

INTERPRETING THE ANCIENT ARCHAIC TEXT
USING CONTEMPORARY PEDAGOGICAL METHODS
FOR CHURCH GROWTH

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
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requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Ministry

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ABSTRACT

The ancient archaic text has survived for thousands of years. My thesis poses this question: How relevant is the ancient text to church growth today? The goal of my project is to create a model for ministry analysis that assesses whether church growth springs from the presentation of the ancient archaic text, or whether church growth is influenced by other factors. Most churches, small or large, do not have a framework for analyzing and understanding the factors that contribute to or hinder growth. Therefore, this project aims to devise methods to determine whether the interpretation of the ancient text is at the core of church growth and to posit strategies that promote growth in modern churches.

This study was conducted at the following church location: Kingdom in the Valley Christian Church, 11640 North 19th Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona, 85029, Reginald and Kelley Steele, Pastors.

The candidate's church location is as follows: The Highway Church, 371 10th Avenue, Paterson, New Jersey, 07514, Bishop Liston Page Jr., Pastor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What an incredible journey this study has been, considering the vast number of churches – of varying denominations – that are examining the role that the ancient archaic text¹ plays on church growth. Taking into account everything that comprises a church, there are significant differences, yet great similarities among churches all over the world. In studying the roles of pastors and leaders, and how they function in the church, I see many variables that can be positive, but I can also clearly see some negative influences and hindrances to church growth.

Leadership has always played a valuable role in the growth of churches, as the decisions leaders make control most of what happens in their respective church bodies. In the Pentecostal church, for example, we have traditionally been taught to respect church leaders without question because those leaders are the voice of God for our lives. This is referred to as “episcopal authority,” something that typically no one challenges,

¹ In the context of this thesis, my definition of “ancient archaic text” means the unadulterated, unfiltered, true word of God, which is the Holy Bible. My reference to the Bible as the ancient archaic text is a commentary on how contemporary society views the Bible today. While I firmly believe that the lessons and directives of the Bible are, and always will be, just as relevant and applicable to our lives today as in the ancient days, modern society – and even the contemporary Christian church, to a degree – view the Bible as archaic. To them, the Bible is something that cannot be interpreted for or strictly applied to modern living.

because the church body has been taught to respect that hierarchal structure. Because episcopal authority is traditional in nature and automatically conferred upon a leader, it actually has little to do with one's ability to lead or preach and teach God's word. As a result, pastors and leaders may not feel challenged to uphold the standard of the word of God in everything that they do. This omission creates a deficiency in the proper delivery of the biblical instruction and discipline that the church body needs.

What perpetuates this traditionalism-based mindset is the fact that most Pentecostal ministries have been family founded, operated, organized, and controlled. There is no such thing as democracy, and if there is a vote, it is jaded, skewed, and influenced by personal interests and promises of some preferred position. This model is extremely harmful and creates considerable dissension among family, friends, colleagues, and peers. Because there are no boards with whom to confer or conjecture, the leader can cast a vision and implement what God presumably lays upon his or her heart without restraint, usually at the expense of the members' growth and well-being. Many church members lack the knowledge to understand this potential harm, and often rely upon a limited education about the truly broad nature of Christian beliefs and practices. As a result, they endeavor to bring to fruition whatever the pastor says the Lord wants them to do, without question.

Not only does this model damage the church members, but it also taints the execution of succession plans with the thirst for control and power, not to mention the pursuit of the financial rewards that will benefit the next leader. In my view, this governance model has significantly hampered the growth of Pentecostal churches.

By contrast, when I examine the Baptist model of congregational leadership or authority, I see that it has necessary checks and balances. The Baptist model encourages an inclusiveness that empowers people to take ownership of the direction of the ministry. In my opinion, this creates an atmosphere for cohesiveness and growth within the church and the community. This type of system is definitely needed among the Pentecostal reformations.

A faulty leadership model can create an environment where God's word is improperly interpreted. Pastors may not intentionally fall into this pattern, but in some cases, their love for God and zeal for the gospel supersede their knowledge and education, which can lead to improper interpretation of God's word. This level of misinterpretation occurs when there is a lack of understanding of the word, which causes pastors to dilute the word to fit their personal or philosophical assumptions and to protect their self-interests. We often view God's word through the eyes of our leaders, because our worldview, by nature, is the unexamined framework through which we understand reality. Using our worldview for biblical interpretation without being open to allowing our norms to be challenged can cause us to read *in* something that *is not* in the text or to read *out* something that *is* in the text. We usually aren't even aware that our norms are misleading our understanding of the text until someone else asks a question or makes an observation that reveals our blindness. This is why it is advantageous to study God's word in a diverse community; it creates an opportunity to interact with people whose views or traditions differ from our own. This diversity is something that is missing from many of our churches today.

Most mainstream denominations place a mandate on their leaders to be hermeneutically trained, meaning they must learn how to properly interpret and apply the Bible or interpret written or spoken biblical language. This training, along with their calling, enables pastors or leaders to better serve their congregations. There are some pastors who say that if God calls someone, then He will equip them, but I believe that is a mindset of laziness. Coupled with each person's gift and calling is a responsibility to cultivate and substantiate it. What happens when church members are told to just do what the pastor says, because all that other stuff is not important? The result is that we end up with a lot of confused people with a lot of unanswered questions. They love God, but they do not know just what He is saying to them or what He has for them. In 2 Timothy 2:15, the word says, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Pastors and leaders should equip themselves with the tools that will help them be effective leaders.

The Bible must be interpreted evenly but confidently. There is no such thing as perfect interpretation, but there is no doubt that we can better assess the meaning of the given text. Keeping the spotlight on the text will keep us secure in the truth. If we have been faithful to this process, the Holy Spirit will have plenty of space to shine His light and bring us understanding. As believers, we never master our text; we always come back to it and get more clarity and a deeper understanding time after time. Sometimes new insights change our earlier interpretation, so we should take our time with the text and work toward a clear understanding so that our experience will always be life-changing and uplifting.

As we study God's word, we must allow the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. The Holy Spirit does not awaken and strengthen faith apart from the word of God. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The reason for this is that the Spirit has been sent into the world to glorify Christ. But Christ would not be glorified if the Spirit awakened faith in the absence of the revelation of the glory of Christ in the gospel. "When the Spirit of truth comes," Jesus said, "He will glorify me" (John 16:13-14). If the Spirit brought us to faith in the absence of the proclamation of Christ in His Word, our faith would not be in Christ, and He would not be honored.

Therefore, the Spirit binds His faith-awakening ministry to the Christ-exalting word. This means that when we go to the word of Christ, we put ourselves in the path of the Spirit's willingness to reveal Christ to us and strengthen our faith. And in this faith is the "taste and see" of all our joy. Therefore, the word that awakens our faith works for our joy. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul writes, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, he states similarly, "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." In 2 Peter 1:20-21, Peter states, "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

There is no excuse not to be a much better example and model of righteousness to those that I lead. My parents, who are also my spiritual parents, have provided me with a

pristine model of how a person should conduct themselves in ministry. However, when I was exposed and introduced to different churches and organizations, I saw mentors with powerful, anointed, thriving, and successful ministry gifts to the body of Christ, but sometimes their focus was not driven by the word. This is why we have to be responsible for ourselves, know and study the word, and safeguard ourselves by being associated with healthy-thinking people who will hold us accountable for our actions. Had I submitted to this mindset earlier, I would have been a much better pastor, husband, father, son, brother, and friend to my family and loved ones.

The last five months have really challenged my personal convictions and expanded my thoughts, concepts, and ideas about theology. I have always known that there is a bevy of theological studies and methods to learn about God and church growth, but I never realized how antiquated some of my thoughts were. I am unapologetically a Pentecostal charismatic believer in doctrine and practice; consequently, many of my biases have crippled, handicapped, and stifled my theological development and thoughts about growing a ministry. My theology, or my understanding of God, has come from my own personal experiences, and the more I walk with God and study, the more it continues to organically expand.

I like what Terry A. Veling says in his book, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven*: “Theology is always shaped by and embodied in the practices of historical, cultural, and linguistic communities. Our understandings always emerge from our practices, or from the forms of life which we participate in.”² We each take our own

² Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 158.

journey to understanding the things of God. Being reared in church did not keep me from experiencing the world of drugs, alcohol, and sexually deviant behavior, but I ultimately learned that I needed my own personal encounter with God. Although coming to know the Lord through one's own process can leave one with an attitude of arrogance and an air of spiritual elitism, I believe that my theology is developing because I am being provoked to think outside my own personal experience.

My responsibility is to be a thoughtful person, not a thoughtless one. Veling believes that "thoughtfulness is important to theology, just as it is important to human living."³ If I am going to have a healthy theological perspective, I am going to have to acquire a better understanding, be willing to listen, and be very attentive and compassionate. Veling references Simone Weil in her brief essay and suggests that "thoughtful attention is crucial to the pursuit of learning, and that this pursuit will, in turn, aid us in living attentive and responsive lives."⁴ He further states that, "Although people seem to be unaware of it today, the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost sole interest of studies."⁵ After studying Veling's analysis, I must agree that thoughtful, attentive lives are extremely valuable and significant when a person is attempting to grasp, understand, and comprehend through an unfamiliar theological lens.

³ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵ *Ibid.*

My project is essentially a ministry assessment or analysis that examines the limitations and jaded theological views that impact the way churches interpret and apply the ancient archaic text. I have heard all my life that a tree is known by the fruit it bears, however, I don't truly believe we have produced fruit – or church growth – from theology alone. Truly, theology has been tainted by the clandestine motives and limited perspectives of some leaders and influencers within the religious community. If we are not careful, our theology will be overtaken by these closed monotheistic overtones, and this will ultimately hinder church growth.

As this journey that I embarked upon comes to a close, there are many things that come to mind about interpreting the ancient archaic text using contemporary pedagogical methods for church growth and the ethics that go along with being a successful pastor and church leader. Because of the lessons learned through my study of this topic, I know that I am going to be a better steward and manager of my time and I will be extremely conscientious about what I preach now and in the future.

The Project

My project is to create a ministry analysis that assesses whether growth occurs through the presentation and application of the ancient archaic text, or whether church growth comes about through other factors unrelated to the text. Understanding church growth has always been a conundrum. Most churches do not have a process in place to analyze and understand what factors contribute to or hinder growth, particularly as it relates to the interpretation and presentation of the ancient archaic text. I believe interpretation is extremely important and relevant to the health and growth of any

ministry; however, I also believe that other factors can be just as influential on church growth. By conducting a ministry analysis, leaders will be equipped with tools that will enable them to identify and implement systems that foster church growth.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to create and devise ways to explore the structure of the local church and discern whether the interpretation of the ancient text is at the core of church growth. At the center of all we believe should be the word of God, but how important is it to a church and its members? Do we read and study the word as believers did in the early church, or has our focus on man become so great that God and His word have become secondary? Can we say that how we live is a true reflection of God's word? Do we seek God's word when we are looking for a church home? Do we know what to look for when we go to church or should we rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us? Do we know enough about God to know what is in line with His word and what isn't? I truly believe that building a church of healthy believers starts with this: Confidently knowing that all things are possible with God; having a vision, making it plain and keeping it ever before the congregation; focusing on God's greatness in the church and in each individual's life; and studying God's word daily.

