

Why are there so few megachurches among ecumenical Christians?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

August 6, 2016

I was talking about different forms of new church developments at a denominational conference, when someone asked, “Have you studied any Evangelical megachurches? They’re filled with thousands of young adults. Young people are flocking to them!”

I said no, and explained that I was focusing on new movements in ecumenical churches. I gave a few reasons why. I can’t remember exactly what I said, but it was probably something like—

- A lot of people are already studying Evangelical megachurches. That’s a well-worn area of research, but it’s not mine.
- Megachurches are often not sustainable beyond a particular charismatic leader, and in some cases, they’re not able to make it beyond one generation.
- Megachurches have basic culture conflicts with denominational churches (i.e., megachurches are often geared toward seekers, have a celebrity culture, and/or are entertainment focused).

That’s not to say that we can’t learn from megachurches. I grew up in one, and there are things I miss. Especially when I see how painful it is to extract money from our most affluent churches for a bottom-of-the-line website. Or when I see the amount of money that some Evangelicals put into starting and supporting new churches. I wish we had a fraction of the determination to reach out to our communities through the *actual means of communication that people in 2016 use*.

That said, there’s a deeper difference between Evangelical and Ecumenical congregations that we can’t replicate. When you grow up as an Evangelical, it’s a whole big package. There are so many things that go against the cultural milieu. When you’re little, you watch cartoons like Veggie Tales. You might be homeschooled or go to a private Christian school. You might be against basic science, like global warming or evolution. When you get older, you have praise

music and Christian rock bands. You only read Christian books. Then, purity culture becomes utmost in importance, and people frown upon birth control. Obviously, drugs and alcohol are out of the question. When people get married, wives submit to their husbands. Children are also to be submissive. Political alliances don't depend on voting records or experience, but upon James Dobson's word that the politician has been Born Again.

Often, you're not allowed to hang out with friends who aren't evangelicals or date people who believe differently. Denominational Christians or Catholics are not usually considered real Christians. You become suspicious of non-believers, and you feel this flooding sense of relief when you find someone else who believes like you do. When a person falls away from the faith (stops going to church, has doubts, or realizes that they are LGBT or Q), then they are shunned.

Many questions arise in Evangelical subcultures—If you're cloistered, how can you be salt and light? Why would you reject certain music and entertainment for it's worldliness, and then copy the style? Could it be a marketing scheme—just a way to make money? Does purity culture shame girls and put too much burden on them? If you don't want abortions, then why penalize people from using birth control? Shouldn't women and men be equal? And, isn't much of the Republican party platform anti-Christian? Isn't caring for the poor a good thing? Why would the Prince of Peace want us to fight for the rights of gun owners? Didn't God say that we should take care of the earth?

I could go on and on. I haven't even begun the religious questions of inerrancy or interpretation. But, in short, in order to keep the belief system intact, a person needs to be a part of the subculture. You need to be surrounded by like-minded people who can look past scientific realities, uphold a separate role for women, and give unquestioned support to the GOP.

So, that's the long answer I couldn't go into. **I don't study megachurches, because Ecumenical people can't replicate them. It's not just about the music or style of preaching, it's about creating a subculture**, and we just don't need that support system as badly. We watch PBS, go to public schools and listen to secular radio. We read NYT bestsellers, believe in science, have a healthy skepticism toward politics. And—on our best days—we understand systemic racism and poverty, and we work to dismantle it. If we are counter-cultural, then we're probably anti-capitalist, and so the model still doesn't work for us.