

Oversized expectations: A small congregation gets megachurched

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

They were visitors in our worship service and, like all visitors in a small church, they were not hard to spot. I could see from the looks on their faces that whatever they were looking for in a church, we didn't have it. When we all stood to sing the hymns, they just looked straight ahead, never making an effort to sing and not even picking up a hymnbook.

I greeted them in the hallway after the service and said something like, "I couldn't help noticing that you seemed uncomfortable in our service. Is there something I could help you with?"

They looked at one another and then one of them blurted out, "Well, we noticed you use hymnbooks. We've never been in a church that *still* uses hymnbooks. We've always had the words on overhead screens."

We had just been megachurched: hit with expectations and agendas determined by megachurches. We *still* used hymnbooks instead of overhead video screens. Obviously, we were both small and antiquated.

There is a long history of small churches being "big-churched"—of people coming to small churches with expectations determined by larger churches. It is common to hear that our choir and our building are too small. We are used to people being disappointed that we don't have a "family-life center" (gym). I am used to getting the question: "You mean, you're the only full-time minister?"

The big criticism, the one that sticks the knife in and twists it, is: "You *don't* have a youth (or children's) program?! Well, what do you do with your young people?" The fact that a teenage girl just led the liturgy seems to have been missed.

Though these visitors know up front they are attending a small church—after all, they can see the size of the building when they drive up—they still bring big-church expectations with them. What I've noticed in the past decade is a kind of morphing

of big-church expectations into megachurch expectations. Sometimes even our own church members look for what they've experienced in megachurches, seen in a megachurch on television or heard about megachurches.

The most common megachurch expectation I encounter is that we don't have a "praise band" to lead worship. In our town, with a population of 30,000, with somewhere between 25 and 30 Baptist churches (depending on how many church fights occurred this past week), three Methodist churches and various other mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, we're among only five or six churches of any stripe without a praise band in at least one worship service. A few of my members will come back from visiting their grandchildren and comment, "Why don't we have a praise band? My son's church in Dallas is so upbeat. We're so dreary here."

Size does not seem to matter in the quest to be like the megachurches. And what megachurches actually do and do not do also seems beside the point. It's the perception of what they do. People perceive that megachurches are cool and up-to-date and think that if we're going to be cool and up-to-date (and attract cool and up-to-date visitors), then we've got to do what the megachurches do.

I remember a young family that visited one Sunday morning. Several people in our church knew them and had invited them. I was excited. They were new to town, looking for a church, had two small children, and both adults were active with environmental issues, something our congregation is heavily involved in. But when I went to see them in a follow-up visit, they said, "You have a good church, but a person has to work too hard to be a member of your church. We don't have time to work that hard." They ended up joining a large church.

Their criticism was valid. It does take a lot of work to be in a small congregation. Many people visit a small church thinking that it will be simple and quaint, when the truth is that life in small churches is complex. Members of a small church have multiple roles and responsibilities. Many activities and ministries are multigenerational both because the church is too shorthanded to do otherwise and because it is endemic to being a small community.

Our vacation Bible school, for example, is multi generational. It is held one week in the summer during the evening so everyone can participate. We write and plan our own curriculum instead of using a canned curriculum from a denominational publishing house. It would be simpler to use the prewritten materials, but that would

not fit who we are and who we want to be and what we want to teach.

In our small church everyone is responsible. It takes all of us to prepare and bring food and eat together, and old people and young people, parents and children, singles and couples sing together, act out Bible stories and get down on the floor to do the creative activities. It is not simple; it is not polished and certainly not glitzy. It is loud and chaotic and complex, but it is us.

On Sunday mornings it is not uncommon for a family to show up and have all its members drafted into roles they were not expecting to play when they left home. If one of the ushers is out of town, we will grab the seventh-grade son to help. The choir may be singing something different from what was planned because the tenor called in sick—and so the mom has to grab the new music and start looking it over. We're understaffed in the nursery so the high school daughter steps in there, while the dad finds out that he is in charge of providing coffee after the service.

Part of the challenge for visitors is not to be overwhelmed or put off by the responsibilities and improvisations required to participate in a small church. They're often looking for a place where they can simply "have their needs met"—a phrase picked up from the megachurches—and they're not eager to go to a church where they have to work so hard.

While megachurches did not invent the consumerism in our society that shapes us so much that we're always looking for ways to have our needs met, they have certainly been highly visible in capitalizing on it for the purposes of church growth. In the hyperindividualized part of the country where I serve, having one's needs met in church often means enjoying privatized religious experiences (even if they occur in a darkened auditorium with a thousand other individuals). Megachurch worship is often perceived to be a kind of one-stop spiritual experience: a person goes in, sits down, watches a special effects show with an inspirational message and then goes home. It is efficient and fast.

Small-church worship couldn't be more different. Participating in and taking responsibility for the community takes time. Knowing God grows out of the particular relationships and practices that are nurtured over years. When someone sings in worship, it is less about how well he performs and more about the fact that he is my neighbor, with whom I once volunteered on a Habitat project, whom I have prayed with and served Holy Communion with, and whose adult son we buried last year.

This is slow church. People with fast megachurch expectations do not get it and generally show no interest in getting it.

Last year, a young woman who had recently graduated from seminary knelt in front of our congregation. She had been a member of the church since she was eight. The entire congregation lined up, including her Sunday school teachers, the adults who had gone to youth camps with her when she was the only youth going to camp from our church, and my daughters, whom she had babysat. Many of those present had heard her preach her first sermon when she was 11 years old. Everyone quietly walked by, putting their hands on her head and ordaining her. Part of the testimony she had given earlier in the service was about how every time she sings the hymn “How Firm a Foundation,” she thinks of our church.

It is true that she could have learned “How Firm a Foundation” from a video screen just as easily as from a hymnal. But my instincts tell me that in that case she would be different. Maybe I’m wrong. All I know is that it took about 20 years for a whole community of people in various ways to nurture and raise her so she might know that hymn in this particular small-church way and become this particular kind of young minister.