Church leaders are always searching for new pedagogical methods without having a mastery of the ancient archaic text. The Bible says, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman who needeth not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). In order to reach a level of maturity in God, we have to study His word and be disciplined. The ultimate goal of this project is to place emphasis on not only the

importance of proper exegetical analysis of the ancient archaic text, but also on the successful implementation of ministry functions that undergird the word of God while building and growing a vibrant contemporary ministry.

Scope of the Project

The project uses targeted focus groups, internal church data, area demographics, internal demographics, and external demographics detailing the diverse population of the church to determine if growth is connected to the ancient text. My purpose in using Kingdom in the Valley Christian Church within the project's scope is to study a church that believes Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and that focuses its ministry on building people, relationships, community, and God's Kingdom.

This church believes that individual growth comes by harnessing and believing that the power of God lives within each person. My assumption was that this church has grown rapidly as a result of implementing a ministry model based upon the ancient text. It has been said that when a church begins to retain and emulate the character of Jesus, it will exhibit the qualities that create a climate that naturally lends to growth. Therefore, my goal for this project is to gain insight into the importance of the word of God in the believer's life and the growth of the church, and to examine how other factors may influence their decision to connect with and stay connected with the church.

I have been inclined to believe that church growth can be attributed to many factors. For example, there is the pastor's influence, the happenstance of people just walking in, revivals, children's church, interest groups (people who don't serve in the church, but pay tithes in exchange for influence), or influence of family and friends.

Clearly, getting people to church is one thing, but getting them to stay is another. So, it is my endeavor to take an in-depth look at what really draws people to the pews each day, each week, and each year. Is church still relevant in this modern contemporary age of the church? Do we as believers still value the word to strengthen and change our lives for the better? With these and other questions in mind, I will take a targeted approach to each group within this study to get an understanding of church growth today.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY AND RESEARCH

More specifically to the purpose of this research is to investigate and understand how a church grows from thirty-seven members to over thirteen thousand within thirteen years of existence. While this study focuses on Kingdom in The Valley Church in Phoenix, Arizona, I do not intend to suggest that this is the only viable model to evaluate church growth in the context of institutionalized Christianity. My work, along with the lay advisory committee, has focused on the structure, teachings, concepts, ideologies, and leadership of the church. I believe that lessons and experiences coming from the individuals actually engaged in ministry are important to understand the culture and religious life of church members. There are many long-held assumptions that come from years of attending these churches and also reading academic studies. I believe that all churches, regardless of size, have a responsibility to be relevant, life-giving, life-changing, healthy expressions of Christianity. I have benefited from the research of other scholars on the subject of megachurches and have used those studies to broaden my perspective on research for this thesis.

I have drawn implicitly and explicitly from other data sources and from the writings of consultants and journalists, and their work has offered clues about the meaning and importance of the quantitative data. I have examined my own Pentecostal denominational reports and the reports of other denominations that have much larger and

more skillful research offices that receive extensive annual reports from their churches. These groups tend to provide reports rich in data that is important for understanding congregational health as well as information about giving to missions, budgets, worship attendance, and enrollments in Christian education classes. When such information is compared across denominations, I as the researcher can get a more complete picture of the religious landscape. Unfortunately, some traditional denominations and independent reformations survey irregularly or not at all. And the traditional denominational groups almost never employ standardized reporting methods across the groups. This is extremely problematic for understanding the complete picture when one of the fastest growing areas of American religious life is the nondenominational church, or churches that function like they are not part of a denomination, like Kingdom in The Valley. It is also one of the reasons I have relied on and drawn from *Faith Communities Today* studies that have attempted to get denominational and nondenominational groups to work cohesively and collaboratively using the same questionnaire.

I also used random poll surveys derived from telephone interviews to investigate individual religious behaviors and attitudes. The information I gathered provides another perspective on the phenomenon of church growth. In addition to these more formal quantitative types of data, I have also gleaned from other types of information. I have relied on small focus groups that shared stories that, in many cases, go unreported. The conversations I have had with the members of Kingdom in the Valley and the books I have read concerning church growth have also been valuable in forming my new perspective and reshaping my thinking. Other valuable sources of information are media reports we have tracked about Kingdom's growth and the buzz about how diverse the

ethnic groups are within the church. America has grown over the centuries as a result of strong waves of immigration, primarily motivated by the pursuit of religious freedom. The mosaic of American culture and religion thrives in the soil of religious freedom, ease of assembly, voluntary group formation, and friendly tax laws for nonprofit organizations. These freedoms have helped Kingdom in the Valley's diverse congregation to be an extremely comfortable and inviting environment with a culture designed to share faith from children down through generations.

The Modern Church

My research has found that the veneer of religiosity that is so prevalent in Western institutionalized Christianity is not the focus of the modern church. Kingdom in the Valley prides itself on diversity of religious expression that comes from its different ethnic groups and their relationship with Christ as it is interpreted through the ancient archaic text. With that being said, the explosion of growth in Kingdom in the Valley has made some mainstream church leaders very uncomfortable, especially those whose churches and denominations are fragmenting over polarizing issues such as race and whose attendance numbers are dropping.

Leaders of evangelical movements say that modern church growth is attributed to shallow religious faith and a watered-down teaching and preaching of the gospel that leads to a gross misinterpretation of the ancient archaic text. My research has found that the ideology of Kingdom in the Valley is to extend the love of God to everyone by showing them how much God loves them through the biblical narratives of the ancient archaic text. I found that the modern, sophisticated Christian is looking for options

because in a society where everything is mutable and most identities can be chosen, the act of choosing creates commitment.

Kingdom in the Valley attracts a greater number of diverse people because it offers more options for service times and styles, ministries that meet needs, opportunities to serve others, and opportunities to volunteer than many other churches offer. These options allow people to choose exactly what they want to do and still connect with the congregation because they can interact with the church on their own terms, creating a customized experience that satisfies their spiritual and personal needs. This is especially evident in the manner in which worship services are offered. Kingdom in the Valley views services lasting more than 90 minutes as an intrusive waste of members' time. Therefore, the biblical message from the ancient archaic text must be short and relevant to the issues of everyday contemporary life. It is not necessary for worship styles and sermon forms to be in contemporary idioms, but it is critical that they touch on daily concerns, issues, and social needs.

The goal of Kingdom in the Valley is to exegete the text in a way that the parishioner can see their lives reflected in the message and glean an understanding that translates into wise actions they can take throughout the week with their family, friends, coworkers, or spouse. In countless interviews through the course of this research, the participants spoke in terms of the church's family-like atmosphere, the feeling of home to them, and their satisfaction with finding a place to belong. How many times have we heard "Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week"? Indeed, every time the demographic characteristics of congregations are analyzed nationally, the truth of this statement is confirmed.

Since the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, our nation has legislated racial inclusion everywhere except in the church. But it isn't just race that separates congregations. Even with the considerable progress made to level the playing field in education, income, class, and status in the United States, studies still show significant divisions among churches and denominations around these variables. Through the interaction I had with the members of Kingdom in the Valley church, it was quite evident that inclusion is intentional and by design. Therefore, it should be no surprise that other churches and denominations are attempting to replicate Kingdom in the Valley's model. However, the more detailed information I learned from my studies of Kingdom in the Valley church, the easier it was to see that the social makeup of the congregation is far more complex than expected. Both in the detailed analysis and at the broad national level, this entire phenomenon varies dramatically in terms of social constituency.

I believe Kingdom in the Valley church is strong because the congregants have adopted a vision stating that the church is for all people, regardless of their race, income, or educational status. Also, the worship forms and styles of the church both reinforce the vision and resonate with a generic American pop culture model imbedded in contemporary society. This model is influenced by the messages conveyed on television, the one-stop-shop mindset of the modern shopping marketplace, and the big business prototype that permeates this country. In other words, they are worshipping in the common language of modern people.

Obviously, this mindset or characteristic has immediate disadvantages for anyone concerned with biblical or doctrinal purity or who sees the worship service as functioning to ensure personal accountability. In a large audience, it is virtually impossible to impose

homogeneity around any issue or characteristic even if that is what the leaders want. In my opinion, this environment offers too much personal freedom to deviate from the standard and too many places to hide from accountability. This reality becomes quite apparent upon examination of the theological and moral differences evident in my studies.

Modern Church Leadership

I have concluded that leadership is a critical factor in a church of any size. Pastors are often the center of attention whether the church is large or small, and the reality for all clergy, regardless of the congregation's size, is that the members confer a great degree of personal responsibility and authority on them. When one is chosen to be the head of a church and operate spiritually as God's spokesperson to the people, that individual receives a valued degree of influence. This leadership dynamic is just as prevalent among leaders of religious groups as it is among executives in a corporate organization. It is forever in existence, even if it is rarely discussed. Since the responsibility of a pastor holds a degree of power and authority, it follows that as the church grows, so does the pastor's influence.

The prosperity of the ministry is partly connected to the abilities and strengths of the pastor. With greater success comes a greater level of authority. Success fosters an environment where one needs to meet continuous expectations of growth and prosperity. Anyone serving as a founder or pastor of a largely successful organization that generates millions of dollars in revenue, and has hundreds of employees and thousands of members, also has honor and fame. This proves to be factual not only in the church but

also in the world of business. Given these circumstances, it is no surprise that most mega-ministries are recognized by the names of their leaders.

The most prosperous ministries are often characterized by their leaders. It is regrettable that the current reality leads critics to imply that most mega-ministries are built around the popularity or personality of the leaders rather than the word of God and His kingdom. Certain individuals have expanded upon that criticism by stating that the members of mega-ministries are blind, careless followers that only attend services because of the pastor's personality, not the presence of God. The critics also state that, without question, these members take their pastor's advice and counsel as if it were actually coming directly from God.

It is no surprise that the political arena believes that mega-ministries' members' votes for elected officials can be swayed solely on the word of their leader. This point of view also casts blame on the pastors of these mega-ministries for the extravagant lifestyles they lead, and depicts the members as nothing more than servants that support these lifestyles. It is true that some members are taken in by the notoriety and hype surrounding their leaders. On the other hand, there are millions of members that attend these mega-ministries, and as of yet, none have built any idols in their leaders' names or declared that they have given up free will altogether. It is not difficult to see why some of these mega-ministry pastors seem like rock stars, with their armies of followers, droves of admirers, and adjutants that serve as butlers and bodyguards. There is something to be said about this level of attention or protection for the small number of pastors that can sell out arena-sized venues. There are some mega-ministries that go out of their way to advertise and promote their pastors as media celebrities in order to

increase exposure. The most popular among them get to travel the world, and with that level of exposure, these leaders have, without question, become celebrities in their own right.

