

# **Open the Doors and See All the People: Profile of Large Protestant Churches 500-1,799 in Attendance**

By Scott Thumma, Ph.D.

The religious landscape of the United States is overwhelmingly dominated by congregations with less than 500 persons in weekly worship. Over 90%, almost 300,000 Protestant churches, are this size or smaller, with half of them having attendance of 80 persons or less according to the latest 2015 Faith Communities Today research. Yet, more than half of all weekly attendees go to churches that are larger than 500 weekly worshippers in size.

Thanks in part to the series of national surveys of megachurches conducted by our two groups, Leadership Network and Hartford Institute for Religion Research, we know a considerable amount about the largest churches in the country, those around 2,000 and higher in weekly worship attendance. However, researchers know very little about the congregations in the 500-1799 range, those 10% of Protestant churches which are home to more attenders than any other size group.<sup>i</sup>

This report focuses directly on a survey of 158 of these large Protestant churches, sized 500-1,799 attendees.<sup>ii</sup> It reveals interesting dynamics related to growth, vitality and leadership.

## **Key findings include:**

- Just over two thirds of the weekly attenders are under age 50
- Over a third of large churches are multiracial
- Multisite churches are growing at a far faster rate than single-site churches
- Seemingly less importance is placed on denominational connections with an intentional migration out of denominations
- At least three-quarters report the use of small groups as central to their spiritual formation strategy
- Nearly 7 out of 10 churches are under the leadership of the senior pastor under whose tenure the most dramatic growth occurred
- Nearly 7 out of 10 offer a formal internship program

There are roughly 30,000 Protestant churches with weekly worship attendances (adults and children) of 500-1,799, which account for over 40% of all worship attendees (those above 1,800 account for another 10% of all weekly worshippers), and yet almost no research specifically targets this population to understand its dynamics. While our current study is not representative of this entire population, this report begins to describe the patterns and dynamics from 158 of these large churches. Further analysis in the coming months will draw on a larger sample of churches of all sizes and compare this group with both larger and smaller congregations to uncover further distinctive features by size groupings.

## **Dominant Characteristics**

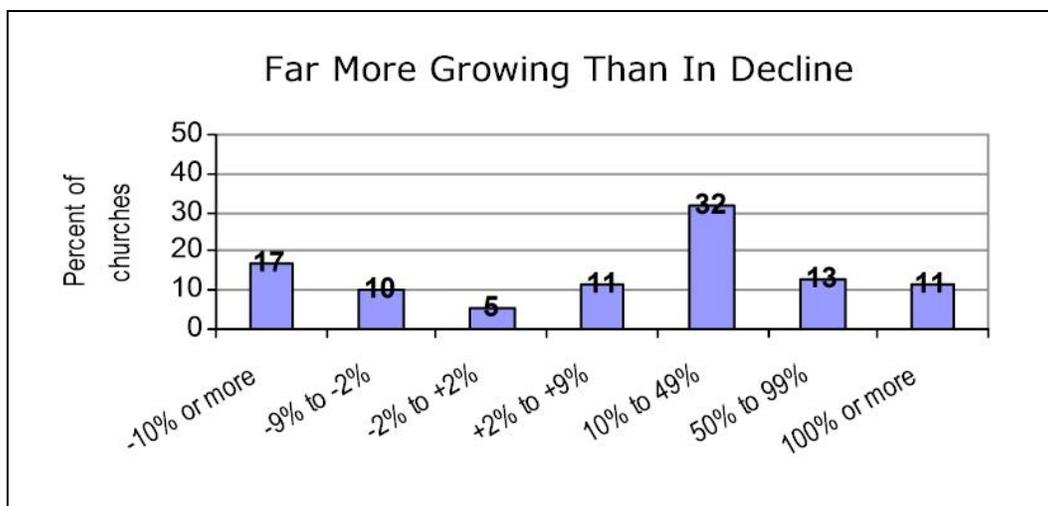
Obviously their large size distinguishes these churches from other congregations. In our sample 17% were 500-999 in size, 57% 1,000-1,499, and 26% 1,500-1,799.<sup>iii</sup> While these congregations

may be considerably larger than the average church, they too experience having considerably more persons associated with the church than regularly participate or attend weekly. A median of 2,350 persons were associated in any way with these churches, whereas the median regular participants figure was 1,600 but weekly attendance median is significantly less at 1,268 persons. (The median is the midpoint of the response range – meaning 50% were below and 50% above this figure.)

