian nurture and then assimilation of new Christians into the local body of Christ.

Community leaders, as well as congregational leaders, tell us repeatedly that we need an approach to leadership training which will help the various generations from the baby boomers to the present to learn how to assume their share of responsibility in both the community and the parish. Once again, it seems that within the small group there is the instruction and nurturing, the modeling and coaching, the support and caring, and the cultivation of talents or gifts to be utilized in effectively carrying out the Great Commission in rural areas, small towns or sprawling metropolises.

There are no panaceas in education, ministry, medicine or any area of life. We appear to be on the front end of the information age. As we become inundated with new information, more choices, more diversity and whatever else may lead to confusion and distraction within the church, we certainly need to find effective ways of ministering to members of the household of faith and also to those who presently do not know their Lord and Savior.

The metachurch should at least be studied carefully by professional leaders and lay leaders in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Many congregations may choose to implement the basics of this approach to make disciples of all the people God has placed in their midst.

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William Preuss
Professor of Education
Concordia College-Seward

So What's the “Big” Deal?

THE 1955 PUBLICATION OF *The Bridges of God* by Donald McGavran influenced the creation of the Church Growth Movement. As a foreign missionary in India, McGavran's concern was for the lack of growth among converts. *The Bridges of God* emphasizes the need to create churches which will nurture the faith of the converted and integrate

them into the Christian community. The Church Growth Movement has spawned “megachurches,” large, growing churches which aggressively pursue growth. Membership increases may demonstrate to those churches that they are successful, that is, meeting needs and getting the Gospel out to those who have not heard.

“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (ROMANS 10:14-15) Growing churches are good news! They can be indications that more people are being claimed by the Holy Spirit, that more are being added to the Kingdom.

“Mega”=very big, great. Church= 1)Building for public worship. . . 3)Body of all Christians (*The Oxford Dictionary*). Megachurch=a very big body of all Christians. There does not have to be anything wrong with being a big church. The issue becomes one of clarifying the fundamental mission of the church and the motivation and approach used to fulfill that mission. The 1987 CTCR document on “Evangelism and Church Growth” states that the church's mission is to make disciples of all nations. If that mission is pursued, it seems that “big” could be an indication of that mission being fulfilled.

What is the church? What do we want it to become? How do we get there? How does our situation influence how we answer that question? How do other models of churches apply to our inquiry? How does our understanding of current trends and culturally significant events affect how we do church? Should those trends and events impact our church? Are we to be wary of research and prototypes which could be useful in setting plans for the future of the church? Is planning itself to be suspect? Dialogue on these issues will be fundamental in helping churches critically determine the value of what is happening at megachurches, allowing churches to learn from these models. These conversations can lead to a decision of whether megachurches are “trend-setters” or simply consumer profiteers.

The church in the 21st century—the church today—needs leaders who know the mission of the church, who are not afraid to stand boldly for that mission, and who can evaluate trends and needs in seeking to address these as we faithfully live out our calling to be Church. The church in the 21st century also needs educational ministries which nurture the faith of existing members, new members, and potential members as we help them live out their faith in a society depicted as chaotic. We stand as a people separate from the world, accepting a Scripture and Church which is relevant in all times. But we stand in a time in which many may not understand clearly our essential

message and reason for existence, and so we must examine how the Word can be comprehended.

There is much work to be done as we live out the mission to share the Good News with those who do not know the Savior. Larger and smaller churches can work faithfully to see God's Kingdom expanded. Evaluation is essential in order to consider for use in the church tools and strategies available to us in this modern age. The emphasis need not be on how large we can become, but on understanding our mission as church, lifting up Christ, proclaiming His Word, nurturing the faith of His people. And He will give the increase—to both larger and smaller churches.

Lisa Keyne
Director of DCE Ministries and
Assistant Professor of Education
Concordia College-Seward

Tribute to Daenzer and Heider

THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE commends the faithful service of two members of the committee, Professor Gil Daenzer and Dr. George Heider.

Now professor *emeritus*, Gil Daenzer served as a member of the Editorial Committee since 1971. His keen insights and sensitivity to central issues related to the educational ministry of the church resulted in many contributions to *Issues*.

Recently called as President of Concordia University-River Forest, George Heider assumed responsibility for editorials in 1986. His in-depth Biblical perspectives and a wide range of intellectual interests added much to *Issues*.

Gil and George, we value your significant contributions to *Issues* and wish you God's blessings as you begin new ministries.

Welcome to Hennig and Keyne

PRESIDENT ORVILLE WALZ recently announced the appointment of two members of the Editorial Committee, Dr. Robert Hennig as an Associate and Dr. Lisa Keyne who assumes responsibility for editorials.

Dr. Hennig is a Professor of Sociology, and Dr. Keyne is the Director of the DCE Ministries Program and an Assistant Professor of Education.

Bob and Lisa, we welcome your participation in the publication of *Issues*.

Graphic Design by Amy Gehmer
of CONCORDesign, Concordia College, Seward

Megachurch and the real issue:

MEGA

grace

Kent R. Hunter

WHY ARE PEOPLE FASCINATED BY SIZE? Some, I suppose, are mesmerized by numbers. Some are interested in success. Some people want to make a name for themselves. There are abuses in any movement, including Christianity.

From the perspective of the Church Growth Movement, we look at large churches because they appear to be reaching many people for Christ. Growth is not the point. Cancer grows. It grows fast. That doesn't make it good. That doesn't make it desirable. Numbers are not the point.

The key is God's grace impacting people. Mega grace is the starting point. Mega grace is God's love in Jesus Christ. It is greater, larger, and more wonderful than anyone can measure or diagnose. As the Holy Spirit touches people's lives with God's grace, they become His people, known as the church. It is God who builds the church.

Rick Warren is pastor of the fastest growing church in America.¹ He is senior pastor of Saddleback Church in Southern California. Rick says that the key issue of church growth is not at all growth in numbers. The key issue is church health. Growth is natural. You don't have to tell your children to grow. Every living organism grows. It is supposed to grow. The key to a growing church is a healthy church. God is the one who grows the church. We just want to be effective in using the means that He has given to us to help people grow. Then God will grow the church.²

Dr. Kent R. Hunter is a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod clergyman who serves as President of the Church Growth Center in Corunna, Indiana. He is an author, speaker for conferences, and serves as a consultant to local churches. He is heard on Christian radio as The Church DoctorTM.

The most important and central concept of Church Growth teaching is not a quantity issue at all. It is a quality issue: making disciples. God gives His means of grace to Christians who share that powerful Gospel with others.³

God grows His church, through means of delivering His grace. But He uses people to reach people. The apostle Paul struck the balance when he said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plant, but God brings the increase."⁴ The challenge in the equation is God's use of people. People make mistakes, develop roadblocks to growth, and get into bad habits. These habits hinder the Gospel moving clearly to people. The Church Growth Movement focuses on removing those roadblocks so that God can bring the increase to us and through us. Megachurches are helpful to study because they have often done well at removing roadblocks and getting the Gospel out.

My friend John Vaughan has probably written more on larger churches than anyone else. In analyzing American megachurches, he gives away his theological bias when he says, "My personal experience and contact with pastors of most of the largest churches in the United States and in other countries lead me to believe that many, I repeat many, of these men refuse to apologize for the growth *God has given* to their churches." (emphasis mine)⁵ As a diagnostician and student of larger churches, Vaughan clearly articulates his understanding that it is not human beings, or gadgets, or programs that increase the size of churches to mega proportion. It is the growth that God has given. David Yonggi Cho, the pastor of the largest church in Christian history, in Seoul, Korea, has consistently pointed out that the objective is not getting more and more people—just to gain numbers. In fact, he has written a book entitled *More Than Numbers* and elsewhere has stated clearly that the key objective in churches of all sizes needs to be equipping people (quality growth) and reaching out in mission to others.⁶

Mega What? How Big is Big?

What is meant by a megachurch? The word mega means "large" or "huge." For several years those who have studied large church dynamics have used different terms in trying to grasp an understanding of how the larger churches operate. Lyle Schaller, in his book *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church*, calls the larger church a "mini denomination" and designates those congregations as having 700 or more in worship on the average.⁷ By 1992, Schaller had changed his terminology to the "full service church."⁸ About that same time, Carl George interjected a term that was originally coined by Paul Hiebert, a professor at Fuller Seminary. George spoke about the "metachurch" in this book, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*.⁹ The concept of a

metachurch not only speaks of larger churches, often 10,000 or more in worship, but also, and more importantly, speaks to the infrastructure of the church, flexibility to change as a church experiences growth, and the training and releasing of members to do the work of ministry.

Management consultant Peter Drucker chooses the figure of 2,000 or more in attendance when he talks about what he calls "the large pastoral churches."¹⁰ Bill Sullivan, who leads the Church Growth department at the headquarters of the Church of the Nazarene in Kansas City, speaks about "K-Churches." These are churches that are between 1,000 and 1,999 in average worship attendance. The figure of 2,000 or more in worship was classified as a megachurch by Peter Steinfelds in his series on megachurches in *The New York Times*.¹¹

Many church analysts use the figure of 2,000 or more in worship and call this a megachurch. Sometimes this is designated as an M-Church. However, since the dynamics are similar, but also different, when the church grows past 10,000 in worship, the designation frequently used is M² or megachurch². For the purposes of this article, we are going to identify the megachurch as one that worships 2,000 or more in worship in attendance. We are also focusing on those that appear to be effective, particularly those that are attracting unchurched people who are coming into the church and growing in their relationship to Christ, to other Christians, and in their understanding of the Word.

Megachurch Movement

There are differences of opinion concerning the actual figures, but it is probably safe to say that of the 80 million Protestants in America, about 50 percent worship in one-seventh of the churches. There is definitely a trend among many people toward attending larger churches. Most metropolitan areas have one or more larger churches who identify their entire region as their immediate mission field.

Megachurches have received a lot of attention through the media. They have been the focus of many articles and a television special hosted by Peter Jennings, entitled "In the Name of God."¹² The most useful attitude, when approaching the study of the megachurch, is *not* with the idea that bigger is better. There are abuses in every size of church, including megachurches. The most productive way to approach the issue of megachurches is with a hunger to know how we can be most strategic in getting out the Gospel. *What can we learn and use that removes roadblocks so God can grow His church in us and through us most effectively?*

Among mainline denominations that have been consistently declining—including Lutherans—it seems that churches which show growth in numbers and members

who report growth spiritually (in Bible study, in outreach, and Christian service) can be a target for cautious investigation. Can we learn something from them?

There are some cautions in such investigations. It is important to remember two important diagnostic principles. The first is to determine size by worship attendance, not by the names of those who are listed on the membership rolls of the church. This is the standard form of measurement among those in the Church Growth Movement, and it reflects a discernment away from numbers only and a commitment to quality growth. From the Lutheran perspective, we are interested in those who are regularly involved in Word and Sacrament.