The Multicultural Church

When I decided to conduct my project and research at Kingdom in the Valley church it was, in my opinion, a ministry that modeled what God intended the universal church to look like. Upon my first visit there to teach and preach, I was completely overwhelmed at the sight of all the ethnicities in one building worshiping and praising God. I come from a very strict Afrocentric apostolic denominational background and though I have been exposed to other ministries and reformations, I had never seen a true multicultural church.

While talking to Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele, I learned that everything they do is intentional for bringing different cultures together and making people feel comfortable and included. Even when they preach and teach, they attempt to refer to God using non-gender specific terms and phrases so as not to offend anyone. They use as a biblical scripture reference 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, which says,

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ, that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

This scripture has become the heartbeat of their ministry, and they expect all members of the church to display this type of behavior toward any visitor that comes through the doors of church.

When conducting the interviews of the members we polled, we first had to explain to them what the ancient archaic text was. I was very surprised that they were unfamiliar with the Old and New Testaments being the ultimate authority that we govern our lives by and our belief that it is the infallible word of God. It was quite challenging because they were not accustomed to certain theological terms or phrases, and that made it difficult to communicate at times. But once I was able to explain and interpret the reason for my research, it was a very profitable dialogue and exchange of concepts and ideas. Once I presented how we would come to my findings through six ethnically homogenous focus groups and one multicultural group, I could feel the excitement increase.

There were some people who were uncomfortable discussing the idea of attending a church comprised of people of their own ethnicity, which I found quite surprising. When we started to talk about why they were opposed to the idea, they stated that the reason they didn't attend a church made up of members primarily within their ethnic group was because they desire diversity, and they want their children to grow up in a religious or spiritual environment that has a great appreciation for all people. I did everything in my power, and used all of my pastoral influence, to comfort them and to ensure them that this was nothing more than research and that their pastors were not trying to create another prism or paradigm for the church. I must be honest – I found

their concerns refreshing, and this confirmed for me that this was the right church to survey for this project.

The Focus Group Surveys

When I first went to Kingdom in the Valley church, I knew it was something different and I am glad I had the opportunity to drill down deep into the structure and fabric of the church. To begin my research, Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele announced to the church that I would be conducting a two-day, eight-hour per day seminar on ministry analysis and asked for volunteers from six different ethnic groups. They asked for five to seven people to represent each ethnic group and then there would be a seventh group made up of one person from each of the six groups, which would be our multicultural group. This is how we were able to poll 42 people collectively and individually over a 16 to 20-hour period, exclusive of the leadership team and the administration staff of the ministry. I spent an additional 18 hours on research and discussion with the leadership and administration teams.

I was very surprised by the willing participation of the church and the volunteers because I knew it would be a very tedious process, and to be quite honest, I was afraid that my hypothesis of church growth would be wrong, because I was taught that the word of God is the sole reason people would come to a sacred space called the church and stay there. I was taught that if you just feed the flock with the word of God, they will be committed and faithful and they will go out and make disciples. Well, I was in for a rude awakening, because that's not at all what I learned through this project.

The six ethnic groups we polled were as follows: Native American, Asian American, Latin American, African American, White American, and Middle Eastern American. These were the groups that the study focused on that are prominent in Kingdom in the Valley church. I thought it was amazing to sit and investigate the reasons these groups were so locked into the ministry. I found that speaking with these groups was very insightful, but I also noticed that the people in these groups were very uncomfortable answering questions in front of their pastors. In the pastors' presence, the church members seemed to present only the positive aspects of the ministry and did not want to articulate their concerns. The people were very hesitant to point out church matters that they didn't understand, and they were very fearful that what they shared would be taken out of context. To circumvent this issue, Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele devised the idea of interviewing the members separately rather than have them participate in the focus groups. When we took them out of the group setting, the people appeared to be more open to share their real feelings about the church and the ministry.

It was interesting that the six focus groups all had various opinions about the ancient archaic text and how they saw it being presented and interpreted. My main focus was to use questions and observations to find out whether they considered it important that their pastors' and the church's main focus was teaching them the Bible correctly, and whether that was the only reason they attended this church. I wanted them to share with me the powerful message they heard that impacted or even changed their life, but for the most part, it was not the teaching or preaching that impacted them the most.

I was not surprised that the African American group placed great importance on the teaching and preaching as well as the music and arts ministry, but I was very

surprised that honesty and transparency were equally important to that group. The African American group enjoyed how their pastors were extremely open about their past life experiences before they became pastors leading a church or a ministry. They were drawn to how family-oriented the church was and they really loved the model of a husband and wife co-pastoring and sharing authority and power. They appreciated how Pastor Reginald honored his wife and they were impressed with how Pastor Kelley submitted to her husband.

The White American group had an appreciation for the humility of their pastors and how the teaching of the Bible was so relevant and simple that anyone could understand it. They loved Pastor Reginald's illustrations and his ability to quote the Bible (the ancient archaic text) by book, chapter, and verse without looking at notes or a manuscript, and they liked that he always referenced a scripture to support anything he said. They enjoyed his enthusiasm and energy when he preached or taught and they were drawn to his passion and love for God. They were most impressed by Pastor Reginald's transparency and the way both pastors talked about their relationship before they were pastors. Members felt like that level of openness made it easy for them to follow African American leadership. Additionally, they valued seeing a model of family that included the pastors' children working with them in the ministry. Members also placed considerable weight on the importance of the children's ministry and a youth and young adults ministry.

The White American group also mentioned that they loved that the church facility was always clean and the sanctuary was contemporary and very technologically advanced. These amenities made them feel secure about what they were investing their

money into, because they could see the results and the fruit. I personally thought it was interesting that they expressed how much trust they had in the way the church seemed to be run – like a corporate business and not like a religious institution.

The Native Americans felt that the church met their spiritual needs because they perceive God in nature and in all that God has created, so they connected with the way Pastor Reginald used natural things to metaphorically describe God and the relationship with Him. Native Americans are heavily connected to family, culture, and loyalty, and they are a people whose beliefs are characterized by inter-related meanings, practices, and behaviors. These behavioral patterns and beliefs are practiced across all enduring Native American tribes. This indigenous group of people that has connected with Kingdom in the Valley is most impressive because of their decision to embrace Christianity despite opposition from their families. Historically, the Native American community has felt a lack of trust in the institution of Christianity because it is the religion of the culture that oppressed their ancestors. So, for the Native Americans that attend Kingdom in the Valley church to feel as comfortable as they do around their own people speaks volumes about the culture that has been fostered by the church leaders and emulated by the congregants.

The Asian Americans said they initially had a hard time connecting when they started visiting the church because they couldn't understand the way people would praise God with such charismatic emotion. Because of their traditional Asian American culture, religion, spirituality, and faith have always been important. Although they felt that there was not a large Asian population in that area, they continued to visit Kingdom in the Valley to search for a way to connect. Because of their persistence, they were able to

connect through the music, and ultimately, the Asian American women that came to church felt empowered when they saw Pastor Kelley teaching and preaching. They felt they now had a voice to express themselves, which helped their relationships with their husbands and children because they used Pastor Kelley as the model to be a better wife, mother, daughter, and friend. The Asian American men in the group said that getting involved in the media department of the church and helping in the technical areas is what interested them, and after committing to an assignment they started having a greater appreciation for the teaching and preaching. The Asian American group also appreciated the timeliness and order of each service and the number of options they had to attend service at different times of day.

The Latin American group stated that their religious beliefs were primarily based in Roman Catholicism and were diametrically opposed to the non-denominational practices of Kingdom in the Valley church. They laughed and chuckled about how they ended up there, but they were all quite pleased with the entire church experience. What impacted them the most was how the sermons were illustrated in such a way that someone who didn't know the Bible (ancient archaic text) would be able to understand what was being taught. They applauded Pastors Reginald and Kelley's sensitivity in handling them and taking the time to help them understand the culture of the church.

The Latin American group also gravitated toward the family atmosphere and the balance of recreational activities with spiritual disciplines like fasting and prayer. Music is a major part of their culture, so they really enjoyed the different types of praise and worship expressions through the music and the professionalism of the weekly presentations. This group was the only one, to my surprise, that spoke about being most

comfortable seeing a plethora of mixed marriages and relationships, which encouraged them to be as active in the ministry as possible. If there was any issue that this group had, it was learning that the worship of idols or statues was not permitted because idols were not recognized with the same level of veneration as they were in Roman Catholicism. The group expressed how their theology was restructured from their pastors' interpretation of certain scriptures which challenged them to read and study the Bible more.

The Middle Eastern American group was the group that interested me the most because there were people in that group from different branches of Islam. I was very curious to understand how they viewed being raised Islamic and converting to become a devout Christian. Group members were drawn and attracted to seeing a male from their perspective that could lead their family. They loved the example of Pastor Reginald, as seeing him in front of them demonstrated that a man could be the priest of his house. The group was a bit challenged by seeing a strong woman, Pastor Kelley, out front leading and teaching men, but what made them adjust was the diversity and intentional instruction by the pastors regarding patriarchal, misogynistic dominance. More than the interpretation of the ancient archaic text, they put substantial value on integrity and they witnessed elevated character coming from the leadership of the church. They believe in accountability and submission to authority so it was practically a seamless transition to join Kingdom in the Valley church. The love displayed for one another in the church keeps them connected and passionate about learning all they can about Christ and Christianity.

This group also expressed how learning the Bible in a corporate setting was uncomfortable because they were used to men being taught in a different setting than women. They were accustomed to each group (men and women) being instructed by their own gender, so what made the transition to Kingdom in the Valley easier was the church's creation of a men's fellowship and women's fellowship. So now they had a forum where both groups could learn something that was foreign to them – the Bible – in a more familiar, gender-specific environment. This group was very thankful and grateful for their pastors' reception and openness to having them as members of the church in light of the growing hostility in our country for the Middle Eastern people, particularly those with Islamic roots. They feel that they have truly witnessed the love of God and appreciate that they are being taught from the Bible (ancient archaic text).

The multicultural group erased the traditional definition of a White church or Black church. This group was a true reflection of the body of believers at Kingdom in the Valley. Each member gave details of their experience and fellowship with their brothers and sisters. It affirmed the value of diversity and the fact that God has created us all. This group wasn't satisfied with just being around or worshiping with people just like themselves; instead, there was a willingness to be a part of other cultures. Because the majority of the people in this group lived outside the geographic area of the church, this multi-cultural group also evidenced the notion that we go where we feel God and His love.