Half of these large churches were founded since 1964 and were distributed throughout the country’s regions in proportions similar to other-sized, with the greatest concentration being in the southern region. These congregations had a median annual income of \$2.1 million dollars in 2014, of this 15% was dedicated to mission activity. Almost three-quarters (72%) reported their financial health as good or excellent, compared to their 2010 assessment of financial health where 44% said it was good or excellent.

In the minds of many persons, size implies abundant resources, success and influence. However, being large does not necessarily equate to massive building and giant campuses. Nor does it mean that all these large congregations function identically. Throughout this report, variation in the size of the church, even within this large-church grouping, influences its characteristics in ways that often go unrecognized. Therefore, size is important – not just in setting these churches apart from other smaller churches but also in understanding variation among these large congregations.

The vast majority of these congregations are growing quite rapidly compared to smaller churches at a median 5 year growth rate of 17%, but not all of them grew equally. In fact, a number of them actually declined in attendance, with 27% showing declines greater than 2% whereas 64% were growing by more than 2%. Comparisons related to the rates of growth, discussed below, contribute stimulating insights into possible reasons for that growth.



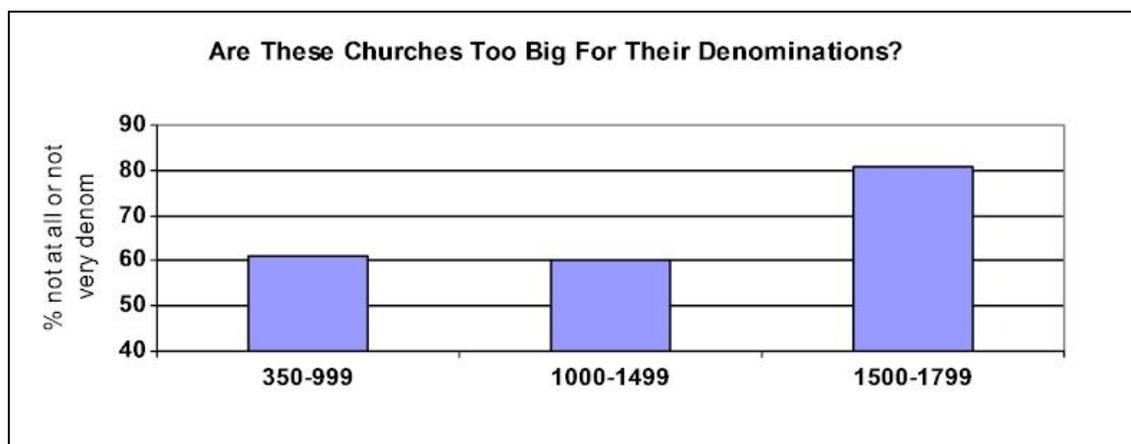
These large churches seldom have massive sanctuaries. The average seating capacity of the church’s largest sanctuary was 823, with a median seating of 750. Nearly every church (99%) had multiple weekend worship services with roughly half (49%) saying these services varied by style or type.

Additionally, 36% of churches reported holding services at multiple locations, with another 17% of them saying they were considering this multisite strategy. This finding echoes other evidence of the growth of the multisite phenomenon seen in our previous studies of megachurches as well as reports on churches of all sizes. For those churches with satellite campuses, they averaged 2.8 locations.

The larger the church, the more likely it is to have multiple campuses. Multisite churches are growing faster (74% growth rate) than single site ones (38%) over the past 5 years. Interestingly but not surprising, multisite churches have smaller primary sanctuaries in terms of seating capacity. Perhaps this is one of the key motivational reasons for adopting a multisite approach.