A second diagnostic principle is to be sure to look at *how* churches are growing. This is another quality issue, except that it focuses on quality outreach. Sometimes churches are growing by biological growth, which is additions by families having new babies. Sometimes churches grow through transfer, which is not "growth" of the Kingdom, but people moving from one church to another. The key is to look at conversion growth, or gains from the outside, which reflect the effectiveness of a church in reaching unchurched people.

My two favorite megachurches include one outside Lutheran circles and one that is in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. I know both pastors and churches very well. One is Saddleback Valley Community Church which was mentioned earlier. Pastor Rick Warren indicates that 80 percent of the growth of this Southern Baptist church is from those who are formerly unchurched. The Lutheran megachurch that I feel is an excellent example is Faith Lutheran Church in Troy, Michigan. This church, also, is a congregation that is growing not primarily by biological growth or transfers, but is reaching those who were previously unchurched. In fact, Faith Lutheran Church, pastored by Warren Arndt, continually reports the largest gains from the outside of any church in the denomination. What is really amazing is that, in comparison with the 5,000+ other churches in the denomination, this church and the other top three that consistently add those who are previously unchurched have all been significantly exposed to and involved in church growth principles.¹³ It seems to me that we could learn quite a bit from looking at models like this. The point is not *numbers*. The point is that God is blessing these churches in the methods that they are using to get God's mega grace in Jesus Christ out to many people.

Lessons from Megachurches

How did these megachurches get large? What is attracting people? Why are unchurched people being effectively touched by the Gospel in larger numbers in these congregations? Why do they return? Why is it that they report that

they are growing in discipleship? Why is it that other churches, with equally dedicated staff and leadership, with equally "pure" teaching in the same region or in similar situations, are not growing? I believe that there are at least six lessons that we can learn from effective megachurches.

Every church is driven by something. Some churches are driven by tradition, others by money, some by the building, and some are driven by doctrinal purity. If a church is driven by tradition, the phrase that is often heard is, "We've never done it that way before." If the church is driven by money, the first question that is often asked is, "What does it cost?" If it is the building that drives the church, the response that is frequently heard is, "You can't change that!" or "We can't relocate." As Rick Warren has pointed out, the building drives the ministry. The shoe tells the foot how big it can get. If it is doctrinal purity that drives the church, the comment is often heard, "We've done our ministry when we have correctly preached the Word and administered the Sacraments." This view basically betrays an attitude that Christians have no responsibility to speak the language of the people, or touch people where they are. It is a form of medieval magic that denies the incarnational dynamics of the passion of God: to reach people where they are.

Lesson 1: Effective megachurches are purpose-driven.

This is the primary thrust of the Church Growth Movement paradigm: to revolutionize the worldview of Christians and their churches to be purpose-driven and to shape their ministry according to God's passion to make disciples of all people. This priority and bias recognizes that all of these other issues (tradition, money, building, doctrinal purity, and everything else) are only means to a greater end. (This is a major tension and debate among Lutherans today—the result of which will determine the future health and vitality of the Lutheran Movement.) Purpose-driven churches believe that mega grace is the driving force, not anything else.

When Jesus became flesh (incarnate), God demonstrated that He wanted to meet people where they are. Jesus in His method, style, and approach, met people on their own terms. He looked like them, talked like them, ate like them, and wept like them. He started with people where they were, not where He thought they should be.

The Apostle Paul, who was a great example of a purpose-driven missionary said, "I will become all things to all people so that by any means some might be saved."¹⁴ Christianity came to the United States, for the most part, from Europe. It came with a lot of cultural baggage. Many Christians, for decades, have suffered from cultural overhang. Today the church is experiencing—in a major way,

perhaps for the first time in history—what it means to be a Christian church on American soil. Missionaries call this process indigenization. Here in America it might be called the Americanization of Christianity. It is speaking the *unchanging* Message in the vehicles that relate to your audience.

This, too, creates a great tension among Christians. Christians struggle with defining what it means to be truly Christian, or for that matter, truly Lutheran. Our forefathers were clear: being Lutheran is grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. Certain building styles, pews, languages, liturgies, and instruments do not define Lutheranism or Christianity. This struggle is no small matter. It is a key theological issue—mega grace. It's telling people that they don't have to like a certain kind of music to learn about the Savior, any more than Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved.¹⁵

Lesson 2: Effective mega churches reach their audiences in their heart language by method, style, and approach.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the growth of the church—not gimmicks, programs, or activities. Removing roadblocks to the communication of that precious Gospel is important. Being "seeker-sensitive" is what mission methodology is all about.

But the Gospel is what changes lives. Salvation is a supernatural event. The Holy Spirit brings faith by the power of the Gospel. There is no other way that it happens.

One of the keys to delivering that Gospel is to meet people at their point of need, on common ground. It is interesting to study the life of Jesus and recognize that He had no one form or method of evangelistic strategy. With the woman at the well, He delivered living water. To the fisherman, He spoke of catching fish. To the guilt-ridden prostitutes, He spoke of forgiveness and acceptance and invited those who were pure to cast the first stone. To the diseased, He spoke healing. To the demonized, He spoke deliverance. People don't care about what you know until they know you care.



Lesson 3: Effective megachurches speak the Gospel clearly as the only way of salvation, but speak it tenderly as it applies to their hurts and needs.

The message emanating from the preaching and teaching in effective megachurches is not just cognitive but also relational.

Not long ago my wife and I went to a movie showing in a theater in the small town where she was raised. As we waited for the film to begin, Janet reflected about how the old theater had been divided right down the middle with a wall. Now, two films are shown simultaneously. The other day I was in a gas station and realized how my concept of service stations has changed. This service station included a mini-mart, a small Dunkin Donuts®, and a small McDonald's®. There are two key issues in these various examples of life in the United States today. These examples relate to one of the concepts that we can learn from megachurches. One will be discussed here and the other below.

Megachurches have learned that the key to larger is smaller. In one sense, the smallest church I have ever attended is Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. This is a church with 600,000 members. However, it is a church divided up into small cell groups that meet regularly in homes. In my numerous trips to this church, I have never found a member of that church who is overwhelmed or, for that matter, impressed by the size. The members of that church are personally attached to other Christians and supported by a division of leadership that helps them through Bible study, prayer, and outreach—as well as meets their needs.

Lesson 4: Effective megachurches structure the church smaller as it grows larger.

This is a sociological principle. Every army needs divisions, companies, platoons, and squads. It is a principle also recognized in the Old Testament when Moses couldn't handle one great big group of Israelites, and his father-in-law, Jethro, taught him delegation and division. In the New Testament Church at Jerusalem, it was one of the key social dynamics that is reflected when ministry took place among small groups in homes.¹⁶

The second lesson from the service station mentioned above is found in the refrigerated cooler section of the mini-mart. Why do you think Snapple is growing in popularity? When I was younger, there was just Coke®. Now there is Coke®, Diet Coke®, Cherry Coke®, Classic Coke®, Diet Cherry Coke®, and Caffeine-Free Diet Coke®. In a recent *Time* magazine I saw an ad for what they call Private Issue Credit Cards by Discover®. You can now order a personalized credit card designed by Jane Seymour, Florence Griffith Joyner, or Ringo Starr!¹⁷ What

is the point? The point is that we live in a world of choices! Megachurches can offer a wide range of choices in programming, ministries, worship times, worship styles, mission trips, outreach activities, and points of community contact.

Lesson 5: Effective megachurches can offer multiple choices of involvement and service, and provide multiple types of contacts as they reach out to the unchurched.

God's plan for expansion of His Kingdom is multiplication, not addition. When God wanted the earth to be populated, He said, "Be fruitful and multiply."¹⁸ When God wanted Heaven populated, He gave the command to multiply.¹⁹ Most churches in the United States continue to flounder under the concept of growth by addition. Growth by addition is characterized by a congregation in which the pastor does the ministry and the people lead the church, usually through some sort of congregational decision-making model—like a Voters' Assembly. In his book, *Leading Your Church to Growth: The Secret of Pastor/People Partnership in Dynamic Church Growth*, C. Peter Wagner points out that the unbiblical and unproductive addition method roadblocks what God wants to do to grow His church.²⁰ Martin Luther and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation saw this key biblical truth, identifying it as the "Priesthood of all Believers." To follow the biblical model of multiplication, many congregations would require a complete reversal in the way they function. The key role of the church staff is not to do ministry, but to equip God's people for the work of ministry.²¹

Lesson 6: Effective megachurches operate with staff and leadership who see their priority as equipping rather than controlling.

Staff in effective megachurches help members discover their gifts and talents. They help people do ministry rather than do ministry for people. In this way, megachurches are involved in multiplying growth rather than expansion of the Kingdom by addition. It is the biblical way. It is what is meant by "making disciples." Nowhere in the Scripture does it say, "Go, therefore, and make pew sitters of all people, providing the ministry for them."

In this way, megachurches pose a challenge even to seminaries. They train lay people to be ministers at all levels of congregational life. "These megachurches are becoming teaching centers, just as you have teaching hospitals."²² In the next century, preparation for fulltime ministry may take radically different forms, centered geographically around megachurches rather than campuses, involving on-the-job residencies of much longer duration, on-site experience on the mission field, and much more theological education by extension—a trend already practiced throughout the world.

Megachurches, in cooperation with parachurch organizations, are becoming "... the new centers of religious influence in the world of Protestantism."²³

Go for Grace, Not Size

These are just a few of the many lessons we can identify as we look at effective megachurches. The key is not to look at programs to emulate, but principles that remove roadblocks to growth and allow God's grace to touch people.

Another priority is not to get enamored with size. Some people will be attracted to large churches. But many others will hear the Gospel in smaller churches. Whatever the size of your church, work to be good stewards of the grace of God,²⁴ as you seek to be effective in getting the Gospel out. As you effectively present the Gospel, it does work to change people's lives—just as God promises. And as it does work, the people in your church grow spiritually, and as they grow, they share the Gospel with unbelievers and your church grows. As this happens, inevitably, there will be more megachurches. But the real excitement is not the size. It is the privilege of getting God's mega grace in Jesus Christ to people who don't know Him!

End Notes

¹John Vaughan, "North America's 280 Fastest Growing Churches 1992-1993," (Bolivar, MO: *Church Growth Today*, 1994), Vol. 9, No. 5, p. 2.

²Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message or Mission*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), pp. 10-11.

³Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth: Biblical Basics for the Local Church*, (Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1994), pp. 52-57.

⁴I Corinthians 3:6,9.

⁵John N. Vaughan, *Megachurches and America's Cities: How Churches Grow*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), p. 13.

⁶David Yonggi Cho, *Answers to Your Questions*, (Seoul, Korea: Church Growth International, 1984), p. 35.

⁷Lyle Schaller, *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980).

⁸Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-A-Week Church*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992).

⁹Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1992).

¹⁰Peter F. Drucker, *Managing for the Future*, (New York, NY: Dutton, 1992), p. 255.

¹¹Peter Steinfels, "Beliefs," (New York, NY: *The New York Times*, May 13, 1995), p. 8. However, Steinfels also adds to the definition (beyond the category of size) to include those churches who have abandoned traditional worship services and who use contemporary, "seeker-sensitive" type worship.