Congregational Transformation, Church Growth and Decline

The unity and love on display at Kingdom in the Valley shows just how kingdom-minded Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele are. I would say that the majority of American churches are still segregated, leaving race at the forefront of the brokenness we still face as the body of Protestant Christian believers. In order for this to change, the question we must ask ourselves is this: Is my love walk with God authentic when the people I draw are only people like myself? Church will never be multi-cultural until we see all humans through God's eyes and we interpret the ancient archaic text without seeing through our own ethnic lenses.

Being able to read the signs of the times and congregational transformation have been extremely difficult for church statisticians for years. In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass uses her own experiences and research to give the Christian community some insight into why some church congregations grow and why some church congregations decline.¹ Over a period of three years, the author researched fifty congregations from six denominations: United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, and Disciples of Christ. Some of her findings do not resonate with my view of the foundational ties that connect us all as Christians, but I concur with some of her assessments.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017), 55.

Similar to the denominations Butler Bass evaluated, there is also some decline in attendance, excitement, passion and commitment in many of our African American denominations, including Church of God in Christ, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, United Pentecostal Church, Pentecostal Church of the Apostolic Faith, and Bibleway Church World Wide. This is my context and it is predominantly Black, but there are some congruencies across the denominations as far as church decline is considered. Butler Bass said that mainline Protestantism is antiquated, dying and has lost its fervor in contrast to the more liberal megachurch that appears to have excitement and enthusiasm mixed with technology and a high level of professionalism.² Ed Stetzer also expresses concern that mainline Protestantism is dying.³ He says that while Christianity overall is not dying, mainline protestants (United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church, American Baptist Churches, United Church of Christ, and The Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) are close to dying out.⁴ The decline has been a sharp one – in 1972, “28% of Americans identified with a mainline church,” but by 2014, “that number had dropped to 12.2%,” – and Stetzer foreshadows the end of some mainline denominations within the next four to five decades.⁵ Notably, the rise of non-denominational churches accounts for some of the

² Butler Bass, *Christianity*, 27.

³ Ed Stetzer, “The State of the Church in America: When Numbers Point To A New Reality, Part 2,” *The Exchange Blog*, September 14, 2016, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/september/state-of-church-in-america-when-numbers-point-to-new-realit.html>.

⁴ Stetzer, “State of the Church.”

⁵ *Ibid.*

shifting away from mainline Protestantism.⁶ Stetzer estimates that non-denominational churches will eventually become the largest among evangelical denominations.⁷ By contrast, historically African-American churches and denominations have remained steady, with 7% of Americans identifying with Black churches in 2009, and 6.5% in 2014.⁸

Butler Bass's research addresses vignettes from ten core churches. She examines ten Christian practices as a way in which she sees these progressive churches seeking to follow Christ in an ever-changing world. The ten practices are hospitality, discernment, healing, contemplation, testimony, diversity, justice, worship, reflection, and beauty. She believes through her research that these elements, when properly executed, will transform lives.⁹ As I read the book, I found that leadership's reluctance to embrace change will cause the congregation's morale to wane, and when the people lose interest, there is no motivation to commit themselves to discipleship, which in my opinion is the heartbeat of Christ. Calling people to a deeper spiritual life comes from engaging them in a variety of styles of evangelism. As I continued to read, I struggled with her study's lack of diversity because all of her research and findings came from an all-White perspective. However, no matter what the ethnicities are, we as a community of Christian believers have the same basic challenge, and that is finding a way to politically and theologically

⁶ Stetzer, "State of the Church."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Butler Bass, *Christianity*, 239.

strike a balance between the progressive/liberal and traditional/conservative mainline church.

When I was growing up in church, the structure was episcopal and not congregational. To my knowledge, that hierarchical leadership was all we knew. However, today's mentality about leadership has congregations rapidly moving away from hierarchical, top-down communities of authority and moving toward more participatory forms of church. Diana Butler Bass says, "the congregations along my way navigated between the extremes of spiritual individualism and authoritarian religion by emphasizing the power of relationship in community."¹⁰ I believe that if we can encourage people to fall back in love with God, awaken their desire to be truly challenged and changed by Him, and not get caught up in gimmicky innovations in search of cultural relevance – like the use of the latest music in worship services, a food court in the foyer, or trips to Six Flags – we will see people transformed by the power of God. Indeed, this transformational process comes about, in part, not only by our willingness to be changed, but also by the grace of God as we grow and mature in our faith. But the reality of today is that prioritizing the teaching of and the submission to the transformational potential of the word of God alone is not enough. Rather, it is a transactional relationship – underscored by some of the more modern church innovations that exude the enthusiasm, technology, and professionalism that Butler Bass speaks of – that initially draws many people to the place where they can be planted so that the transformative process can ultimately begin.

¹⁰ Butler Bass, *Christianity*, 219.

Contemporary styles of worship and embracing cultural norms, such as the use of and dependence on “must-have” conveniences like high technology, does not always ensure growth or success, but it does raise the question of whether the message of salvation, which is kerygma (the preaching of the Gospel of Christ), is enough. We have been taught to bring salvation – the understanding, acceptance, and profession of Jesus Christ as the risen savior, whereby all who believe and receive Christ by faith are born of the Holy Spirit and become children of God – to a dying world. We are supposed to be the light that shines in darkness, a city that sits on a hill that cannot be hidden, but it appears that we are attempting to blend into the culture in order to keep our churches alive and relevant instead of concentrating on finding a way to convey the message of Christ more effectively.

As I studied Kingdom in the Valley, I discovered that their ministry model does not embrace any one specific thing to the exclusion of another when it comes to drawing people to Christ. Rather, the ministry creates an environment that meets people where they are – saved, unsaved, unsure, estranged, unchurched – and connects with them in whichever way speaks to them, be it through the preached word of God or through the personal and ministry relationships cultivated among the members and within the ministry activities. Ultimately, Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele are focused on the well-being of their flock. Their desire is to draw the people to come, and when they arrive, they are exposed to the biblical teaching that guides them to salvation and encourages them to live a sanctified life. Butler Bass shares what she believes “Christianity for the rest of us” is really about, stating that,

Transformation is the promise at the heart of the Christian life. Christianity for the rest of us is not about personal salvation, not about getting everybody else saved, or about the politics of exclusion and moral purity. Christianity for the rest of us is the promise of transformation that, by God's mercy, we can be different, our congregations can be different, and our world can be different.¹¹

While Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele teach the importance of this transformation, it is up to the individual to choose it for themselves.

¹¹ Butler Bass, *Christianity*, 255.

CHAPTER 3

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Local Church

The data collected for this project began with a review of the ancient archaic text and its importance to the survival of the local church as well as megachurches. The goal of the project is to establish what effect, if any, the ancient archaic text has on individuals and the cause by which church growth is the outcome. The church used as the focus of this project was Kingdom in the Valley Christian Church, in Phoenix, Arizona, pastored by Reginald and Kelley Steele.

Purpose and Mission

Pastor Steele has set forth a purpose and mission for his local church, which is to make Jesus Christ Lord and Savior in the lives of believers, by building people, relationships, community and God's kingdom. A guiding scripture is Romans 10:9, "that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. In doing so make stable your temperament and behavior as you grow in your relationship with Christ." The church also stands on 1 Corinthians 15:58, which says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." With these scriptures in mind, an important goal is to strengthen our

individual relationship with Christ. As born-again believers, the power of God lives within each of us, and Kingdom in the Valley places great emphasis on teaching their members this Romans 8:11 principle: “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” Kingdom in the Valley’s purpose and mission are grounded in the desire “to establish you, strengthen you, and encourage you so that you will establish, strengthen, and encourage one another.”

Looking at Kingdom in the Valley’s purpose and mission, it is very ancient archaic text driven, especially considering that one of the focus scriptures is Romans 8:11. This scripture says it is our obligation to respond as believers, because God has done the foundational work for us. We must live in the power and under the control of the Holy Spirit and not allow our bodies to lead us. Pastor Steele is preaching to believers to say no to sinful worldly desires that imprison believers, to have self-control with the Holy Spirit, and to be sober and diligent in the word of God. Most of God’s training and instruction comes through suffering and perseverance, and without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible. As leaders, I believe it is imperative that we let our congregants know that spiritual growth will sometimes entail hardship and struggle. How we handle those hardships and struggles will determine and demonstrate our spiritual maturity.

The Word Applied

The word of God is central to Pastor Steele’s weekly sermons and is the tool he uses to encourage, admonish and draw people to God. Within the fiber of that word is the love exemplified daily through sharing the touch of God with individuals and visitors

alike. It is that display of God's love that encourages people to make Kingdom in the Valley their home. Research from members shows that their desire and need to make Kingdom in the Valley their church home was a result of the preached word and the love shown to them by other members. Many members received an invitation to visit from family, friends, and co-workers. Upon experiencing the service firsthand, most of them became members after their first visit.

It is the belief of Kingdom in the Valley that God's word is the source by which the church thrives and grows, and they are a body of believers living out the very essence of God's love. It is evident that for all believers, the way we love and embrace each other is a true witness of God's love. Our attitude has to be entangled in God's word so that we can be a living tool used for His glory. While we cannot change our past or how people will conduct themselves, we can, with the help of God, control how we view Him every day.

Case Study

I conducted an overall review with Pastor Reginald Steele within my study and research of Kingdom in the Valley. Below is my interview with Pastor Steele, which gives insight into the foundation and growth of Kingdom in the Valley.

Questions:

1. q) When did you start your ministry?
 - a) January 2nd, 2005, thirteen years ago.
2. q) Is this your original location?
 - a) No, our first building was a Flea Market gym.

3. q) What was the membership at that time?
 - a) 37 (thirty-seven) people.
4. q) Two years later what was the membership?
 - a) 2,300 (twenty-three hundred).
5. q) When did you notice a major growth was taking place?
 - a) 2008, (three years later) that when the church purchased our first building.
6. q) How important is location to growth?
 - a) Not that significant, I would say about fifty percent. It depends on what you do with location that will determine growth.
7. q) Would you say the majority of your members live in the area or commute?
 - a) We are about thirty to forty minutes away from our original location. Most of our members commute to church.
8. q) Can you say that the word is key in the growth or what part does it play?
 - a) The word is most important, but most people look for: 1. Personality; 2. Transparency; 3. The word; 4. Children's ministry; and 5. Music.
9. q) What's the one thing you will say is important to any church's growth?
 - a) Transparency.
10. q) What's your church membership today?
 - a) Thirteen thousand.

