

Flexible megachurches rival denominations: Swift adaptability

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

Displaying swift adaptability in the early 2000s, America's largest congregations may be reshaping institutional church life, suggests a national megachurch survey, the third conducted in eight years.

"In some sense megachurches can be seen as becoming de facto replacements for denominations in that they are duplicating many of the functions of these bureaucratic national bodies," wrote the coauthors of the study of about 400 Protestant congregations that draw more than 1,800 adults and children on a typical weekend.

In the late 20th century Vineyard churches and the Calvary Chapels expanded beyond their founding megachurches to become quasi-denominations. The founding pastors of large churches such as Willow Creek and Saddleback Church have since grown in influence partly through their annual leadership institutes and informal networking with "tens of thousands" of pastors via the Internet and newsletters, researchers said. The number of megachurches sponsoring pastor conferences grew from 47 percent to 54 percent in the last eight years.

Church education literature as well as worship and music materials produced by the largest churches are already "consumed en masse by smaller churches" of various denominations, wrote Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Warren Bird of the Dallas-based Leadership Network.

Working with questionnaires from a survey that ended in August, the researchers pointed out in an Internet news conference September 11 some adjustments and innovations that might be mimicked in other midsized or big churches.

"More megachurches are adopting Web-based streaming media to broadcast their message than the more costly radio and TV approaches," they said.

Fewer big churches are running church schools, the study found. In 2000, 42 percent of the churches surveyed operated a Christian elementary or secondary school, compared to only 25 percent this year.

When it comes to training potential staff and ministerial candidates, 69 percent of big churches say they have their own internship or residency programs, the report said. It was not clear if those programs serve as substitutes for seminary education, but there is some indication that they are functioning that way for associate pastors, said Thumma.

Analysts found that because the size of the main sanctuary of megachurches is constant, as their attendance keeps growing they add more overflow rooms and offer more services. Also, 35 percent say they hold worship “of different styles” at separate spots on campus.

The attendance figures also grow as megachurches hold satellite services away from the main church grounds—an innovation not unique to such places as Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church in southern California. More than one-third (37 percent) of megachurches surveyed this year said they hold satellite services, compared to 27 percent in 2005 and 22 percent in 2000.

Thumma and Bird found that contrary to what might be expected, the creation of satellite worship sites has not dimmed the desire to plant independent churches. The number of megachurches starting or helping to start other congregations “rose from 68 percent in 2000 to 70 percent in 2005 to 77 percent in 2008,” the report said.

Most megachurches continue to support denominational mission programs, the authors said, but they are also “increasingly investing heavily in their own homegrown, hands-on mission trips.”

The large congregations in the survey remain mostly Republican in politics and theologically conservative, but the researchers noted shifts in self-descriptions. Many more large churches see themselves as “evangelical” rather than Pentecostal, charismatic or “moderate,” and the majority “political outlook” in their pews, pastors say, is now “somewhat conservative” (44 percent) rather than “predominantly conservative” (33 percent).