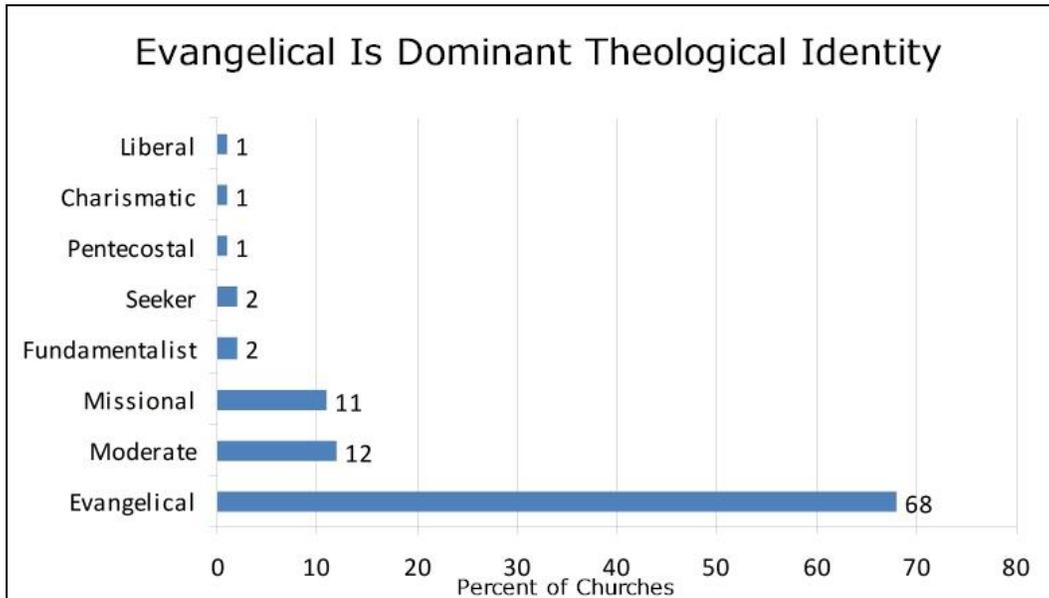
These large churches are also turning to online worship experiences to increase their reach. One quarter (26%) have virtual campuses, with another 15% thinking about this approach. These campuses are more than just streaming the service video, with a third of them assigning staff whose primary task is to serve the on average 182 weekly online worshippers.

In terms of religious affiliation, the greatest percentage of large churches were nondenominational (25%), followed by Southern Baptists (21%), United Methodists (9%), Evangelical Free (4%) and Assemblies of God (4%). There is evidence of an intentional migration out of denominations, since 26% of the current nondenominational churches said they were once part of a denomination. At the very least, there is some fluidity in affiliation status, in the past 10 years, 16% considered switching affiliation to another denomination or to independence, and 10% actually did so. At the same time, these churches, even the nondenominational ones, are not completely unaffiliated, with 54% saying they have some connection to a network, fellowship, or association. However, a majority (65%) of large churches indicated that denominational affiliation was not at all or not very important, and just 12% said it was very important. As worship attendance size increases over 1,500 the commitment to, or need for, a denominational identity diminishes dramatically.



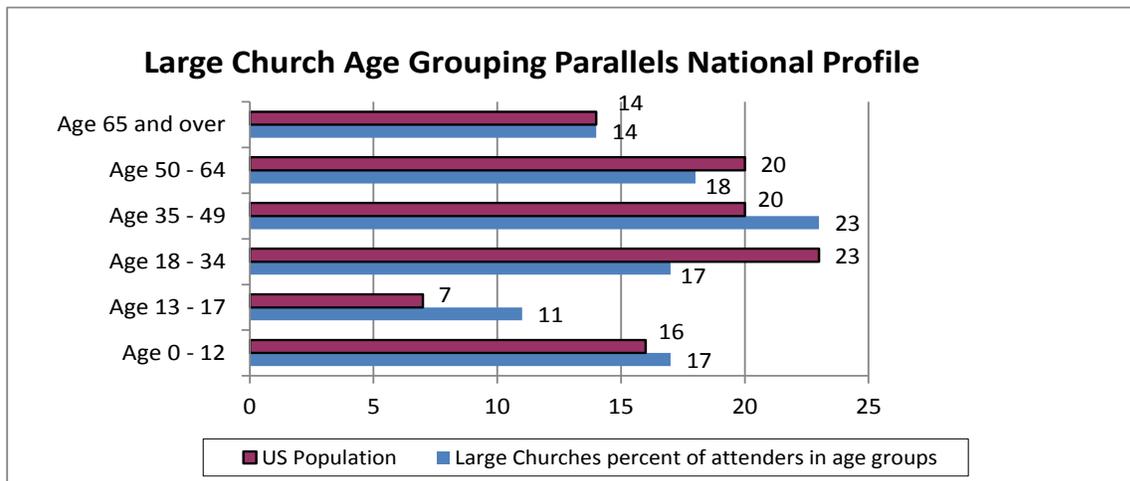
Whether a denominational affiliate or not, the vast majority of the sample (68%) described the theological outlook of their regularly participating adults as Evangelical. Interestingly, hardly any chose labels at the two theological extremes – either fundamentalist or liberal, or even