The Steeles noted that there are critical attributes of their growing church: love; the word of God; commitment; openness; unity; flexibility; and vision. It is important to note that these components vary with each church. By the conclusion of the interview with Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele, I had a clear understanding of the effects that

pastoring a megachurch can have on a professional relationship with God versus a personal relationship. By professional, I mean the business of operating a megachurch, which, for some pastors, is so onerous that it can easily preoccupy them to the point that it overshadows their commitment to God and to the church. One cannot allow their working or professional relationship with the church to compromise their personal, intimate relationship with God. The Steeles have mastered this balance, and I marvel at the way they have been able to maintain a heart of God and love of people in the midst of the busy operation of a large, growing church. In my view, their effectiveness serves as a great witness to all, but especially to pastors. The Steeles believe, and I wholeheartedly agree, that it is important that each pastor place priority on their time spent seeking, worshiping and studying God's word. This is not only of the utmost importance to a pastor's relationship with God but also to their relationship with their congregants. God is willing to do great things through us, but we, as leaders, must fully surrender our souls and go forward in His strength, trusting in the all mighty God.

Individual Members

I found that the majority of the individual survey participants had either relocated to Kingdom in the Valley from another state, changed their local residence, or changed their denomination. I will make reference to three of these members as Member 1, Member 2, and Member 3. Their personal accounts are as follows:

Member 1 – “A member of Kingdom in the Valley invited me to come worship with them. I was seeking a higher calling in Jesus Christ and Kingdom in the Valley gave me that so I could be a part of the body of Christ.”

Member 2 – “I was raised United Methodist. I stopped going to church when I was eighteen. I came back to church here at Kingdom in the Valley, a non-denominational church, when I was twenty-four. This is where I really started to grow in my faith.”

Member 3 – “I moved here from New Mexico and attended other churches prior to coming to Kingdom in the Valley. I watched Pastor Steele on television and knew I was in good hands when I joined. I know attending gives me the word and the tools that I need to live life.”

At Kingdom in the Valley there is a hunger and thirst for more of God and His word, and it is true that a church can not only change how they see themselves and how they see others, but it can also change people and their future. While the responses of the survey participants varied, the consistent theme was that they were all in search of something. Although they each articulated this desire differently, ultimately, in my view, they were all in pursuit of an encounter with God, whether they recognized it as such or not. So while the methods and means that drew them to Kingdom in the Valley may have, on the surface, seemed only tangentially or wholly unrelated to the ancient archaic text, the reality is that it was the guidance and direction offered by the preached word as well as the relationships with other members that solidified their commitment to the church.

These responses were refreshing and inspiring, because today I see many Christian believers living a life of being judgmental or self-righteous. When did God give any of us the authority to cast judgement on others regarding race, religion or finances? A few months ago I heard a pastor try to justify hatred and bigotry. It grieves

me to know that today some pastors have compromised God's love. How can we place more importance on what we believe and our rights as Christians than on our love for people? Kingdom in the Valley a multicultural church where the word is edifying all members. The individual members at Kingdom in the Valley made it plain that the love of God is what drew them there.

CHAPTER 4

EVALUATION

As I researched and read studies conducted over the past fifty years on church growth and the value the church places on the word of God, I can say with certainty that church memberships have grown in the last twenty to thirty years. But I cannot say with certainty that this growth came about solely because of the written word. As a pastor, I know that church attendance is important to believers. It's the place where we come to seek God, worship, and fellowship with other believers. But how important to believers is the word that is being taught, and how important is it that we incorporate it into our lives? How much of a part does it play in church growth?

There are scores of articles and scholarly research findings addressing different areas and causes of church growth. In the Appendix, I have included sample articles and charts to illustrate some of the approaches to evaluating church growth. Here, I will address the most salient issues revealed by my research and my project concerning factors that contribute to church growth.

Impact of the Word of God

The scripture holds true in Matthew 18:20, which states, "For where two or three gather in My name, there am I with them." Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting

together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” The word says that we are to assemble ourselves in worship, and we are to build each other through our fellowship. Ephesians 4:11-13 says,

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip His people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

The word that we read, study and apply to our lives is what we are to use as the driving force of our human compass. The word governs how we relate to one another and conduct ourselves as God-fearing people.

While the word is clear on how we should promote one another’s growth, how do we apply these principles to church growth? Do we aspire to grow our churches just for the sake of numbers and metrics, or are our sights set on growth according to how God has commanded us? In his article on church growth principles, Dr. Richard Krejcir cautions us to carefully examine Matthew 28:18-20 to keep church growth in perspective.¹ The goal is discipleship and spiritual growth, not just a numbers game.² Krejcir contends, and I agree, that “the primary goals in church growth are the spiritual

¹ Richard J. Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles that are Real and Work!” *Into Thy Word Ministries*, 2000, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=32791>.

² Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

growth of the congregation, and growing in the Lord. When this is taking place, the numbers will follow, because people are following the Lord and reaching out.”³

Impact of the Megachurch Model

“A megachurch, by widely accepted definition, is a Protestant church that regularly draws a weekly worship attendance of 2,000 or more.”⁴ With its membership of over 13,000 people, Kingdom in the Valley undoubtedly fits the description of a megachurch. The number of megachurches in America is on the rise, so much so that their influence has created a megachurch effect – churches looking to these super-sized institutions to follow their innovations and success strategies – and this effect can be felt across the Christian community, in both large and small churches alike.

The Modern Megachurch

Kingdom in the Valley is among some of the largest megachurches in the country. While a smaller megachurch may draw about 2,000 people to its worship services per week, some of the largest U.S. churches draw more than 30,000 people.⁵ At Kingdom in the Valley, the two Sunday morning services are filled to capacity on a weekly basis. As a result, Pastor Reginald Steele indicated that there are plans underway to add a third

³ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

⁴ Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “Recent Shifts in America’s Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Summary Report,” *Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary*, December 2, 2015, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch-2015-summary-report.html>.

⁵ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

worship service. After testing an 8:00 a.m. service option for three years, Pastor Steele learned that the time was inconvenient for his congregants. The early timeframe did not fit their lifestyle; therefore, they would not attend. Pastor Steele explained that West Coast culture is vastly different than East Coast culture, where early services are popular and customary. In Arizona, the culture is “laid back” and less accommodating of church activities that require one to be an early riser. After observing how these cultural norms translated into church attendance, Pastor Steele ended the 8:00 a.m. service option and is now considering offering an evening service to accommodate the lifestyle preferences of his congregants and to make room for the current and continued growth of the church.

Megachurches like Kingdom in the Valley are not only growing in new members who attend in-person, but also by people who participate through an online or video streaming experience. Thumma and Bird found that the use of online “campuses” is on the rise, with 30% of megachurches offering “an online campus experience—described as more than video streaming of the service, including interactive features, staff involvement and online attender accountability.”⁶ Of the churches offering this experience, about one-third of them have devoted one or more full-time staff members to manage the online campus and to serve “a median of 300 people weekly.”⁷

Kingdom in the Valley is experiencing considerable success with its online church experience, and, as many similarly situated churches have done, Kingdom in the Valley recently assigned dedicated staff members to manage the online experience. In

⁶ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

⁷ Ibid.

addition to streaming both of the Sunday morning services to an average of 1,000 viewers per week, the staff members also meet the needs of the “e-members,” including responding to their prayer requests and ensuring that the e-members are treated in the same manner as regular members who attend church in-person. Pastor Steele noted that the internet church experience has added to, not detracted from, the growth of Kingdom in the Valley. In fact, the contributions of e-members using the online giving platform now account for 35% of the church’s revenue. Although online giving has become a significant source of revenue, Pastor Steele indicated that in-person giving has not declined at all and continues to grow, and the online option has only enhanced giving by offering a platform that is convenient for tech-savvy church members.

Similarly, Thumma and Bird’s research does not indicate that churches endeavoring to offer online experiences have seen a reduction in physical attendance. Rather, their research indicates that a contributing factor to megachurch growth is the interactive use of technology in the worship experience, which in many cases includes the use of online campuses.⁸

Data shows that megachurches are not only large, but also they continue to grow, often at rapid rates.⁹ According to research by Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, the median growth rate among megachurches was 26% over a five-year period, or about 5%

⁸ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

⁹ Ibid.

each year on average.¹⁰ Figure 1 illustrates growth in attendance at megachurches from the years 2009-2014:

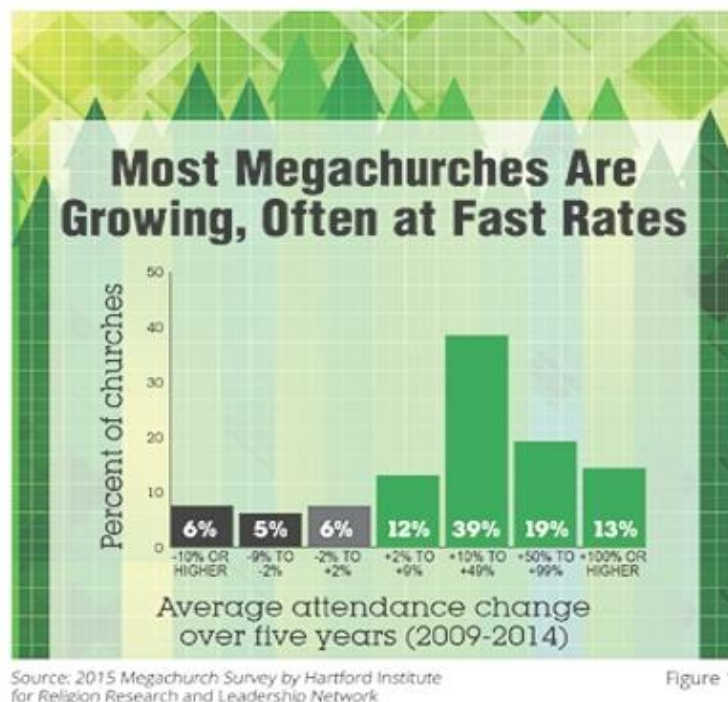


Figure 1. Megachurch attendance change from 2009-2014. *Source:* Data from Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “Recent Shifts in America’s Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Summary Report,” *Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary*, December 2, 2015, Figure 1.

The exponential growth of megachurches has been nothing short of dramatic.

Where megachurches were once few and far between, that dynamic has shifted in recent years. Researchers studying megachurch trends found that “In 1990, the United States had one megachurch per 4 million people but by 2005 the terrain had shifted to four megachurches per one million Americans.”¹¹ In 1970, there were approximately 50 megachurches in America; as of 2015 there were about 1,350, and as of 2017, that

¹⁰ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

¹¹ “Megachurch Trends,” *Insights into Religion*, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://www.religioninsights.org/articles/megachurch-trends>.

number stands at about 1,600 churches.¹² Research also shows that newer megachurches, which are growing at a faster rate than their older, more established counterparts, have benefitted from the lessons of older megachurches to design a more refined model that positions them for rapid growth.¹³

In addition to rapid growth, megachurches are also growing increasingly non-denominational. Between 35-40 percent of megachurches are non-denominational, and some others may not claim to be non-denominational, but they do make an effort to “minimize their denominational ties” by altering the church’s name to remove the denominational affiliation.¹⁴

As aforementioned, Kingdom in the Valley survey participants highlighted features and benefits of the church facility, technology, worship service styles and worship service options as some of the key reasons that they became members of the church and have remained there ever since. Research data bears out the same results and links similar features and benefits to church attendance and growth. Thumma and Bird found that overall, megachurch worship services are contemporary in nature, utilizing praise bands and musical instruments such as electric guitars, bass, and keyboard.¹⁵ They also found that, like Kingdom in the Valley, most megachurches are highly technological

¹² “Megachurch Trends,” Aaron Earls, “Where Are All the Megachurches?,” *Facts & Trends*, June 9, 2017, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://factsandtrends.net/2017/06/09/where-are-all-the-megachurches/>.