¹²ABC News Special Presentation, 1995. This special was not aimed primarily at large churches, but at contemporary communication methods and the danger of "selling out the Gospel." However, it focused on several megachurches, including Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois.

¹³*Evangelism News*, (St. Louis, MO: The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Board for Evangelism Services, July 1995), p. 7. The other three congregations are St. John Lutheran Church, Ellisville, MO; St. John Lutheran Church, Orange, CA; and King of Kings Lutheran Church, Omaha, NE. Gains from the outside are designated as Adult Baptisms or Confirmations, and the period for reporting is 1994.

¹⁴I Corinthians 9:19-22.

¹⁵Acts 14-15.

¹⁶William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, (Houston, TX: TOUCH Publications, 1995), p. 73.

¹⁷*Time*, August 14, 1995 (Vol. 146, No. 7), p. 13.

¹⁸Gen. 1:28.

¹⁹Matthew 28:19-20; Ephesians 4.

²⁰C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Grow: The Secret of Pastor/People Partnership in Dynamic Church Growth*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), pp. 19-22; 131-135.

²¹Ephesians 4.

²²Leonard I. Sweet, Chancellor of United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH.

²³Gustav Nievuhr, "Powershift in Protestantism Toward a New Church Model," *The New York Times*, (April 29, 1995), p. 1.

²⁴I Peter 4:10.

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Megachurch: is BIGGER Better?

W. Theophil Janzow

MEGACHURCH, SUPER-CHURCH, METACHURCH—all terms of relatively recent vintage—are swiftly becoming part of the conventional discourse among church leaders, both clergy and laity, who are laboring in the Lord's vineyard and seeking modern methodologies that fit the age-old challenge of our Lord to "make disciples of all nations."

At the same time, many still find these labels foreign to their vocabulary and their implications enigmatic, daunting, and perhaps even menacing.

The term megachurch has a mathematical sound. It conjures up the idea of extraordinarily large numbers. The size of the number that allows a local gathering of Christians to be labeled megachurch as distinguished from just church or congregation or even large church is still moot. Yet all agree that Yoida Central Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, with over 650,000 parishioners, is a megachurch. The same would be true of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, with a weekly public worship attendance ranging between 15,000 and 27,000, and Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona, with between four and five thousand attending worship services on a given weekend.

One professor who is considered an authority on the subject has defined a megachurch as one that "draws at least 2000 people every week."¹

Key Megachurch Traits

In the minds of some, however, the key factor in megachurch definition is not so much numerical size, although size is the most visible trait, but style of worship, approach to ministry, social organization, and psychological/spiritual atmosphere. In reading the literature describing these churches, one comes across phrases such as:

- contemporary pop-style music
- no intimidating liturgies
- sermons and classes focused on people's "felt needs"
- mostly "yes's"; few "nos"
- no denominational affiliation
- large celebrations counterposed with small cell groups
- no creeds, confessions, or catechisms
- informality (no dress expectations)
- mimicking pop culture
- entertainment oriented
- evoking feelings of joy

One 39 year-old who attends a church that draws more than 15,000 people a week told a reporter: "I can't ever remember enjoying going to church so much."²

Motivation and Size

The emergence of the megachurch raises questions that research has not yet fully addressed, questions that at this stage of development remain largely unanswered. One

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obvious question is the relation between motivation and size. What makes some people gravitate toward large rather than small church groupings? Clearly, not all people do.

A related question is: Will the attraction to extremely large churches last? The departmental religion head at a southern university thinks that in time many megachurch members might go back to smaller, more traditional churches. "People get starved for transcendence," he said. "Sooner or later you want a God who is not like us, who would not be on Letterman."³

My own experience conforms with this. Working with a small urban congregation in recent years I have found people saying: "I joined this church because it is small. I went to a large church for a while, but I felt lost in the crowd. I hardly knew the pastor. I was surrounded with people on a Sunday morning, knew a few of them by name, but most of them were strangers. I missed the closeness and warmth of intimate human contact that I had experienced in the small church where I grew up."

Yet, clearly the existence and, in many cases, phenomenal growth of larger and larger churches lend credence to the theory that many people do not miss the loss of social intimacy that a small church provides; instead they seem to find their psychological satisfactions in other kinds of benefits and services found in the megachurch environment.

Can the emergence of megalopolitan concentrations of population in different parts of the world shed any light on the emergence of megachurches? Why do people in less populated rural areas gravitate toward "the big city"? How does one explain the huge concentrations of population in world centers like Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Lagos, Shanghai, and Seoul, some of which are located in countries that otherwise are technologically underdeveloped and that continue to be largely agrarian in outlook and organization? Economics, some would say. But is that a sufficient explanation? If other factors can be identified, would this help us in our examination of motivations that draw people into extremely large congregations?

In considering these questions it would seem legitimate to take a look at population theory, especially as it applies to the urbanization phenomenon, and then ask if similar dynamics may be at work in megachurch development.

Population theorists argue that among the things that draw, especially younger, people to "the big city" are style of life factors that are influenced by size and density of population, including the following:

- greater diversity of experiential options
- the newness and excitement of the "city lights"
- hope for greater leadership opportunities
- the anonymity that results in less social control⁴

A quick survey of journalistic reports on comments that megachurch members make when asked what they like about their church reveals some suggestive, if untested, correlatives with the above list:

- "I was attracted by the lack of tradition"
- "You're not intimidated by any ceremonies"
- "It's a full service church, heavy with activities"
- "Music is performed with all the pizzazz of a professional show"
- "Pastors don't make me feel ignorant or guilty"
- "We were here for a full year before we knew it was Lutheran"
- "This is a church that meets my needs where I am"
- "They don't make you feel that you have to dress up"⁵

Conversely, social analysts have also observed a reverse trend, a flight away from megalopolis, a desire for open spaces, a movement to the urban fringe, to suburbia, to small bedroom villages, to acreages just beyond the city limits and even way out in some isolated wooded area. These people, it is said, are *pushed* away from city life by fear for one's safety, high decibel and inescapable noise, health-affecting pollution, a hectic stress-producing pace of life, anomie, and other factors. Simultaneously, they feel a strong *pull* toward the "intimate human relationships, security, spiritual unity, and orderly transmission of the basic cultural inheritance" which the small community can provide.⁶

Clearly, people are ambivalent. They want occupational, economic, social, and cultural flexibility and diversity with the availability of endless options. But not at the expense of safety, health, and sense of social and religious community. They want social intimacy, but not at the expense of personal freedom. They want people close to them in their lives, concerned about their well-being, available to provide comfort, support, and celebration during the deeply personal passage periods of their lives, but not in a judgmental, admonitory, or controlling way. To put it succinctly, they want the conveniences that both big city environments and small communities provide, but without the concomitant inconveniences of either.

This is a big order, really an impossible dream. It is a "have your cake and eat it too" psychology. But it is the psychological stuff endemic to our modern world. And the church is not immune. It would be disingenuous to rule it out as a potentially explanatory factor in today's megachurch phenomenon.

Content or Form

The question that intrigues the ecclesiastical analyst is: How much can one learn from the phenomenal growth of the current megachurches in the world that is applicable to other churches? Are there some identifiable criteria that, when used, will contribute to similar growth patterns in other churches? Is such growth a function of content or form, personality or public relations, providence or organizational skill, one of these, a combination of some of these, or all of these?

In the 1970s Dean M. Kelley found that "conservative" churches were growing faster than those which were accommodating their beliefs and practices to emergent modern norms.⁷ Is it essential to megachurch development that the theological foundations of these churches be conservative, i.e., Bible-based and confessional in their theology? One writer claims that, while secularization is a major trend in religion today, "there is strong evidence that people still need Emil Durkheim's four elements of religion in their lives, namely, sacred objects, beliefs, rituals, and community."⁸ Admittedly, Durkheim, a seminal theorist in the study of cross-cultural religious phenomena, was not speaking exclusively about the Christian religion. But the implication is that growth in all religion is empirically connected with a basic human need for identification with the historical roots from which those religions issued.

It is of interest to note that contemporary journalistic descriptions of megachurch characteristics have little to say about doctrinal tenets or theological stance. The emphasis instead is on their promotional style. Words like customer, business, marketing strategy, clientele, seeker friendly and

user-friendly forms are often found in news reporters' accounts of what is happening in megachurches. One *New York Times* account uses the term "Wal-Mart-ization of American religion." It suggests that megachurches are attracting "people seeking meaning but without creeds, confessions, or catechisms."⁹

At the same time, it must be noted that megachurch leadership counters criticism by protesting that theological goals continue to be the ultimate purpose for their existence. Comments justifying entertainment type presentations in church services include:

- "We call it froth, but every bit of it has a hook in it. You're getting a lot of people inside the door, then you get a chance to talk to them about the message."
- "People accuse us of watering down the Bible and raising the entertainment quotient to fill seats. . . . No, when you come here, you're not going to get entertained, you're going to get Jesus."¹⁰

Metachurch

One of the strongest critiques of the megachurch movement comes from people who have coined another term: metachurch. Impetus for this approach comes from the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, and its director, Carl F. George. His book, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, articulates what they mean by metachurch.¹¹

Metachurch does not decry megachurch development. To the contrary, it uses the largest megachurch in the world, the Yoida Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, with its 650,000 members, as its model for metachurch. It argues that the secret behind this phenomenal Korean success story is not its huge size but its brilliant organizational approach, specifically, its division of its huge membership into over 50,000 small cell groups containing from 10 to 12 people each, with each of these cells becoming a little church within the megachurch and providing many of the needs which are the basic elements of congregational life, like Bible instruction, emotional support, and shepherding care. The weekly mass services are for celebration. The small cell groups are for integration.