distinctive worship practices like Pentecostal, Charismatic and Seeker. However, the identities of Moderate and Missional each garnered roughly 10%.



### Who Are Their Participants?

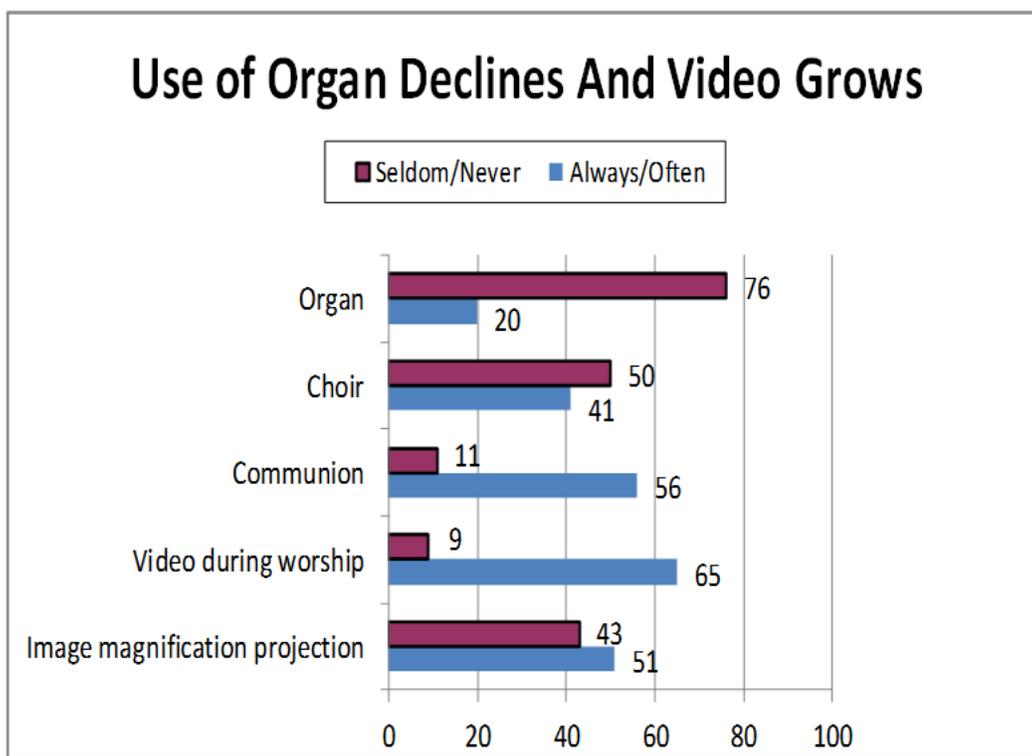
Those persons attracted to large churches are youthful, family-oriented and solidly middle class. The highest percentage of attendees are in their 30s to 40s, and a full 68% are under the age of 50. This means the large churches are not just filled with middle aged or younger adults but with significant numbers of children and teens. While this age profile still does not exactly parallel the U.S. national profile, it comes much closer than congregations of smaller sizes.