¹³ “Megachurch Trends.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

and use projection equipment, large screens, sound boards, and Wi-Fi.¹⁶ While my assessment is that these church features are now essential to growth, by contrast, Krejcir cautions that churches should not feel pressured to compete with an entertainment industry standard.¹⁷ He contends that people are already overstimulated, so the deployment of a full-on multimedia show may only add to their distraction, so what they really need is “reality.”¹⁸ While I do see the merit of Krejcir’s contention, and I agree that the church must be distinguishable from the secular world, my analysis of megachurch research, and my study of the effectiveness of Kingdom in the Valley church, lead me to a different conclusion than his. In my view, it is abundantly clear that the modern churchgoer needs to be reached and connected with in the same manner that they connect with American culture. Churches have to meet the people where they are in order to attract them, and in some cases, people will never be attracted to any church until they can see something in the institution that offers some of the same comforts as their modern, everyday lives.

Krejcir does, however, believe that churches have to be concerned about creature comforts, saying “We must also cater to people’s comfort level. If people are not comfortable they will leave. You don’t want people to leave for merely immature reasons.”¹⁹ A comfortable environment not only satisfies one’s temporal needs, but also

¹⁶ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

¹⁷ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

creates a setting that is “conducive to outreach, since people are drawn to comfort rather than discomfort.”²⁰

Similar to the feeling of inclusion and openness reported by Kingdom in the Valley’s members, Thumma and Bird’s research also found that most megachurches emanate a feeling that people describe as “inspirational, joyful, nurturing of faith, thought-provoking, and filled with a sense of God’s presence.”²¹ Figure 2 illustrates the reported data on how megachurches compare to other churches in key areas of interest to congregants:



Figure 2. Ranking of megachurch key areas of interest. *Source:* Data from Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “Recent Shifts in America’s Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Summary Report,” *Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary*, December 2, 2015, Figure 2.

²⁰ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

²¹ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

By comparison, megachurches rank considerably higher than other churches in these areas, especially when it comes to being inspirational, nurturing people's faith, and in being innovative.²²

Mission and Purpose

Another common practice of megachurches that fuels growth is the development of a clear mission and purpose. My study with Kingdom in the Valley taught me just how important mission and purpose are to growth for our churches. Pastors Reginald and Kelley Steele emphasized vision as a critical factor in the sustained growth of their church. Their vision – which is making Jesus Christ Lord and Savior in the lives of believers, by building people, relationships, community and God's Kingdom – undergirds everything they do at their church. As a result, people are drawn to the church because they feel like it is a place where they can belong, no matter who they are.

Thumma and Bird likewise linked the popularity and growth of megachurches to the fact that they are nearly twice as likely to have a clear mission and purpose than non-megachurches.²³ Dr. Richard Krejcir cautions that not only must the vision and mission statement be “real and authentic,” but the church must also be willing to act on it.²⁴ Even an “empowered vision and mission statement with a clearly defined purpose, and

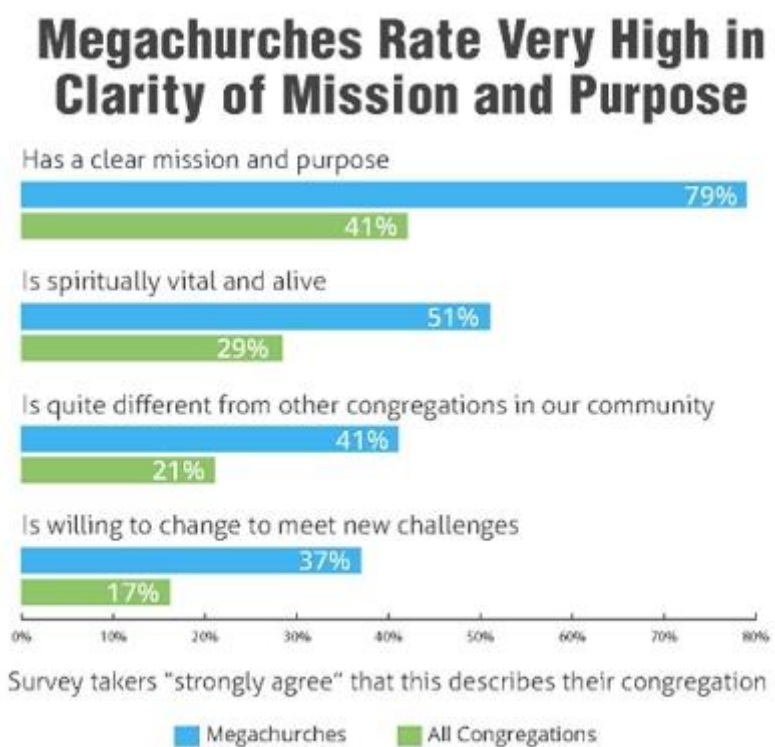
²² Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

strategies on what God has called you to do and be” will not effectuate growth if it goes unexecuted.²⁵

Figure 3 illustrates survey respondents’ impressions of their own church’s clarity of mission and purpose. The megachurches ranked their churches overwhelmingly higher than non-megachurches, which indicates a deficiency in the ability of smaller churches to establish or execute a clear mission and purpose:



Source: 2015 Megachurch Survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Leadership Network

Figure 3

Figure 3. Megachurch ratings on mission and purpose. *Source:* Data from Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “Recent Shifts in America’s Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Summary Report,” *Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary*, December 2, 2015, Figure 3.

²⁵ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

The researchers also found that megachurches emphasize evangelism more than smaller churches, which directly correlates to growth, as members are better equipped to go out and make disciples, which should ultimately lead to new members coming to the church.

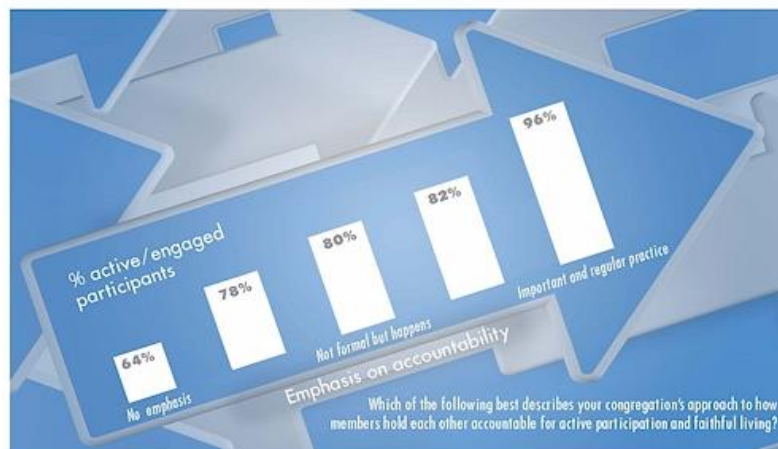
Active Engagement

As noted by some Kingdom in the Valley members, they were not initially drawn to the church by the preaching or teaching. Rather, it was their involvement in church activities, like working with the technology team, which made them feel connected. Once they made that connection, they became more receptive to hearing and receiving the word of God and applying it to their lives. Thumma and Bird found that while overall attendance may vary at times, attendance by people described as “regular participants” increases.²⁶ They believe this pattern reflects the notion that there is a direct connection between actively engaged members and enhanced congregational dynamics, like the amount of offering they give, and greater participation in small groups.²⁷ Figure 4 illustrates the high percentage of actively engaged participants in churches that make accountability an important and regular practice, which results in an increase in engagement:

²⁶ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

²⁷ Ibid.

With More Accountability Comes More Engagement



Source: 2015 Megachurch Survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Leadership Network

Figure 13

Figure 4. Member accountability and engagement. *Source:* Data from Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “Recent Shifts in America’s Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Summary Report,” *Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary*, December 2, 2015, Figure 13.

I observed this dynamic at work as I studied Kingdom in the Valley church. They offer a plethora of options for events and activities, like the men’s and women’s fellowships, children’s church, and the technology team. Activities like these have a built-in accountability component that makes members aware of the value and importance of their participation for their own benefit, as well as for the benefit of the church body as a whole. As a result, members are more likely to commit to these activities and remain connected with the church. Church activities not only provide an opportunity for members to connect with others and serve within the church, but also they enhance the worship experience overall. Thumma and Bird make the same

observation in their research, finding that “churches that implement intentional systems of member accountability show significantly higher levels of participation.”²⁸

Missions and Outreach

In their 2015 study, Thumma and Bird found that 81% of megachurches place a special emphasis on global missions programs.²⁹ Not only are megachurches devoted to global missions, but they are also focusing on community service or outreach programs in increasingly high numbers. 81% of megachurches report engagement in community service programs of some kind, and churches placing greater emphasis on missions see higher financial giving from their members.³⁰ Dr. Richard Krejcir challenges the church to “spend at least one-third of its resources of time, talent, and money in outreach and missions.”³¹

Multiculturalism

At the outset of this project, I approached my study of Kingdom in the Valley under the assumption that the church had grown exponentially because of a concerted effort to attract a multiracial audience. What I found was that Kingdom in the Valley’s cultural and ethnic diversity was not necessarily a stated goal; rather, it came about as a

²⁸ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

result of the implementation of the church's mission and purpose. Therefore, Kingdom in the Valley is not growing *because* it is *multicultural*; rather, it is *multicultural* because it is *growing*. While most megachurches are still predominated by one ethnic group, 10% of megachurches reported having no racial majority in in 2015.³² In view of the research, it is clear that Kingdom in the Valley is exceptional in the sense that it is truly multiracial.