The philosophy of metachurch is substantially summarized by four sentences in George's book.¹² They are:

- "the metagrowth system of organization shifts focus away from an all-too-common overdependence on overfunctioning clergy"
- "the focus in the metachurch is the people . . . How well are they being cared for and encouraged by one another?"
- "only on the cell level can people's deeply felt care needs be met"

- "certain other adventures in faith do not occur easily among ten people. When believers come together in a huge crowd, an extra festival-like dimension of excitement attaches itself to the singing of praise or the preaching of Scripture"

The metachurch model, in other words, is an effort at combining very large and very small into a practical organizational unity which is intended to provide a "best of both worlds" result. At the same time, there is an implication in this model that it has the ability to provide solace and comfort to all those "medium-sized churches" which realistically can never aspire to megachurch status, promising them that the ultimate secret of successful church ministry is to be found in the building of the kind of human relationships that are possible only in what sociologists call "primary groups."¹³

Primary groups, by definition, are groups where one can find these interconnected features:

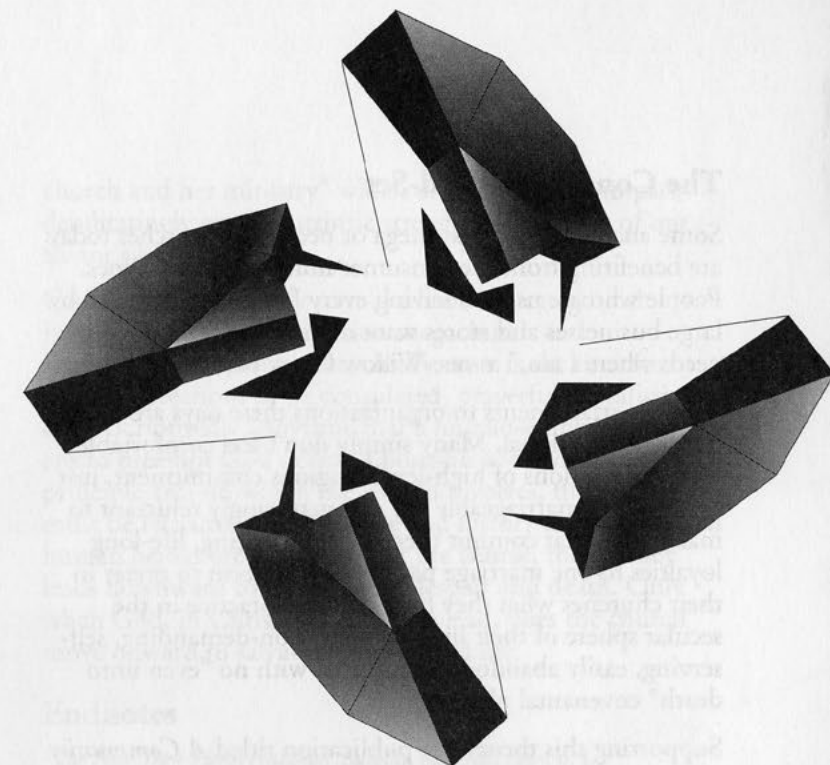
- continuous face-to-face interaction
- strong personal identity with the group
- strong ties of affection
- multifaceted relationships
- a long-lasting group

Not all churches that fall into the megachurch category have been as successful as the Yoida Full Gospel Church in Seoul in providing primary group satisfactions in the midst of massive numbers. Yet, they have continued to grow. Why is that? Perhaps there are other factors in contemporary western culture that offer some clues.

The Mall/Super-Market Mentality

Some suggest that American society particularly has developed cultural themes that place low value on smallness and high value on bigness. Such themes would include:

- the popularity of large malls where a comprehensive variety of goods and services, including recreational opportunities, are all available under one roof (The West Edmonton Mall, Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota)
- the popularity of super-market grocery stores, relegating small neighborhood grocery stores to near extinction
- the popularity of all-purpose stores which combine fashions, hardware, auto supplies, garden equipment, sports equipment, food, etc., under one roof (K-Mart, Wal-Mart, etc.)
- multi-company mergers, encroaching on the survival of smaller, independent businesses
- corporate loyalty becoming a victim of individual greed (successful executives and staffers jumping from company to company, following the money trail)



- product-producing business, including health, food, sports, and entertainment, and professional service people gravitating to large mall environments where they can provide conveniences for their customers and clients which are not available when they are located in separate establishments

How has this small versus big mentality affected what is happening in institutional religion? Consider the following: in recent years many small country churches have merged with a town church or simply disbanded, leaving individual members to find other, larger churches. People with specialized counseling needs (such as substance abuse, gambling, obesity, marital conflict, and child-rearing problems) are drawn to churches that are large enough to provide comprehensive services. Parents with children who are into sports are attracted to churches large enough to provide a diverse recreational and athletic program. Parents who are concerned about unbridled secularism in the public schools seek out churches that can provide a Christian day school education. People who are uncomfortable with denominational "narrowness" are drawn to independent churches that are large enough to survive without denominational backing and broad enough to allow considerable theological diversity.

Such a minor habit as people going out for Sunday breakfast, brunch, or lunch may draw people to a church that provides a food court or cafeteria.

In malls people can hop from one store to the next until they find what they want. Some see this mentality carrying over into church behavior as parishioners, at relatively small provocation, shift their membership from one congregation to another until they "find what they want."

The Consumer Mind-Set

Some analysts argue that mega or near megachurches today are benefiting from the consumer mind-set of our times. People who are used to having every felt need catered to by large businesses and stores want churches that "meet my needs where I am," as one Willow Creek parishioner opined.

People's attachments to organizations these days are not deeply institutional. Many simply don't feel comfortable with expectations of high-level religious commitment, just as people of marriageable age are increasingly reluctant to make vows that commit them to deep, lasting, life-long loyalties to one marriage partner. Many seem to prefer in their churches what they have come to practice in the secular sphere of their lives, namely, non-demanding, self-serving, easily abandoned contracts, with no "even unto death" covenantal pledges.

Supporting this theory is a publication titled *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship* by Tim Wright.¹⁴ This study argues that newcomers to growth-oriented churches tend to have a consumer orientation. They come asking, "What's in it for me? How will this worship service make me feel? Will it help me meet my goals in life? Does it have anything relevant to say to me?"¹⁵

Specifically, what does the consumer-oriented church goer look for? Eight wants are identified.

1. Innovation: new, trendy, up-to-date worship services
2. Pragmatism and instant gratification: a "gospel" that satisfies here-and-now wants with "how-to" answers to today's problems
3. Choices: a variety of worship choices under one roof
4. Quality: production excellence in music, drama, etc.
5. Short-term commitments: a four-Sunday over four-month Bible study series
6. The present: past religious symbols, garb, forms, music have little relevance
7. Intimacy and authenticity: warm, open, informal worship styles with leaders who are willing to be vulnerable
8. Contemporary experiences and expressions: something that provides emotional stimulation with sounds and rhythms that reflect the secular environment

This study, it should be noted, does not disparage traditional worship styles which continue to inspire many in their praise of God. It does conclude, however, that there is a need for alternative styles of worship "to reach those not reached through traditional forms."¹⁶

The Bottom Line

The bottom line question for the Lutheran Church as it continues to prize its history, remain loyal to its Scriptural

and Confessional beliefs, and treasure the worship forms and music that date back to Luther and the Reformation is whether it needs to accommodate its evangelistic practices to what we here have described as the megachurch and metachurch models. Does the tendency of these models to adjust how they do church to the emergent mentality of western culture contribute to "building up" the body of Christ? Or will it contribute to "building it down"? These questions were addressed provocatively in a 1993 book by Os Guinness. The title, *Dining with the Devil*, obscures the fact that the author does attempt to give a balanced analysis.¹⁷

The study begins by affirming that megachurches and the church growth movement from which they sprang have had "an immensely positive spiritual, cultural, and historical significance for the church of Christ."¹⁸ What is good about this movement is its new and vibrant emphases on the priority of mission, the desirability of growth, the acknowledgment of cultural influences, and the propriety of using the insights and methods of the human sciences to foster growth.

Having granted that, Guinness then embarks on an intense critique and issues strong caveats to which megachurch and church growth leaders would be well advised to give serious attention. The questionable concomitants of this movement, he suggests, include the following tendencies:

- to downplay sin, self-denial, sacrifice, judgment, and hell
- to stress "seeker-friendliness" to the extent that discipleship is subordinated to evangelism and evangelism to entertainment
- to disregard the danger that organizing its ministry around "felt needs" can easily lead to a crop of Western "rice Christians" in which the least demanding churches will be the ones that are in greatest demand
- to lend credibility to a non-denominational trend in which "brand loyalty is a doctrine of the past and the customer is king"
- to allow theology to be relegated to a low level of concern as practicality becomes the operant value of the day
- to fail to recognize that modernity is the late-twentieth century golden calf and that churches who bow down to it are in fact sitting down to a dinner with the devil.

The attempted balance that we ascribed to Guinness is discovered again in one of his closing passages. He writes, "Christians are free to plunder the Egyptians (modernity), but forbidden to set up a golden calf. By all means plunder freely of the treasures of modernity, but in God's name make sure that what comes out of the fire. . . is gold fit for the temple of God and not a late-twentieth century image of a golden calf."¹⁹

Some will argue that all religious forms, groupings, and churchly patterns are in themselves a cultural system that inevitably restructures itself from time to time to fit new and different circumstances.²⁰ This, however, is a purely scientific perspective. Religious adherents view their churches, and have a right to view them, from the perspective of religious faith. From this perspective we have not only the right but the duty to evaluate religious trends in terms of their loyalty to basic premises and their potential for preserving these premises for present and future generations.

In that light megachurch and metachurch trends, with all their exciting drama and visible growth accomplishments, ought to give Lutherans serious pause and activate some attention-getting warning bells.

First, we need to measure everything in terms of the primacy of Lutheran Law/Gospel theology. Both megachurch and metachurch seem to give lesser attention to this than Lutheranism historically has.

Second, we need to measure everything in terms of the priorities which Scripture assigns to the preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments, on the one hand, and individual care-giving, on the other. Megachurch and metachurch seem sometimes to put the cart before the horse.

Third, we need to measure everything in terms of which comes first, the voice of God mediated through his Word, or the voice of a person demanding that we attend to one's felt human needs. No one would claim that this is a new debate. But it takes on special force and urgency in an age and culture where the elevation of the human ego and the deification of individual self-interest have taken on idolatrous dimensions.

Finally, we need to measure everything in terms of the organizational plan which God has laid down for his church as it relates to pastors and laypeople working together in Christian ministry. Both megachurch and metachurch appear to blur distinctions that should be inherent in a God-pleasing ecclesiastical arrangement.

Give the megachurch movement credit for its chief accomplishment, which is energizing the church's focus on its greatest challenge—evangelizing the world for Christ. At the same time, do not close an eye to that part of the movement which puts its most basic goals at risk, namely, its love affair with modernity, which, like all love affairs, can create blind spots that hide flaws which eventually cause serious trouble.

A clear-eyed view of the totality of this movement presents a duo-dimensional picture. Although positive appraisers emphasize its pragmatic, energetic, and growth-achieving accomplishments,²¹ and as such an extrinsic building up of the church of Jesus Christ, some negative appraisers remind us that underlying it all is "a defective doctrine of the

church and her ministry" which ultimately must impact debilitatingly on the intrinsic strength and vitality of our Savior's kingdom.²²

Caution: It is too early to make final and categorical judgments about the direction megachurch and metachurch are going. But, clearly, now is the time for course corrections to be considered, prayerfully, realistically, Scripturally. Anytime that a human-emphasis threatens to preempt God's central position as the organizing principle around which the church revolves, the direction must be reexamined. The Bible and history are clear. When human beings are allowed to set the course, the journey leads downward to the valley of despair and death. Only when God, in Christ, is allowed to lead, does the church move onward to salvation and eternal life.

Endnotes

¹ *The New York Times National Sunday*, April 16, 1995, p. 14.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Phillips, E. Barbara and LeGates, Richard T., *City Lights*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 3-4.

⁵ *New York Times*, p. 14.

⁶ Phillips, p. 160.

⁷ Kelley, Dean M., *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

⁸ Light, Donald Jr. and Keller, Suzanne, *Sociology*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1982, p. 465.