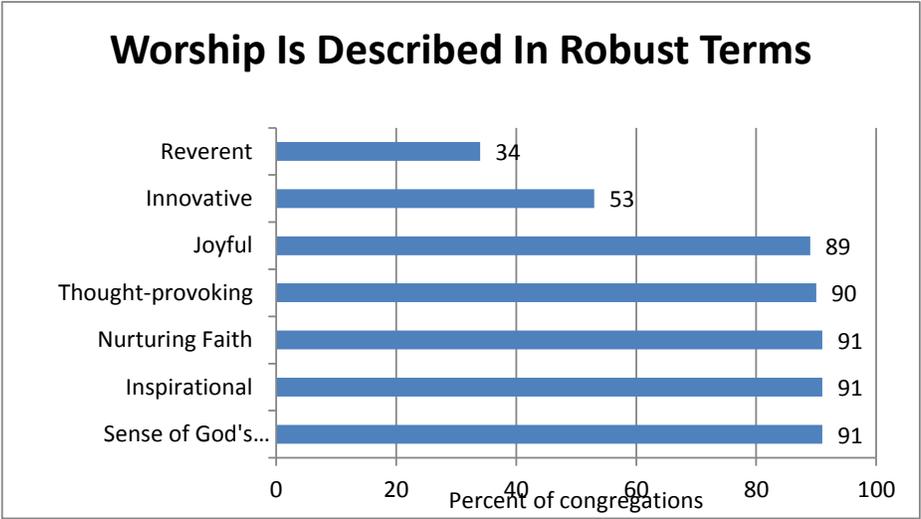
Likewise, a significant percentage of large churches are multiracial. Over a third (35%) have racial diversity of more than 20% of the congregation, including 5% of these large churches without any majority race within the congregation.

## Large Church Worship and Overall Congregational Character

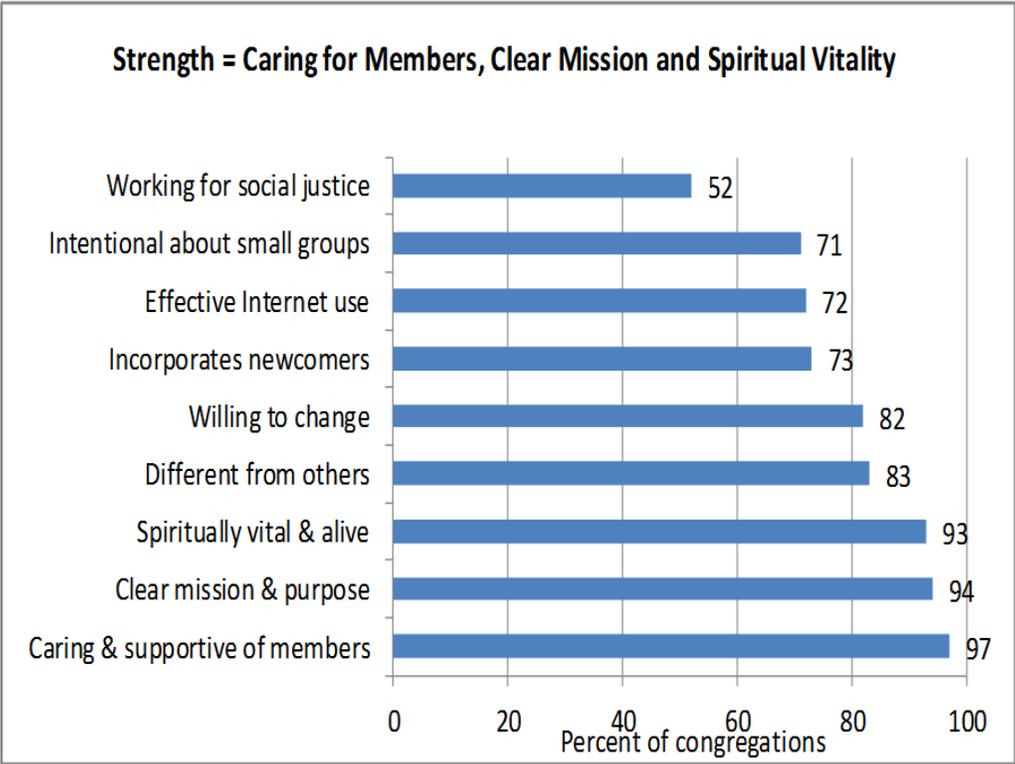
Large church worship is diverse in style depending on its approach and tradition, but it is often dynamic and powerful. While our survey did not explore contemporary worship per se, there are indications of style differences related to use of the organ and formal choirs. Likewise, projection is present in nearly all these large churches, and is often used but not always in the same fashion for each congregation with many showing video clips during worship but fewer embracing the magnified image of the preacher during the service.