Leadership Development

An overwhelming majority of megachurches have some form of a mentoring or leadership development program.³³ Leadership is a critical component of any growing church. Dr. Richard Krejcir defines Servant Leader Development as the process by which leadership develops “a real genuine sense and modeling of being Christ’s servant, and the people in their care are His children.”³⁴ Without properly equipped and conditioned leaders, growth can be hindered or stunted by poor decisions or a lack of focus on the church’s mission and purpose. Krejcir believes that the pastor, in particular, must be well equipped in order to serve effectively and promote a healthy, growing church.³⁵ Figure 5 illustrates the failure of churches as a result of the pastors’ failure to invest time and resources in their own personal and spiritual health:

³² Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

³⁵ Richard Krejcir, “Church Growth Research Graphs and Statistics: The Statistical Overview of Fifteen Years of Research, Asking Why Churches Fail,” *Into Thy Word Ministries*, 2000, accessed February 24, 2018,

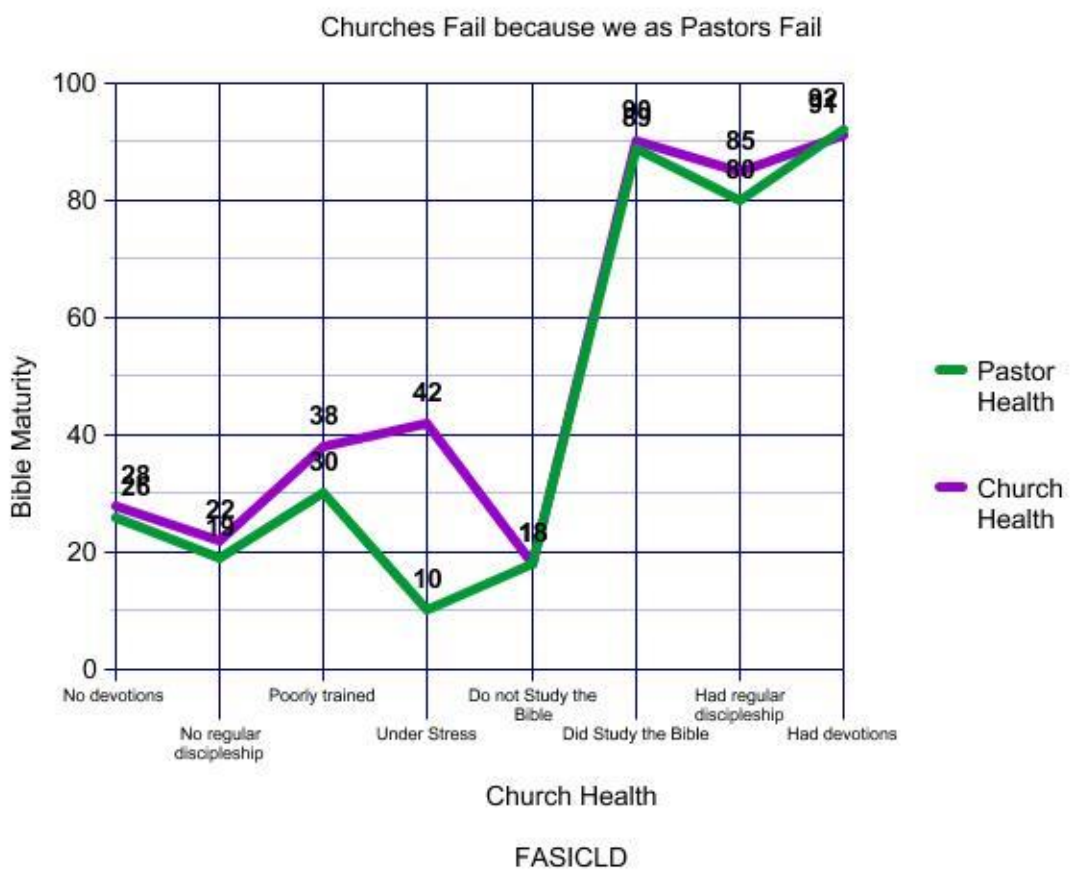


Figure 5. Comparison of Bible maturity to church health. *Source:* Data from Richard Krejcir, “Church Growth Research Graphs and Statistics: The Statistical Overview of Fifteen Years of Research, Asking Why Churches Fail,” *Into Thy Word Ministries*, 2006.

Krejcir found that pastors who fail to self-develop – through devotions, discipleship, training, Bible study, and stress-management – are more likely to have a failing church. By contrast, pastors who are committed to growing and succeeding in those areas have a correspondingly successful church.³⁶

<http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/default.asp?blogid=0&url=10&view=post&articleid=36571&link=1&fldKeywords=&fldAuthor=&fldTopic=0>

³⁶ Krejcir, “Church Growth Statistics.”

Finances

Good stewardship is a sure sign of a healthy, growing church. In the year 2014, the median megachurch income was \$4.7 million, and 43% of churches reported having excellent financial health.³⁷ Some churches, especially smaller ones, tend to shy away from teaching on stewardship for fear of alienating the congregants. Krejcir advises taking the opposite approach. He encourages churches, “Do not be afraid to preach Biblical stewardship and how to handle money...A stifled church, no matter how many are attending, will always have financial problems, where a small, poor church with real conviction and purpose will usually have enough!”³⁸

Although most megachurches report that their financials and their perception of their financial health are strong, data shows that actual income was flat from the years 2000 -2015, when inflation is factored in to the reported revenue figures.³⁹ Krejcir’s contention that church size is not necessarily indicative of commitment to giving may explain why many megachurches have not seen a dramatic increase in actual giving, even though survey respondents’ perception of their church’s financial health has increased. It is possible, that in a megachurch setting, members feel less compelled to give at all or increase their giving because the apparent solvency and success of the church gives them a sense of financial complacency. If this is the case, it is more important than ever that

³⁷ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

³⁸ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

³⁹ Thumma and Bird, “Recent Shifts.”

megachurch leadership ensure that they are teaching and reinforcing biblical principles on giving.

The Small Church

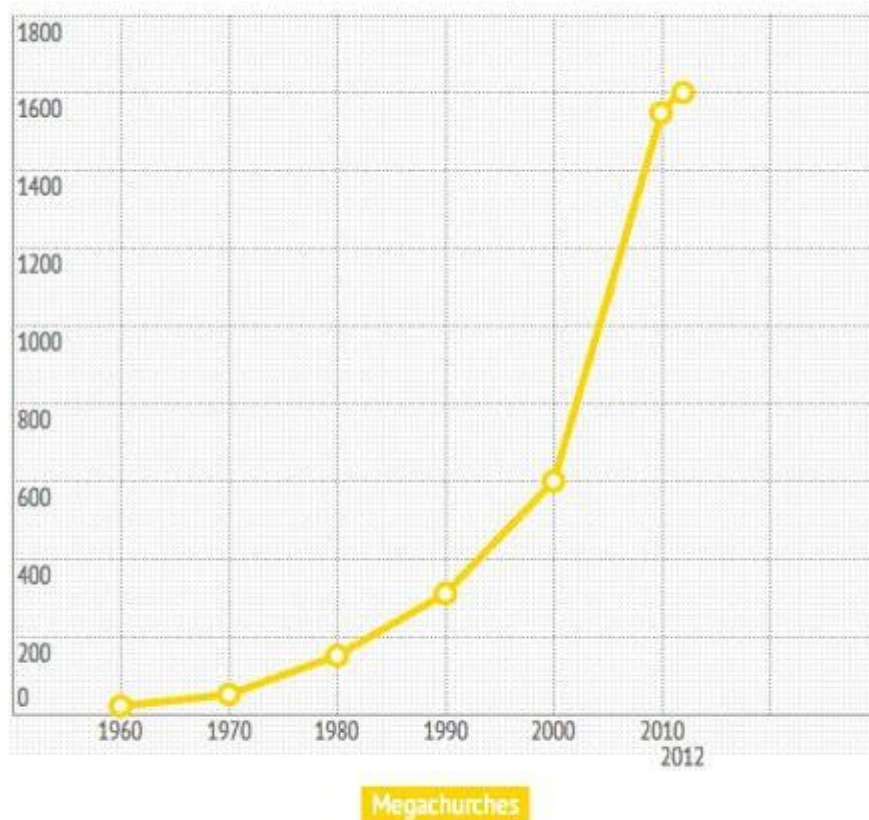
While they differ in many ways, there are notable similarities between small churches and megachurches. I have found in my personal experience and studies that the small, local church imitates the megachurch in an attempt to adopt the practices they perceive as drivers of church growth. The small church's assumption is that megachurches know the recipe for growth, so in order to grow, they must follow in the megachurch's footsteps.

The Exchange, a blog by Ed Stetzer, published an article entitled "The Explosive Growth of U. S. Megachurches, Even While Many Say Their Day is Done."⁴⁰ In this article, Stetzer says that there is major growth in megachurches and that Christians are choosing them over small churches.⁴¹ Figure 6 depicts the growth of megachurches in the United States from 1960 through 2012. The figure shows a sharp increase in the number of megachurches, especially within the last 20 years:

⁴⁰ Ed Stetzer, "The Explosive Growth of U. S. Megachurches, Even While Many Say Their Day is Done," *The Exchange Blog*, February 19, 2013, accessed February 23, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/february/explosive-growth-of-us-megachurches-even-while-many-say.html>.

⁴¹ Stetzer, "Explosive Growth."

Megachurches in the US



©2013 EdStetzer.com

Sources: John Vaughan, Elmer Towns, Warren Bird, and Scott Thumma

Figure 6. U.S. megachurch growth over 20 years. *Source:* Data from Ed Stetzer, “The Explosive Growth of U. S. Megachurches, Even While Many Say Their Day is Done,” *The Exchange Blog*, February 19, 2013.

Stetzer says that the practices occurring in smaller churches “trickle down from larger ones,” and because of their desire to drive growth, they “copy what the growing churches are doing.”⁴²

I agree with Stetzer that some small churches copy what the larger churches are doing, but in many cases, small churches do not successfully emulate megachurches

⁴² Stetzer, “Explosive Growth.”

because they lack financial stability. That is not to say that all small churches are struggling financially, however. Within large and small churches alike, there are some members who are affluent, some who are poor, some who are educated, and some who are uneducated. These financial and socioeconomic conditions play a part in just how much a church grows and how much the members are able to give in tithes and offerings.

All churches may have the ability to grow, but if their resources are not utilized effectively, some will miss this opportunity. Even churches with exceptional giving can fall victim to financial mismanagement, so it is imperative that churches develop fiscally responsible policies and procedures in order to protect and cultivate the church's financial health. Not every church will be a megachurch, and not all churches are trying to be, but ultimately, the word of God is just as effective in a small church as it is in a megachurch.

Summary

I am concerned that we have focused so much on membership numbers that we have lost sight of the heart of the membership. In choosing my topic for this thesis, I posed a question to myself: How important is the word of God to my life and my church? My research hit home for me because I preach and teach the word that I feel and know holds true to our faith and who we are as believers. It is about how we see other human beings, and that must be through the eyes of God and His word. With our preoccupation with change and growth, we unwittingly place limitations on human life based on race, wealth, and education. In doing so we miss the framework of the word – to be better human beings. Many of today's churches are losing sight of the love message of God. Could it be that we as pastors, bishops, and teachers are not doing our job?