⁹ *New York Times*, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ George, Carl F., *Prepare Your Church for the Future*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

¹³ Light and Keller, p. 197.

¹⁴ Wright, Tim, *A Community of Joy*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18 ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁷ Guinness, Os, *Dining With the Devil*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁰ Geertz, Clifford, "Religion as a Cultural System," *Religion American Style* (Patrick H. McNamara, ed.). New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

²¹ Kallestad, Walther P. and Schey, Steven I., *Total Quality Ministry*. Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1994.

²² "The Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology on Metachurch," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, July, 1995, p. 222.



When *small* is **NOT** Better

Robert Scudieri

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LET'S FACE IT; there are some things small churches do better than large churches. To say the converse, that large churches do some things better, is not to say large churches are essentially better! St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:18 are helpful: "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be." This can apply to churches as well as individual Christians. Let's assume at the outset that both small and large churches have things they do well. This is a good thing because most churches in the United States today are small.

Church researcher Lyle Schaller (*Ministry Advantage*, November/December 1994) states that the small church has been "the dominant expression of Christianity in North America for nearly four centuries." Today the small congregation (less than 100 at worship) makes up 60 percent of Protestant congregations in North America. As several people have said a number of times, God must love the small church because He makes so many of them. In that regard, God must love the Missouri Synod.

Many may not realize that the average size of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregation has been steadily declining. On a typical Sunday morning in 1973 the average congregation of the LCMS had 197 people worshipping God. In 1983 that figure declined to 182. By 1992, just ten years later, only 169 souls were worshipping God each week at the average LCMS worship service.

Could it be only coincidental that the average *total* attendance of LCMS congregations has been falling as well? In 1973, 1,106,407 people in LCMS congregations worshiped God each week; by 1983 that number was 1,040,730; in 1992 this number dropped below one million to 994,301.

If we are going to assume that in some ways large churches are better than small churches, we first have to remember that the differences between the two do not end with numbers. Large and small churches are different "organisms"; they grow in a different way, they serve differently. In administration, small and large churches are, well, different.

In the eyes of God, when God's people are gathered around the Word as it is preached in its purity and the sacraments as they are rightly administered, they are a church—God's people, forgiven for every sin, every blemish. In this sense there is no difference between a large and a small church. They both deliver the salvation won for us at the cross of Christ. This is most important.

Small Churches May Experience Difficulties

It is also true that many small churches are having a difficult time today. For one thing, not too long ago 75 people at worship on Sunday were required to pay the cost for a full-time pastor. Today that number, depending on the economic level of the congregation, is in the 135-150 member range.

There is more to consider. In the language of sociology, small churches are "single cells," the place where, in the words of a popular television show, "everybody knows your name." In a culture where so many people are lonely, where the family unit breaks apart more than 50 percent of the time, having a base where you are known, loved, and supported is invaluable.

But most of us cannot know the names and, more importantly, know what is going on in the lives of more than 75 to 100 other people. When worship attendance grows beyond 100 we find it difficult to keep up with the names of the new people joining the church. "Outsiders" do not perceive they are welcomed into our "family." This is because, in the small church, an "outsider" circle does not exist; everyone is supposed to belong, supposed to know everyone else, and supposed to help out. Here, we are talking about family.

Suggest to a small congregation (or one with a small congregation mentality) that it may grow if another worship service were added, and one will hear the complaint, "But that would divide our church." The real concern is, "How will we keep up with what is going on in the lives of our friends if we no longer see them regularly?"

One of the major findings of the AAL sponsored "Church Membership Initiative" was that approximately 80 percent of LCMS congregations defined their mission as serving current congregation members—serving "the family"—versus emphasizing bringing the gospel to those still

unreached. Even though one-half of the 80 percent *said* that they saw their mission as reaching the lost with the saving gospel of Jesus, they were not prepared to make the necessary changes to do this.

Further, the small church tends to be a "homogenous unit." The great majority of members are of the same ethnic, cultural and social background. Members of a homogenous group do not easily accept others "different" from themselves. This is not a conscious decision of the congregation. But unless a decision is made to include many types of people and strong leadership for that decision is given, the small church usually is very "bland" from an ethnic perspective. In late 20th century America this will cause problems.

Today, nearly one million immigrants a year enter our country. Almost unheralded, we live in the time of the greatest influx of people from outside our borders since the founding of the republic. These folks are not, for the most part, coming from Germany, Norway and Sweden.

When the immigration laws were changed in the 1960s, the new rules favored people from South America and Asia. Since 1970 the majority of increase in population in the United States has come from immigrants and their children. In the 1990s, two-thirds of the increase in population in our country come from immigrants and their children. If current immigration laws remain unchanged, after the year 2000 just about *all* of the growth in population in this country will come from immigrants. This is not just occurring on the fringes of the nation.

The 1980 census showed one Midwest stronghold of Lutheranism, Wausau, Wisconsin, to be the most ethnically homogenous city in the nation, with less than one percent of the population being other than white and English speaking. Today, 25 percent of the children in the Wausau elementary schools are non-Caucasian, enrolling students from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, Albania, and Egypt.

Small churches are having a difficult time because they tend to be homogenous units in a more multicultural country and culture dominated by large institutions. Wal-Mart drives out small businesses in rural areas; megamalls eat up super malls; as "choices," "variety" and convenience are preferred over loyalty to former vendors who offered fewer choices.

Larger Congregations May Offer More Options

Larger churches are more complex organizations. Because of this they offer more places for people with different interests and needs. Introducing another worship service at a different time may make it difficult for some members to

be aware of what is happening in the lives of other members. But if there are people in the congregation who work on Sunday morning, or who travel on weekends to care for an elderly relative, or who after working all week find the weekend to be the best time to be away with family, such people will not have a viable choice.

But offering more services of worship is not all larger churches do. They also offer more variety. For example, is there room in a congregation for people who cannot stand classical music played on the organ? For people who learn more by repetition than by reading? What if they cannot read? Is there room for those who cannot hear? For people who do not speak English?

Very simply stated, larger congregations tend to offer more options. That is how they became larger—they provided more and different places for varied groups of people. They do not shut people out. They do not have one women's group; if they do, women also meet in separate, smaller groups to address a variety of interests at a variety of times for a variety of women. They do not have one youth group, but offer a "smorgasbord" of entry points where young people with different interests can become involved and participate at their level of giftedness.

Larger churches also develop lay leaders for small group Bible studies, providing places where people are cared for and the "family" environment small churches are so good at providing. In these small groups members pray for each other's needs and receive encouragement, love, and respect.

The Role of the Pastor

The structure of a larger church also says something about the role of the pastor: he is much more of an "*episcopus*," bishop, who serves as a supervisor of doctrine and practice than as the *doer* of all ministry (which tends to happen in the small church). Actually, the word "*episcopus*" (overseer of church life) is used more frequently in the New Testament than the Greek word "*poimen*," (shepherd, or pastor). In Ephesians 4:12 Paul says that God "Gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers *to prepare God's people for works of service . . .*"

This role is a strong part of our LCMS tradition. C.F.W. Walther, the first president of the LCMS, preached a sermon on the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity in 1842 at Trinity, St. Louis, in which he described a pastor's role: "Just as in the construction of a church building many workers are needed, not only the one who organizes and supervises (*episcopus*) the whole job, so also in the construction of the invisible church not only the called ministers of Christ do the work, but rather all Christians must lend a hand." Walther continued: "The Christian church is a great

mission-house. Each Christian in it is a missionary, sent out by God into his own circle to convert others to Christ, invite them to the heavenly wedding, call them to the kingdom of God, and enlist soldiers everywhere to the eternal treasure and the army of Christ. God does not give his spiritual gifts only to pastors and teachers."

Reaching Out to Those of Different Ethnic and Social Backgrounds

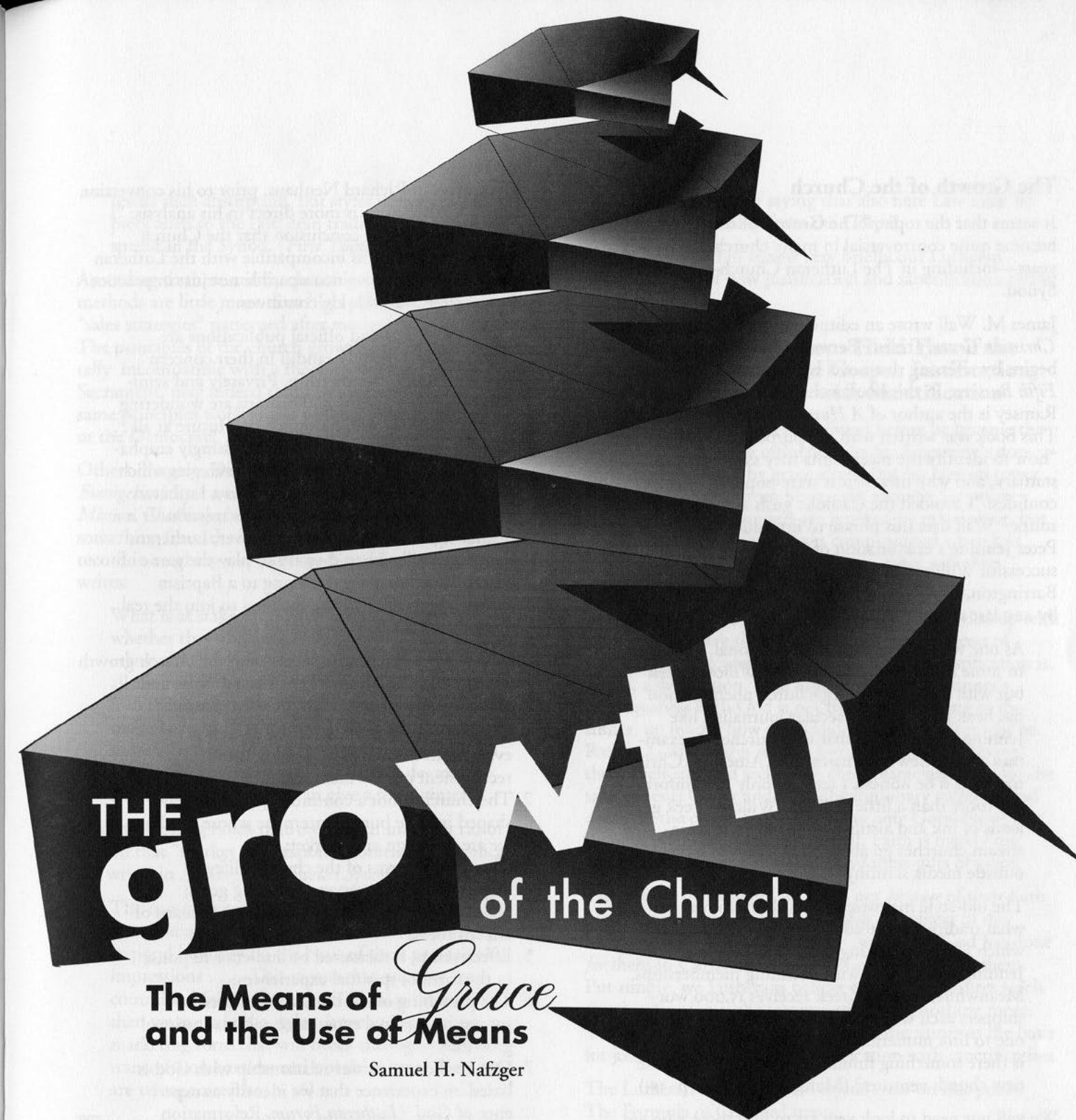
In recent months, another Trinity Lutheran Church in Des Moines, Iowa, decided to offer choices. They had to if they were going to minister to the new people entering their neighborhood. As large groups of people from the African country of the Sudan and new immigrants from the Asian nation of Laos found their way into Trinity's neighborhood, the congregation opened its arms.