The combination of professional, lively and often contemporary worship along with a strong sense of spiritual vitality create an atmosphere of robust worship for attendees and leadership. The leaders of these churches describe their services in distinctive ways. Nearly nine out of ten agree or strongly agree that these descriptions apply to their worship.



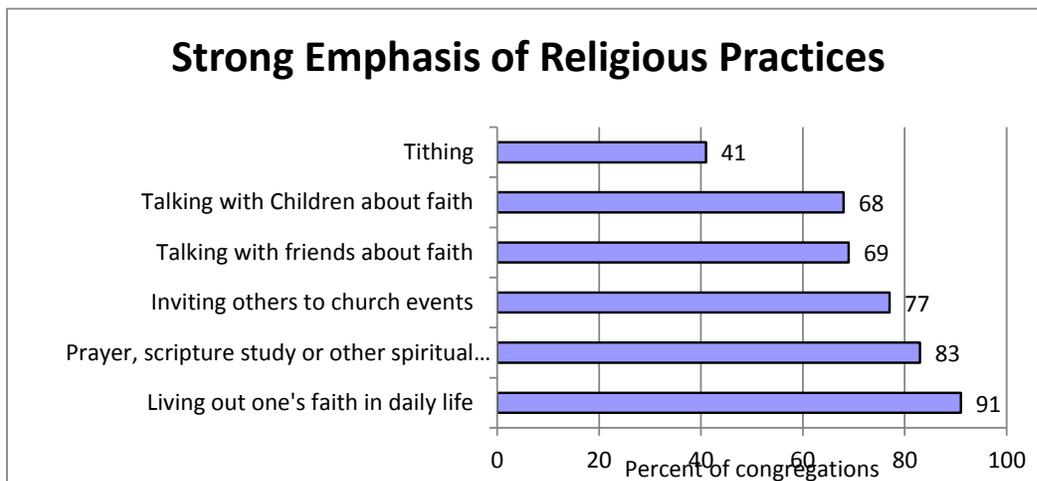
The character and identity of large churches is defined by care for their members, vitality and a sense of purpose. Whether these attributes came before or following their growth is uncertain but their spiritual confidence makes them attractive to those involved. Nearly all these large church leaders agree or strongly agree that their congregations are supportive of the membership, have a clear mission and purpose, are spiritually vital and alive, are distinctive from other churches and are willing to change to meet new challenges. These percentages are significantly higher than the scores of over 4,000 congregations of all sizes in the 2015 Faith Communities Today survey.



