

Diagnose this! Unexpected lessons from the megachurch: unexpected lessons from the megachurch

by [Daniel L Bohlman](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

At the pastors' conference, a church diagnostician has been telling me and other glassy-eyed pastors that we have to start seeing things differently. Regional churches, more commonly known as megachurches, are the wave of the future. The statistics show "clearly" that megachurches will continue to draw more and more members because of their ability to provide expanded ministries to specific groups of people. These churches will have bigger choirs and more of them: choirs for adults, men, women, children, toddlers, infants—maybe even choirs for babes still in the womb. How can another church compete?

They will also have small-group Bible studies, interactive Sunday school groups, and hymnals that you don't need to hold. I'm ready to run home and tell our members to close up shop.

In my snazzy hotel room, I lie awake with a feeling of foreboding. I am pastor of two rural congregations in the middle of Wisconsin. We average 60 at worship, but if there is a family reunion on Sunday, the number can dip to 30. Diagnose that!

The next morning another diagnostician tells us that his area of expertise is "the integration of people and church." He spends the day going through every inch of a church layout, "walking" us from the parking lot to the toilets, from the sanctuary to the back closets. He tells us how to make all these things more inviting. Do our closets have to be inviting too?

My depression deepens and hope oozes out of me while the doctor of diagnosis smiles on and on.

During the final break, when everyone else is eating bran muffins and drinking some kind of French decaffeinated coffee, I sit alone beside the pop machine, hoping no

one sees me huddled there with my Mountain Dew and Snickers bar. Then, in that quiet hallway, the Lord appears to me. Or is it the sugar kicking in? The vision is clear. I see a whole valley of rural congregations, and we are glowing. The brightness is dazzling. Onlookers can't see that our bathrooms are undecorated, and that there is less than half a roll of toilet paper left in the dispenser. They can't see that we don't have parking lot greeters with personalized name tags. But I tell you they can see how we shine!

The revelation is soon over, but I'm inspired. That evening when the pastors get together around the pool, I decide to test my revelation. I want to put our rural congregations up against the megachurch.

Granted, I may need to add a bit of a flourish to God's revelation, embellishing things here and there—but nothing to send down the lightning of God's anger.

One pastor in our group apparently serves a church that could be a poster child for the diagnosticians, and he's eager to tell us about it.

Pastor Goliath brags that he has a 60-member choir. I put down my pop and matter-of-factly tell him both of our churches have 60-member choirs. I nod with all the persuasiveness I can muster, hoping my eyes don't give me away.

I'm not lying, really. I just don't add that our choir anthems are also called congregational hymns.

He tells us about the great small-group Bible studies at his church—12 groups of ten each, to be exact. He is taken aback when I inform him that we have small-group Bible studies going at our church too. I don't explain that every Bible study at our church is a small group.

His voice moves up an octave as he talks about the parenting classes he is offering to the church—classes, as he says, where parents are learning to share their faith with their kids. I echo him rather smugly with the news that parents meet each week at our churches to do the same thing. As I see it, each time the family gathers for worship, it is “doing” active parenting and sharing the faith within the family. I add that our classes are intergenerational. (After all, I've heard grandparents tell their grandkids to “sit down and shut up!”)

“We have rest and relaxation classes,” Goliath says, “to help people deal with the stress of their busy lives.”

“We do too,” I counter. What else should I call those who fall asleep in church—and so what if they need a nap after a busy week?

“Our Sunday school is thriving!” Goliath says. I cut him off ruthlessly. “Thriving?” I mock, “We’re thriving so much we lose track of kids sometimes.” This is nothing to brag about, but it seems to fit the conversation.

Goliath moves on to church structure. He tells about the high visibility his church has: newspaper ads, billboards, TV and radio commercials, cable access. I acknowledge the importance of visibility. “We’re tops in that area too.” Yes, that’s right. Both churches are built on top of hills. Of course, the wind can be a terrible nuisance, and in the winter we sometimes have to cancel church because we can’t get up the hill—but Goliath doesn’t ask about the weather.

Instead he talks about the trained parking lot greeters who make a visitor’s first encounter with the church a pleasant one. I grin. If he knew anything about rural churches he would never have mentioned the parking lot. Everyone knows that in rural churches more is accomplished in the parking lot than in the church itself. In fact, most council decisions are made out there.

Goliath then breathes out the sacred words, “Handicapped parking facilities.” I’m on cruise control now. I tell him we already know where Olive parks her car. And if anybody dares to park in her spot, it’s like an alarm bell that reverberates throughout the sanctuary with the message: “Visitor! Visitor!”

“Adequate parking?” he shoots back, his jaw clenched.

I wipe a bead of sweat off my forehead. I stall. In rural America, parishioners park anywhere they please, even on the church lawn. I can imagine how Goliath’s parishioners would react if someone late for church pulled up onto the church’s lush green lawn in a 1985 Ford 4x4 covered with cow manure.

Goliath eyes me carefully. He knows he’s running out of ammunition. Can I withstand the final push?

“Four houses,” he spits out finally, his eyes a menacing squint. “We just bought four houses around our church so we can expand.”

I pause, then breath a deep sigh of relief. "We've expanded too." It's true. We just bought two more acres to add to our cemetery. We figure that should be enough room for the saints of the next 100 years.

We conclude by discussing issues of hospitality and welcoming, discipline and integration. Through it all, God's revelation holds strong. God had shown me a great truth. What many of these megachurches are trying to simulate or produce through strategized ministries, we already have in our little podunk church.

The next Sunday, I arrive early at church. I sweep aside the raccoon droppings and unlock the church door. I walk through the church turning on lights and checking to see that there is toilet paper. (I did learn something!) Soon people begin to arrive.

When Hazel walks in, I am a bit surprised. She's not a member, but her husband was, and his funeral was held at the church two weeks before. I make my way to the back of the church to welcome her. She tells me it is hard. I nod in sympathy and tell her that I'm glad she is here. When she finds a seat in an empty pew near the back of the church, I grimace. I was hoping she wouldn't sit alone.

Then I see Lenora, also a widow. She stands up, leaves her pew and goes to sit by Hazel. Dorothe, another widow, slides over. For the next 15 minutes, I see Hazel laugh and cry and Lenora put her arm around her and give here a gigantic hug.

We'll be all right. Goliath has size, but David has a good heart.

My biggest worry is that Pastor Goliath will show up to check out my story. I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do.