The pastor of Trinity, Rev. Steve Olsen, supervises elders chosen by the congregation from among the new immigrants. The elders speak the language of the people, know their customs, dress like the people, eat their foods, know their music. Separate Bible studies are held for people who have difficulty with English; as time goes on and the people are more able to speak English, these groups will be integrated. At this time other worship services are offered to people who can hear the living Word of God preached in their own language.

There is no reason why many other small churches cannot do the same. Many churches that are small can decide to reach out to people of different ethnic and social backgrounds. They can begin to offer more than one worship option per week. Pastors of small churches can begin to identify people in the congregation who have the gift to teach others and bring them together to prepare and supervise them in the teaching of small group Bible studies.

Smaller is not better when a church has the opportunity to share the wonderful message of salvation with others, but will not. Smaller is not better when tradition, fear, ignorance, and false doctrine keep the smaller church from taking full advantage of the blessings given by its Savior, Jesus.

Smaller is not a sin. Smaller is not bad. Smaller is an opportunity in itself to provide a loving, caring setting for sharing the gospel, to give broken people forgiveness, a place to find rest, and a place to be part of a family. Smaller is also an opportunity to demonstrate how much God can do with His powerful gospel. God loves smaller churches. Period.



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WHEN WE DISCUSS "THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH," we will have to distinguish carefully between what Lutherans refer to as "the Means of Grace—the Gospel in Word and Sacrament—and the means of getting this Gospel out. Failure to do this results in either the confusion of Law with Gospel which leads to synergism, or it results in the apathy and indifference which follow in the wake of the separation of Law and Gospel.

The Growth of the Church

It seems that the topic, "The Growth of the Church," has become quite controversial in many churches in recent years—including in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

James M. Wall wrote an editorial earlier this year in the *Christian Century* titled "Between a Gush and a Smirk." He begins by referring to a novel by Robertson Davies titled *Fifth Business*. In this book a character named Dunstan Ramsey is the author of *A Hundred Saints for Travelers*. This book was written with the purpose of telling readers "how to identify the most saints they saw in pictures and statuary, and why these saints were popular." Ramsey confides: "I avoided the Catholic gush and the Protestant smirk." Wall uses this phrase to introduce his reaction to Peter Jennings's examination of "the almost supernaturally successful Willow Creek Community Church" in South Barrington, Illinois, and two other megachurches profiled by ABC last spring. Writes Wall:

As one who still hews to the traditional, I confess to some discomfort not just with Willow Creek but with the way the megachurch phenomenon has been picked up by secular journalists like Jennings, who argues that the churches he examines are the new 'mainstream' of American Christianity. To be honest, I feel not only discomfort but more than a little jealousy. Willow Creek gets loads of ink and airtime while old-style mainstream churches go about their business largely outside media scrutiny.

The old-style mainstreamers still try to hew to what tradition has told us was the rock around which all else is sinking sand, but they do so, Jennings points out, with declining memberships. Meanwhile, Willow Creek receives 15,000 worshippers each weekend. Is it jealousy that tempts one to link numerical success with sinking sand, or is there something fundamentally flawed in these new church ventures? (March 22-29, 1995, p. 315)

We will not need to look very far to find those who are quick to answer Wall's question with a resounding "yes." "Yes, there is something fundamentally flawed in these megachurches, and in fact with the entire *Church Growth Movement*," they say.

Martin Marty laments what he calls the contemporary "Baptistification of America" with its emphasis on experience, on "decisions for Christ," and its voluntaristic conception of the church and loss of the sacramental. Baptistification, he concludes, has become "the great new missionary fact of the ecumenical era," complete with its motives, policies, and answers. (*Christianity Today*, 1983)

Former Lutheran Richard Neuhaus, prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism, is more direct in his analysis: "I have been drawn to the conclusion that the Church Growth Movement. . . is incompatible with the Lutheran way of being Christian—incompatible not just in practice but in principle." (p. 18) He continues:

Lutheran leaders and official publications are becoming increasingly candid in their concern about declining membership. Privately and semi-publicly, many pastors and bishops are wondering whether Lutheranism has much of a future at all . . . in the Missouri Synod there is increasingly emphasis on Protestant 'Church growth' strategies which are, in our judgment, utterly alien to a Lutheran understanding of the church and its mission. It is a further sign of desperation. Moreover, Lutherans look pretty silly when they try to play the game of others. If people want to belong to a Baptism church, they will likely be inclined to join the real thing. (*Forum Letter*, December 1986)

Neuhaus delineates seven problems with the church growth movement which he summarizes in seven "false and interrelated propositions which must be rejected":

1. The controlling purpose of the church is evangelism defined as marketing for the recruitment of new members;
2. The church is not a community normatively shaped in time but an enterprise whose product we are to design and market;
3. The style or forms of the church's life are dispensable if that serves marketing goals;
4. The means of grace are defined as the means of effectiveness;
5. Effectiveness is measured by audience response in the form of spiritual experiences;
6. The preaching of the cross is vindicated by success in personal experience and institutional growth;
7. Our confidence in our relationship with God is based on experience that we identify as experience of God. (*Lutheran Forum*, Reformation 1990, p. 24)

James Nuechterlein, in the April 1995 issue of *First Things*, echoes Neuhaus' concerns.

A related problem of Missouri is its susceptibility to the sentimental evangelism and preoccupation with church growth that pervades contemporary conservative Protestantism. The LCMS has a long history of flirting with neo-fundamentalism, and its narrow biblicism puts it in perpetual danger of absorption into the evangelical Protestant world. Missouri's long tradition of confessional orthodoxy

resists such absorption, but styles of evangelical piety alien to the Lutheran tradition are now widespread in the Synod. (*First Things*, April 1995, p. 11)

According to these critics, church growth programs and methods are little more than high powered, well-organized "sales strategies" patterned after modern business methods. The principles of the church growth movement, fundamentally incompatible with a theology centered in Word and Sacrament, may indeed result in megachurches, but these same principles work just as well for Mormons, for the GOP or the Democrats, and for Procter and Gamble.

Others disagree. David Luecke in his widely read book, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America's Mission Challenge*, believes that Lutherans can indeed learn something from the Evangelicals and their impressive track record in reaching out with the Gospel to people today. He writes:

What is at stake for many Lutherans today is whether they continue to function . . . as a separate ethnic church, trying to preserve a distinctive culture all their own. Or will they follow the mobile Lord into the future with an openness and a readiness to move beyond all ethnicity? If they want to respond more effectively to a society that stresses personal choices to a previously unimaginable degree, the Evangelical movement can give a few pointers.

Waldo Werning holds that the church must get rid of the notion that "market orientation is somehow unbiblical." He writes in *Making the Missouri Synod Functional Again*:

The communication through style and marketing is exceedingly important for the reason that people respond basically on the basis of their perceptions, impressions . . . This means that once we are committed faithfully to the Biblical substance, then we must find a style, communication or marketing form that will break through cultural transmission barriers and not drive away those we are trying to reach. (p. 16)

What are we to make of all of this? Is "church growth" compatible with Lutheran theology? Can we distinguish substance from style? Is this distinction helpful? Can Lutherans learn something from the Evangelicals, from the Baptists, without thereby forfeiting what Neuhaus refers to as "the Lutheran Difference" in the process?

As interesting as these questions are, the most important question to ask has to do with the role or place that church growth programs and strategies play in the understanding of how sinners come to faith. In discussing the response to this question, it is all important that the means of grace be distinguished carefully from the use of means, which is

merely another way of saying that also here Law must be distinguished carefully from the Gospel.

It may be helpful to review very briefly our Lutheran understanding of how justification and sanctification relate to one another.

The Lutheran Confessions Hold That if the Gospel is to Remain the Gospel, Justification Must not be Mixed Up with Sanctification

Martin Luther, who was a Christian before he became the Reformer, was deeply influenced by St. Augustine's doctrine of justification by grace alone. But his famous tower experience resulted from his insight that the Scriptures teach not only that sinners are justified by grace alone, but that salvation by grace alone is compromised when it is held that this grace is received in any other way than through faith alone.

In other words, the heart of the Reformation is tied up with Luther's discovery that justification is not a process of renewal or a "becoming righteous," but that justification is an act, a declaration. God's declaration of the sinner's righteousness with God is not based on anything in the sinner, no matter how small and insignificant it might be. Rather, God declares sinners just and holy by forgiving them their sins and reckoning them blameless solely for the sake of Jesus Christ and His substitutionary suffering and death on the cross. The Gospel, the only Good News that there is, is this message of acquittal. Faith is merely the hand through which sinners receive these gifts of grace.

This means that sinners are saved not *because* of their faith but through faith. It also means that the object of the believer's faith is always and only that which God has done *for* them in Christ and not what God has done *in* them. Put simply, we Lutherans believe that the Scriptures teach that justification is the forgiveness of sins, nothing more. To introduce anything whatsoever *in* the sinner as the basis for justification is to confuse justification with sanctification.

The Lutheran Confessors are crystal clear on this point. The Formula of Concord states:

If the article of justification is to remain pure, we must give especially diligent heed that we do not mingle or insert that which precedes faith or follows faith into the article of justification . . . The only essential and necessary elements of justification are the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and faith which accepts the promise of the Gospel. (FC SD, III, 24, 25)

Melanchthon in the *Apology* takes great pains to make it clear that no merit should be attributed even to faith itself, lest faith be turned into a human achievement:

When we say that faith justifies, some may think this refers to the beginning, as though faith were the start of justification or a preparation for justification. Then it would be not faith, but the works that follow by which we would become acceptable with God . . . Regarding faith we maintain not this, but rather that because of Christ by faith itself we are truly accounted righteous or acceptable before God. (Ap IV 71-72)

As proof for this very *fine* but *sharp* distinction between justification and sanctification, the Confessors point to the clear teachings of St. Paul:

This is St. Paul's intention when in this article he so earnestly and diligently stresses such exclusive terms (that is, terms that exclude works from the article of justification by faith) as 'without works,' 'without the law,' 'freely,' 'not of works,' all of which exclusive terms may be summarized in the assertion that we are justified before God and saved "through faith alone." (FC SD, III, 36)

There is no sinner for whom Christ did not die, and there is no sin for which he has not *already* atoned. This, brothers and sisters, is the Gospel truth! It is Good News. And because this is so there is hope for me, and for you. The moment sanctification is inserted into justification, salvation is made to be dependent on what we do, and we can never do enough to get right with God.