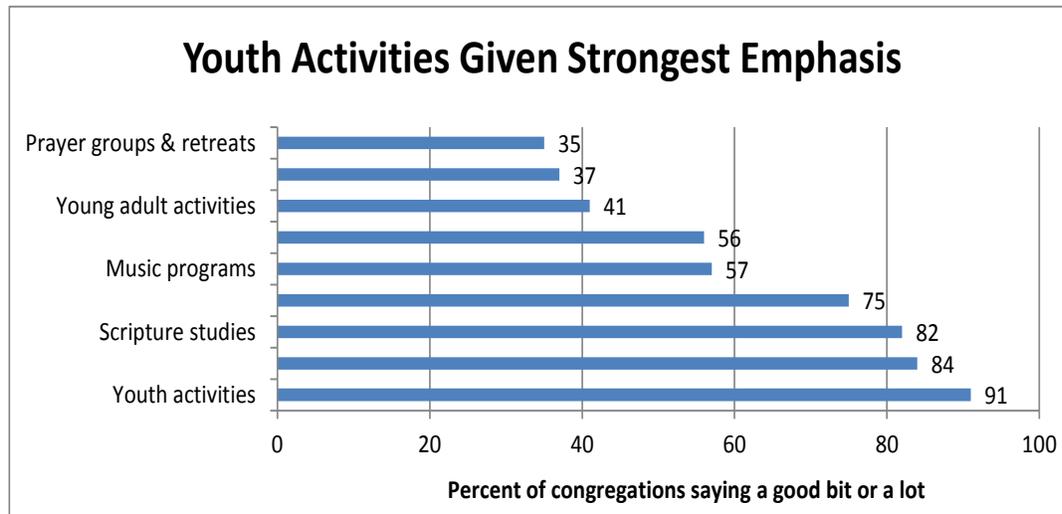
These churches find multiple ways of emphasizing personal accountability and Christian spiritual practices among attenders. They also use small groups of all forms to create spaces for intimacy within the large organization. These congregations work hard at being as small as possible for attendees.

At least three-quarters of the churches (77%) report the use of small groups as central to their spiritual formation strategy, with an average of 41% of their adult membership participating. A majority of them offer religious education for children (60%) and adults (55%) in addition to worship and small group ministry. Many of them (74%) also have age-graded “children’s church” simultaneously with adult worship. Additionally, 60% of large churches use their informal spaces like atriums and coffee shops as extensions of the worship service with screens to indirectly participate, and a third of these (38%) even assign staff to monitor and minister to those persons participating on the margins.

Large churches also use these structured groups along with their worship services to promote personal spiritual practices at a high level. Nearly three-quarters of large churches emphasize the following quite a bit or a lot.



This emphasis on Christian practices is reinforced by a large variety of programs that is available at most large churches. A large percentage of them describe the following programs or activities as being given a lot of emphasis or a specialty of the church.



Active engagement in service, volunteering and leadership are other significant characteristics of these large churches. Over two-thirds (69%) of these churches say their regular participants are involved a lot or quite a bit in programs, committees and service projects in addition to worship. More than a third (36%) report that their participants are involved a lot or quite a bit in recruiting new people. While this percentage is lower than the megachurches (48%), it is considerably higher than smaller churches (14%). A quarter of these churches say they have no problem recruiting volunteer leaders, while only 4% say they can't find enough people willing to serve.

### A Leadership Profile

In many ways the leader of a large church plays a key role. They are the visionary leader and set the tone for the congregation. Nearly 7 out of 10 churches (69%) are under the leadership of the senior pastor under whose tenure the most dramatic growth occurred. These clergy are on average 52 years old, male and have masters or doctoral degrees. Half of them became the senior leader since 2004. The vast majority (89%) are assisted in the task of leadership by an internal board of members rather than some other board configuration. Over half of these churches (54%) rate their succession planning for the senior pastor role as good to outstanding for where it should be at this point. And 69% of these large churches also offer formal internship programs of, on average, 12 months. Nearly a third of these (30%), are done in conjunction with a seminary.

### Challenges

While these large churches are often seen as having many assets that lead to a robust ministry, they are not without their challenges and struggles. The larger the congregation, the greater the likelihood that members are marginal participants. Additionally, in order to sustain a high level of programmatic offerings, sufficient lay volunteers and leadership are crucial. Conflict, seen in nearly all congregations of every size, can escalate to more serious consequences in larger

churches. Likewise, all churches are challenged to reach new generations of believers and the largest churches are no exception. Finally, having the willingness to change and be adaptive is key to continued success.

### *Conflict*

A significant level of conflict is evident among these large churches over the past 5 years. Overall, 30% had no conflict, and another quarter of churches experienced minor challenges without serious repercussion. However, in nearly a third (29%), the conflict was severe enough that some members left. In 10% of churches persons withheld donations. And in 14% of them a pastor or staff person left.