Justification and Sanctification Must Not Be Separated From Each Other

But there is a second error in the way justification and sanctification must be distinguished from each other. Not only must they not be confused or mixed up, but they must not be separated.

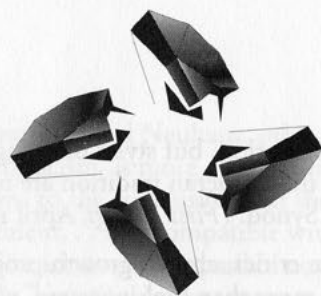
Accused by their opponents of opposing good works because the Lutheran Confessors insist on excluding them from consideration under the doctrine of justification, they emphasize repeatedly the necessity of good works, but always as the fruit of faith, and not as its object.

Melanchthon writes in the *Apology*:

Love and good works *must* also follow faith. So they are not excluded as though they did not follow, but trust in the merit of love or works is excluded from justification. (Ap. IV, 74)

We believe and teach, therefore, that good works must necessarily be done since our incipient keeping of the law must follow faith. (Ap. IV, 214)

As they did when speaking about justification, the writers of the Formula of Concord turn to Luther in support of affirming the necessity of good works:



For as Luther writes in his Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, "Faith is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God, kills the old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active. Whoever does not perform such good works is a faithless man . . . It is therefore as impossible to separate good works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire." (FC SD, IV, 10-12)

In support of this strong emphasis on the necessity of good works, the Confessors turn once again to the Holy Scriptures. The FC states:

Holy Scripture itself uses words like 'necessity,' 'necessary,' 'useful,' 'should,' and 'must' to indicate what we are bound to do because of God's ordinance, commandment, and will. (Romans 13:5, 6, 9; 1 Corinthians 9:9; Acts 5:29; John 15:12; 1 John 4:11). (FC, SD, IV, 14)

The conclusion is clear. According to the Lutheran Confessions, Law and Gospel are not properly related to each other not only when good works are inserted into the way sinners are made right with God, but also when good works are separated from the sinner's being declared righteous in God's sight. *Good works are necessary*, but not for salvation.

The Means of Grace are Related to the Use of Means in Precisely the Same Way as Justification is Related to Sanctification

The Church Growth Movement, with its concentration on the use of methods and techniques in "marketing the Gospel," runs the danger of substituting "the use of means" in getting the Gospel out for "the means of grace," through which *alone* the church, understood as believers gathered around word and sacrament, grows, both numerically and spiritually. This danger is intensified by the fact that the Church Growth Movement had its origin among Christians whose understanding of the sacraments is impoverished and whose clarity regarding the importance of

distinguishing Law and Gospel is often somewhat confused and by the very use of the word *means* with respect to getting the Word out and with respect to the God-ordained sacraments through which He creates faith. To assist in spotting tendencies in Evangelicalism and Church Growth programs and endeavors, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, in its report, *Evangelism and Church Growth with Special Reference to the Church Growth Movement*, formulated seven questions to be asked of evangelism plans and programs:

1. Does the program or technique suggest approaching the unconverted first with the Gospel rather than seeking to discover whether the person has a knowledge of his or her sin and lost condition without Christ?
2. Does the program or technique present the Gospel in a way that suggests that human beings have the ability within themselves to make a decision for Christ rather than that faith comes through the operation of the Holy Spirit?
3. Does the program or technique, either directly or indirectly, focus attention on what is taking place within the individual rather than on what took place on the cross of Jesus Christ? Does it tend to regard the presence of certain extraordinary—or even ordinary—gifts of the Spirit as a basis for certainty of forgiveness and salvation? Does it foster the impression that faith is a good work that merits God's favor?
4. Does this program or technique suggest that there are at least three categories of people—unrepentant sinners, believers or those who have accepted Jesus as Savior but not as Lord, and disciples or those who have accepted Christ as both Lord and Savior?
5. Does the program or technique give the impression, either directly or indirectly, that spiritual growth is always visible to the human eye and can therefore be measured by statistics and plotted on charts and graphs?
6. Does this program or technique create the illusion that the acceptance of the Gospel by sinners is attributable to the use of this program or technique?
7. Does this program or technique lead to the conclusion that the lack of positive results, when this occurs, is attributable solely to the way in which it was implemented?

If questions such as these can be answered positively, this is a sure indication that the use of means for getting the Gospel out has insidiously infiltrated the "means of grace," which in turn indicates that sanctification has been mixed and confused with justification. When this takes place, Christ is robbed of His meritorious work as our substitute, and the sinner is robbed of the assurance that all sins are forgiven in and through Christ.

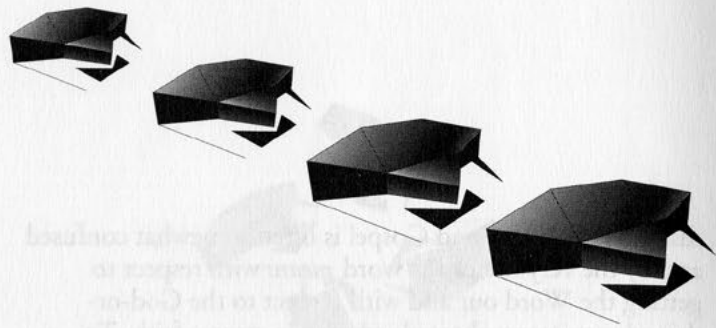
But we Lutherans confess with Luther in the explanation to the Third Article: "I believe that by my own reason and strength, I cannot believe, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." Faith in Jesus Christ is always a miracle of God's grace working through the means of grace in Word and Sacraments. The question "why some and not others"—*cur alii non alii*—called the cross of theologians—the *crux theologium*—must be left to our all merciful Lord.

But the Church Growth Movement not only presents us with the temptation to substitute the use of means for the means of grace. It also raises the possibility of playing the one against the other. Since the Holy Spirit works only through Word and Sacraments to bring sinners to faith in Christ, there is a parallel temptation to regard talk and plans regarding the use of means in getting the Gospel out as in and of itself as somehow antithetical to and subversive of the Scriptural doctrine of the means of grace. "Since we are saved by grace alone without the deeds of the law, good works must be injurious to salvation." Wrong! Such a conclusion also confuses the Scriptural relationship between Law and Gospel in that it would separate sanctification from justification.

Plans and strategies for getting the Gospel out, that is, for the use of means, when understood to fall under sanctification as the result of the work of the Spirit in the lives of sinners whose hearts have been converted, can only be seen as inevitable, yes, as necessary. The love of Christ constrains us to be prepared to give a defense of the hope that is in us, and to so do with grace and respect, making use of all of the strategies and techniques, being all things to all people, so that the Gospel through which the Spirit alone works to bring sinners to faith in Christ can effect its power.

To help the members of the LCMS spot such tendencies in those who would reject all "Church Growth strategies and programs in the interest of not confusing justification and sanctification, against this *separation* of Law and Gospel, the CTCR has also formulated six questions which can be asked of our Evangelism efforts or lack thereof:

1. Is the lack of numerical growth in our congregation the result of a failure to prepare carefully and to execute a plan for reaching those people in our community who do not know Christ?
2. Is a lack of new members attributable, at least in part, to our failure to keep records and to make use of statistics and measuring devices to see weaknesses and discover trends?
3. Have we made wise use of the resources and insights at our disposal—for example, the social sciences, the arts, etc.—in proclaiming the Gospel and in furthering Christian nurture?



4. Are we guilty of excusing our apathy and indifference for sharing the Gospel through a kind of "glorification of littleness"?
5. Do we tend to attribute an absence of numerical growth to faithfulness rather than to laziness and inactivity?
6. Is a lack of new members attributable, at least in part, to a failure to communicate the Gospel clearly?

When such questions can be answered in the affirmative, then we have indeed separated justification and sanctification, thereby undermining the Gospel just as surely as when we confuse them with one another.

Conclusion

On the evening of December 5, 1884, Dr. C. F. W. Walther spoke the following words of concern to a group of young men studying to become pastors in the Missouri Synod:

I am not afraid—unless you become apostates—that you will set up new articles of faith; but I do fear that you will not rightly divide the law and the Gospel. For this requires that you deviate neither to the right or to the left, yielding neither to despondency nor to laxity. (*Law and Gospel*, p. 89)

Walther's fears were well founded. As he had learned so well from his mentor, Dr. Luther, rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is "the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular."

It is just this challenge which the Church Growth Movement poses for us heirs of Luther and Walther. The devil, as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8), constantly attempts to have us either confuse the means of grace with the use of means, or to get us to play them against each other. In either case he succeeds in undermining the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the one hand, the Old Evil Foe constantly seeks to pervert the precious Gospel by tempting us to confuse the means in getting the Gospel out with the means of grace. He comes to us in his most winsome voice that it is our use of means which wins the lost for Christ, which grows the church. Sometimes this temptation takes the crass form of trying to convince us that it is our techniques, our planning, our winsome ways, our persuasive ability, our good intentions, our strategizing which makes the difference, which make the church grow. Who is there who had not at one time or another been prepared to believe precisely this "big lie." When the charts go up, our chests swell—and when they go down, our spirits sag. Church Growth advocates are right—it is indeed God's will that the church grow both numerically and in spiritual maturity. But let us

remember that only God's eyes can measure that growth, and that success is measured in terms of the faithfulness in the use of the means of grace and not on the basis of statistical results.

On the other hand, we Lutherans are also—perhaps I should say especially—confronted by the equally insidious temptation to play the use of means against the means of grace—what Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. Just as soon as it is stated that the growth of the church takes place solely through the means of grace in Word and Sacrament, the devil quickly whispers to us:

Relax, take it easy. Since salvation is by grace alone—the enemy is not adverse in using bits and pieces of truth for his own ends—then why trouble yourself with such things as techniques and strategies, with planning and programs for getting the Gospel out? Why give any thought to trying to meet people where they are? The Holy Spirit does it all, working through Word and Sacrament. Therefore, do nothing. Or do it the easy way or the way we have always done it. Indulge grace! (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959, p. 35)

Apathy, deadness, hypocrisy—these lie in the wake of this satanic perversion of properly relating Law and Gospel. This error also exists in the LCMS. How else can we explain the fact that about 75 percent of our congregations do not gain a single adult from outside each year, that it takes 70 communicant members to win one soul for Christ?

There will always be something a little mysterious about the way the church grows. The longer I study theology, the more I have become convinced that error, more times than not, is the result of teaching a truth out of context, that it is taking a piece of the truth and acting as if it were the whole truth, rather than a matter of a black and white, and that the devil's most persuasive temptations come to us in the form of getting us, as C.S. Lewis once said, to use a fire extinguisher to put out a flood.