### *Young Adult Outreach*

Nearly all congregations suffer from inadequate representation of young adults (aged 18-34) and this is also true of large churches. Overall, they have 17% in this age group, compared to 23% in the national population. At the same time, 68% of large churches say their young adult population has increased in the past 3 years. Of these young adults, the majority are married (61%) though far less have children (20%). Most of these young adults are reported to attend worship (90%), half participate in programs in addition to worship, and a tenth are in positions of leadership.

Interestingly, engaging young adults is seen as a top or main priority for 60% of large churches. The more it is a priority, the greater likelihood of increase, and a higher percentage of them in the congregation. The majority of large churches (77%) have at least one full-time staff person whose primary duty is young adult ministry. Less than half the churches have specific young adult worship services (57%) or singles groups (50%). Roughly half of them place a lot of emphasis on fellowship groups (51%), scripture classes (49%) and mission trips (47%) specifically for young adults. The data is clear, however, the more you offer this age group in terms of programming, the more likely they are to attend and participate.

### *Vitality, Adaptation and Resources for Change*

Overall, a majority of these large congregations are vital, growing and willing to change. A full three-quarter affirm they are doing well and making the changes they need in order to be vital and viable. If anything, these congregations see hindrances to change as primarily a lack of resources, unifying vision or the leader not wanting to be too far ahead of where the congregation is at present. The factors that have most helped them change are having leadership with an expertise in leading change, combined with rigorous planning and assessment, and drawing on realistic concrete models that provide alternative paths to change.

## **Conclusions**

While not representative of all large churches in the United States, this report offers an initial overview of patterns within this set of large churches. In many ways they look similar to our findings from megachurches – those congregations with 1,800 attenders and up. At this early stage of analysis there are surprisingly few statistically significant distinctions between the two groups.

The greatest difference between these large churches and the megachurches are in terms of evangelistic characteristics. The largest churches in the country are much more likely to encourage members to talk with friends about their faith, to invite them to church and to say their members are indeed involved in recruiting others to come to services. These megachurches are also much more likely to have a clear mission and vision and report their congregation is “spiritually vital and alive.” They are using technology to a greater extent in worship and are more engaged in international missions and recovery programs than the churches 500-1,799 in size. The largest churches also draw a larger percentage of young adults and are more likely to be multiracial. However, beyond these few distinctions, there are not many differences in terms of program, worship styles, mission emphasis, or group dynamics between the two size groups.

These large churches are home to a majority of American churchgoers. According to their self-assessment in the survey, they are a vibrant, growing and highly influential segment of American religious life. A subsequent research report available later this year will explore the dynamics of these churches in greater detail and in comparison to smaller and larger congregations. Watch for this later report and subsequent reports from analysis we will do on this interesting segment of the religious landscape.

**Scott Thumma**, Ph.D., is professor of sociology at Hartford Seminary, the director of Hartford Institute for Religion Research, and co-author of *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, among other books and articles.

**Warren Bird**, Ph.D., Research Director at Leadership Network, and co-author of 23 books for church leaders <http://www.leadnet.org/warrenbird>, assisted with the research and editing of this report.

Scott and Warren together authored *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants*.

---

<sup>i</sup> Almost all Roman Catholic churches fall into this range or larger, but this research does not cover those congregations. See the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate <http://cara.georgetown.edu/> for information specific to these Catholic churches.

<sup>ii</sup> The Survey of Large U.S. Churches received 158 usable responses from churches indicating their size as 500-1,799 in terms of average weekly worship attendance, adults and children, all physical campuses combined if multisite.

The survey was launched 4/15/15 and closed 7/14/15. It was conducted by email only, with a different reminder sent every two to three weeks to those who had not responded, later in the process to a second or third person in the non-responding church if additional contact information was available. The first point of contact was the executive pastor or equivalent, if an email address could be obtained, and the second contact, if needed, was the senior pastor or his/her assistant, if an email address could be obtained.

All figures used, unless otherwise noted, are self-reported from the churches. They were not independently corroborated. The various tables and graphics may not total 100% due to rounding.

<sup>iii</sup> A separate report at [www.hartfordinstitute.org/megachurch/megachurches\\_research.html](http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/megachurch/megachurches_research.html) and <http://www.leadnet.org/megachurch> analyzes the congregations from the survey with attendance 1800 and above.