May God in His grace give His Spirit to each of us to distinguish properly the Law and the Gospel so that we keep the Law out of the Gospel without falling into cheap grace. May He motivate us through this Gospel to make use of every means possible in getting the Gospel preached to the joy and edification of God's people everywhere.

book reviews

21 BRIDGES TO THE 21ST CENTURY
by Lyle Schaller. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

It is fascinating to read about the predictions of futurists, especially in regard to the church. Doing so causes one to reflect on current practices to see what modifications may be necessary, not only to survive but also to succeed in the future.

Bigness (pp. 43-47) and change (p. 22) dominate the thinking of Lyle Schaller in his observations on the future of pastoral ministry. Drawing upon analogies related to the development and success of big department stores, big toy stores, big office supply stores, and big electronic stores, Schaller feels that the megachurch will be the driving force in the 21st century.

Schaller states that change, especially in worship, must occur to achieve numerical growth (p. 54). He feels that meeting the religious needs of a church shopper is of utmost importance in seeking to reach and serve adults born after 1945 (p. 52). Worship and preaching can and should be good theater. Schaller urges congregations to utilize a show business approach in at least one service in order to reach the MTV generation (p. 73).

The role of seminaries in producing pastors who can function in a megachurch setting is questioned by Schaller. Academic credentials are seen to be less important than character, Christian commitment, and competence. Megachurches, he feels, are replacing seminaries as a training agency for future pastors of large congregations (p. 118).

The role of a synod is examined also. Schaller does not see a positive future for synods which are regulatory in nature (p. 140). He also feels that such synods will have difficulty in reaching adults born after 1945 (p. 142). Accordingly, citing recent developments in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, he implies that the LCMS does not have a bright future (pp. 140-41).

Down-played or ignored throughout this book is the role of theology in the life of the church. Again and again, Schaller places emphasis on the church meeting the religious needs or yearnings of the people. But what is to be done when the perceived needs of the people are in conflict with the theology of the church, such as when the seeker wishes to be active in choosing to follow Jesus, thus employing decision theology? Theological stance, according to Schaller, is not one of the distinguishing characteristics that have been effective in reaching people (p. 24). Does the church dare to abandon its teachings in order to reach people? If, as Schaller claims, the credibility in preaching is in the messenger and not in the message (p. 85), does the church dare to neglect the message?

The primary weakness of this book is its neglect of theology. When sociological trends and/or survey results are in conflict with the church's theology, the church cannot abandon its theological foundation in an effort to increase numbers. While there may be a short term gain in membership, history has shown that the long term result will be devastating.

David Held
Professor of Music
Concordia College-Seward

TRANSFORMING CONGREGATIONS
FOR THE FUTURE by Loren B. Mead.
The Alban Institute, 1994.

IT IS RATHER EVIDENT THESE DAYS that there is an avalanche of books on religious best seller lists which are loaded with programs that promise to help the minichurch, the microchurch, the metachurch or the megachurch, and anything in between. Many clergy, educators and lay leaders who pick up these volumes, read with the enthusiasm that the author intended, or attend seminars on the circuit that promote the program outlined in the book, soon discover that often these are programs that worked for some congregations in certain locations, but likely are unrealistic in the home parish. Many reasons can be conjured up, and blame can be accessed to inspire a healthy guilt trip for all involved. One wonders how valuable and productive the whole process has been.

Into that kind of world comes a rather straightforward publication written by Loren B. Mead, founder of the Alban Institute, who quickly directs attention to what he calls the "storm" that we are in and offers some rather refreshing formulas for dealing with the storm. The refreshing aspect of the author's thoughts is that he does not offer programs which promise a "sure cure" answer to every problem in the church, but rather, a healthy display of attitudes that need to prevail if the church is truly to be transformed for the future.

Mead, in pointing out the increasing rate of decline in the mainline denominations of this country, attributes the circumstance to several main aspects. The first has to do with money. While members of mainline denominations have risen to new levels of generosity in their financial giving, the contributions simply have not been adequate to meet the increasing costs of the local congregation or the denomination. This results in systematic budget cutting year after year, resulting in declining staff and program dollars to meet the needs of the people.

The second serious cause for decline is what Mead calls the "Secular-Society Game." He points out that researchers give evidence that drop-outs are most frequently not caused by something the church did or did not do, but rather a primary cause is the cultural environment in which the church exists. Often congregations and their staff and leaders are trained for a culture that has long since passed, so that it is essential for churches to gain a new consciousness of themselves and their task to minister to the culture in which they exist. Many "unexploded bombs are lying around" as a result of these issues which intensify the storm which the church faces.

A program will not provide a solution to facing the storm. The heart of the matter is the need to go back to the roots—the Good News and its proclamation by Jesus. Because it is comfortable, we often cling to institutions and structures of the past, and sometimes we fail to go back to the heart of the message of the Gospel. This includes going back with Jesus to His own roots, and when we begin to sort things out, "we who follow this man, we who follow the tradition of his people, we who look to the same Lord who spoke to Abraham and Sarah," will discover that this is really what we are about in the church. For Jesus good news was always in dialogue with bad news, presented in many packages. He never forces the good news on anyone, and never holds it back. Congregations are to be communities that follow Jesus in bringing good news to the pain of the world. Mead admits that the definition is a "slippery" one and may not fit with many denominations' definition of good news, or evangelism. Mead's effort to

provide a good news definition centers in "a word of reaching out, not of gathering in." Two "giants" of good news proclamation are mentioned, Martin Luther King and Billy Graham, both very different in their preaching. King, he says, brought good news to the bad news of oppression; Graham, on the other hand, speaks to the bad news of the human condition, the self-centered life that leads to a separation from God. King called for action mostly in the social arena outside religious institutions; Graham speaks of sin and salvation and calls for action to make "a decision for Christ." Congregations need to be proclaimers of both kinds of good news. The root of that transformation for each of us is a disciple whose life has been touched and shaped by Jesus' good news.

In order to bring this transformation about in the congregation, there needs to be a preparing of disciples and apostles. Discipleship involves a look at self; apostleship is reaching out with self into the community of hurts and pain, inhumanity and injustice. Four functions of transformation are explored to accomplish this task in the congregation: *koinonia*, the community within the larger society; *kerygma*, the proclamation of life-giving processes; *didache*, the teaching of the stories and traditions of the past; *diakonia*, the role of serving. Each of these functions is a necessary support for a life of discipleship. With these functions in mind, the author suggests that the strongest mission congregations of the future "will not be those with the greatest, most visible projects or services, but the ones that can sustain their people in the most diverse and extreme ministries of service and caring one can imagine."

One chapter of the book is devoted to the judicatories of church bodies and their responsibility to the churches. Their supervisory bodies, regardless of their denomination structure, are to serve as encouragers to the congregations and their staffs, offer pastoral care in good and bad times, help in leadership development, offer assistance in technology, provide awareness of the congregation's place in the larger mission of the church, and just listen. This happens less through canned programs than through the sensitivity and presence of the leaders of the judicatory.

In a chapter that draws attention to the roadblocks for the journey Mead sums up the primary spiritual task of the churches as helping Americans deal with the dilemmas of the great wealth we have in this country. How can we best use our wealth to enhance the Gospel proclamation rather than keeping that wealth all for self? This applies to the individual in the congregation and to the congregation itself.

Change is critical in our culture today. While change is at times complex and difficult to face, change is around us everyday, and the church must face that cultural issue. The message does not need to change, but the manner in which it is packaged and delivered may well need to be different than a generation ago. Mead says that "religious structures that fail to change and learn to adapt will be like the buggy-whip manufacturers of the nineteenth century." Change cannot be forced, but can be brought about through "homeostasis," a system through which forces on both sides of an issue are analyzed and strategies are developed on both sides to maintain trust and to effect change using already present energy. Pastors and laity need to prepare themselves for this process and the grief which results in any change.

At the heart of transforming congregations for the future is what Mead calls the restoration of the temple. "What the church is is more important than what it does. And the heart of the church's being is the deep conversation between God and God's people that the

community works out in its life of worship—in its temple.”

There is a storm ahead, but the picture is not hopeless if the church is willing to recognize what it is and approach change through a caring and sensitive process, grounded on the good news of Jesus.

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DINING WITH THE DEVIL: THE MEGACHURCH MOVEMENT FLIRTS WITH MODERNITY

by Os Guinness. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993.

IF IT IS TRUE that the recent history of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has been characterized by an idolatrous adherence to a false god of “ritualized traditionalism,” then it might also be said that this same church could now be characterized by an emerging idolatry to the false gods of pragmatism and success as exemplified in the church growth movement. Evangelical philosopher and theologian, Os Guinness, incisively exposes the potential for this emergent idolatry of the church in this book. In a readable 110 pages, Guinness critically examines the presuppositions of the church growth/megachurch movement and warns of the pitfalls that confront the church as it utilizes principles of

church growth in its attempts to fulfill the Great Commission of our Lord in the 1990s. While refusing to reject the church growth movement altogether, the author argues for a balanced approach in the use of its tools by focusing his critique on the “errors in methodology that result in church growth’s naive reliance on modernity’s ‘new ground.’” The problem, as defined by Guinness, is not the church growth movement nor its objectives, but the lack of a theological and biblical framework for its methods, as well as the lack of historical awareness in its perspective.

Central to the theme of the book is the concept of “modernity” and how it has influenced the ideas, beliefs, and traditions of our society, creating a crisis of cultural authority. Guinness utilizes modernity as the key factor in understanding the crisis that confronts the church (for which church growth proposes a solution). Modernity is defined as the “character and system of the world produced by the forces of development and modernization (through) capitalism, industrialized technology, and communications.” Claiming that the forces of modernity pervade religion and have an impact on the church’s sense of truth, transcendence and tradition, the conclusion is that the tools and insights of church growth methodology (as informed by modernity) are therefore neither entirely good nor neutral. According to Guinness, the church has exemplified a “mindless pragmatism” in its use of church growth methodology due to its myopic view of both modernity itself and the Holy Scriptures that provide the corrective to modernity’s false claims. The church has not recognized the dangers of modernity for the Christian faith also because “the

overall consequences of modernization are so positive.”

Guinness’ assessment of church growth in this book is well balanced; the movement is recognized for its opportunity and challenge to the church, while at the same time its weaknesses and deficiencies are identified and explained. Central to the author’s concern for the church is his warning against an idolatrous misuse of modern technology and ideology in the *praxis* of the church’s mission and ministry. The church’s temptation is to rely not upon God, but upon “forms of religion that we ourselves can create and control.” This is a warning that needs to be heeded by the LCMS in these days of obsession for “whatever works.”

For those who desire a mission emphasis and movement in the church that are consistent and compatible with Lutheran confessional theology and tradition, this book is a valuable resource in the correctives that it offers. Its reading compels God’s people to move beyond a “micro” approach to mission that is fixated on quick solutions, demonstrable variables and immediate successes towards a “macro” approach that is both catholic and apostolic. It is only the latter that will prevent the LCMS (or any other American denomination) from becoming a “widow in the next generation.”

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