As a pastor, it is my duty to preach and teach God's word so that my congregation is encouraged and emboldened to live a life of love and service to their communities and the world. I have clearly had to take a closer look at my own church. The growth is not as consistent as I would like, but I can say the heartbeat of the congregation is strong. When I ask myself if that is enough, my answer is no. I have work to do in the area of outreach and community service, because for us to exercise the knowledge and trust we obtain in church we must be a part of our communities. For Highway Church, in Paterson, New Jersey, the word will remain the same, but how we share that word with our communities will change. It is my charge to be more connected with my community while keeping my message authentic. From my viewpoint, the church is divided. We no longer weigh truth on the scale of God's love; instead, we have taken a very worldly approach. The time to mend this division is now, as there are many lives in our community that are waiting on a touch from God, and it is our job to reach them and make disciples.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I feel there is nothing wrong with pastors desiring pews filled with people, because the purpose of the church is to reach the masses. Jesus's mandate in Matthew 28:19 was to go and make disciples. God wants us to be saved, and in 2 Peter 3:9 the word says, "not desiring any to perish, but all to come to repentance." God wants each believer to mature into a spiritual disciple who will carry out His word. We need the church to grow so the believers can grow. All of us need to be taught the word, spiritual leadership, and fellowship with others through our worship, which will help develop spiritual virtue and a deeper love for God and His word.

A growing church is most pastors' prayer, but it is of the utmost importance that pastors set priorities in their relationship with and dedication to God's word. How we walk and talk is a reflection of what we believe and teach. Jesus must be the center of our preaching, teaching, and expression of love. Dr. Richard Krejcir, says it well: "The best growing churches in the world have solid Biblical preaching at their core. These churches do not water down the Gospel so much that you cannot see the lifted cross! They do not overemphasize the seeker and ignore discipleship!"¹

¹ Krejcir, "44 Church Growth Principles."

As I conclude my studies and research of church growth and the effect that the ancient archaic text may or may not have on that growth, I can now recapitulate and reflect on some key areas that I believe growth stems from in modern churches. These areas, if properly cultivated, will serve as catalysts for church growth.

Worship

Every element of a church service is a form of worship, but there is something about a song that touches one's heart, and that heart then touches God. I believe, and the research supports, that next to the word of God, praise worship is a highly important aspect of church growth and the overall health of the church. This form of worship gives members peace, and relieves the stress and cares of life. It gives new direction and the strength and faith to be strong. Some people attend church just for the praise and worship. It uplifts them and oftentimes penetrates the soul and reminds them that God is able to do the impossible.

When we worship, we remember who God is and who we are to Him, and that is how worship can inform us and transform us. "Real, heartfelt, God exalting adoration must be the focus of the worship service," according to Krejcir.² His point is in alignment with the scripture, as John 4:23-24 says, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth." To worship Him you must have a knowledge of who He is

² Krejcir, "44 Church Growth Principles."

because worship is a matter of the heart, directed by our love for God. When we love God, we worship Him.

Prayer

Every church should have a weekly prayer night. This gives the members an opportunity to connect with God. Coming together to pray can also give members peace of mind and help reduce the stress of their everyday lives. People are easily distracted today by everything going on around them, and these distractions sometimes make them want to give up on their walk with God. Holding a weekly prayer night provides people an opportunity to learn how to connect with Him daily so He can help them manage the trials of life. People have a need today to learn how to go to God in prayer so that they are not so easily upset by their challenges that they become overtaken by them. Most people desire to have more joy and contentment in their lives, and teaching them to pray will help them rely on God to fulfil them as a person. Prayer can change us and any situation we may find ourselves in. Therefore, it is essential that pastors and leaders continually instill in their members the importance of prayer. The pastor should always be praying for his family, for his church family, and for what God would have him minister to them. Krejcir agrees that prayer is critical, and that “A healthy church is prayerful in all of the aspects of church life and ministry.”³

³ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

Congregation

Healthy, growing churches are made up of children, young adults, adults and seniors. I think it is fair to say that most children attend church based on the attendance of their parents or grandparents. Therefore, churches should make sure they have activities and classes available so the children can grow and feel like they are part of something. Young adults have more freedom and liberties because they drive their own cars or take public transportation, so that makes it little easier for them to come to church. However, at the young adult stage, many of them are working and attending school, which can leave them lacking in their church attendance. This is a critical time in young adult's life, because they are faced with growing responsibilities and liberties, and they are faced with many important decisions. They are coming in contact with so many different issues and people that knowing who they are and what they believe is very important. Therefore, it imperative that pastors and leaders make the young adult age group a priority so they will want to be involved in church. Research has shown that churches that intentionally endeavor to engage young adults have a larger percentage of young adults in their congregations.⁴

Keeping young adults engaged will deter them from getting distracted by worldly actives and the wrong company. It is also important that pastors and leaders cover the young adults in prayer, praying for them continually to make the right decisions and the right friends.

⁴ Thumma and Bird, "Recent Shifts."

As for the adults, they are the more active and faithful members of the church. They are the movers and shakers of the church. Most things get done in a church by this age group. Although they typically have family, work and many other responsibilities, they still make it a point to be faithful in their attendance and financial contributions to the church. This group is vital to most churches and the churches' growth.

The seniors are the seasoned, committed members of the church, but sometimes due to illness and other disadvantages their attendance declines. Still, it is up to the pastor and leaders to make sure the seniors are included in the decision-making processes of the church, and they should be constantly reassured that they are loved, valued, and needed. There should always be a committee in place to help this group, because in many cases the church is the only family they have left and they have no one else to depend on.

All of these age groups contribute to the church's growth in some way, so the church has to take an inclusive approach in designing its departments and programs. Members want to be in a church where the pastor and leaders have a heart for the people. When they feel this kind of connection, they will feel more needed, get more involved, and recruit other members to come be a part of the same place that has given them a sense of belonging.

Problems and Conflicts

How pastors and leaders handle problems and conflicts will either give members confidence in the leaders and the church or it will cause them to look for another church. God is not the author of confusion, and He will bless the members and the church, but

pastors have to set the tone for their churches. They cannot be constantly caught up in drama, problems, and confusion. People dislike being in churches where the pastor and first lady are not on the same page or leadership is fighting against one another. Fighting churches are not growing churches. Krejcir believes that the primary reason people stop attending a church is due to conflict and gossip, citing James 3:5-6, which says that the tongue “is a fire, a world of iniquity.”⁵ Figure 7 illustrates Krejcir’s findings on the reasons people leave a church:

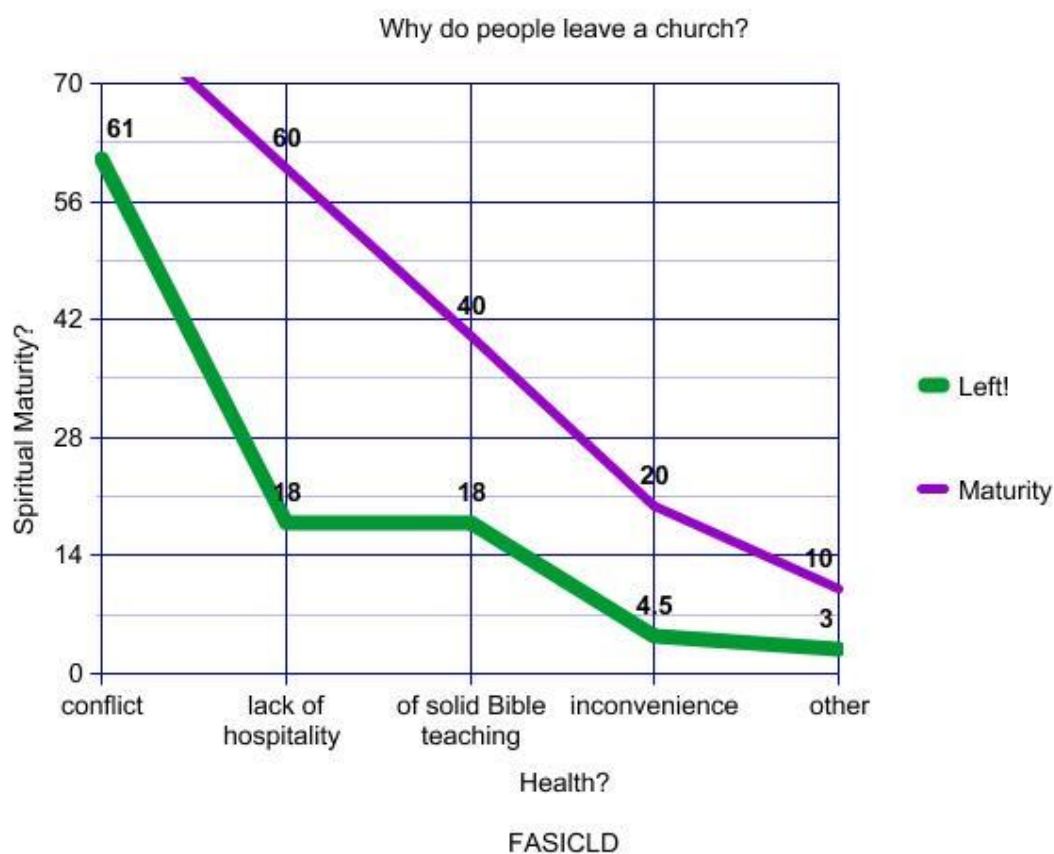


Figure 7. Why people leave churches. *Source:* Data from Richard Krejcir, “Church Growth Research Graphs and Statistics: The Statistical Overview of Fifteen Years of Research, Asking Why Churches Fail,” *Into Thy Word Ministries*, 2006.

⁵ Krejcir, “44 Church Growth Principles.”

Among the top reasons people leave churches are lack of conflict management, lack of hospitality, lack of solid Bible teaching, and inconvenience.⁶ To attract, retain, and grow a church, it is important for the members to see maturity, sober living, positivity and leaders who live out what they preach. Members' faith in what pastors say comes from the demonstration of God's word in their lives. When members see discipline, control and focus in their pastor and leaders, it gives them a good idea of what is acceptable and what is not. If a pastor has a leader who is always causing problems, the pastor must weigh how the matter is being perceived by the members. In some instances, pastors may have to make changes in leadership for the betterment of their members and church. Where there is unity there is strength, so churches should make every effort to follow a positive model for conflict resolution.

Location

Location is very important, and that is why when starting or building a church we have to consider more than just the space available or how good of a deal we can get on the land or property. Having a shortsighted view can lead to the wrong decision. There are many factors to consider when starting a church. Will it be in the city or in the suburbs? Will there be ample parking for the members who drive cars? Is there public transportation nearby? Is there space for future growth? How many churches are already in the area? What are the housing, schools and shopping areas like? At what rate are people moving in or out?

⁶ Krejcir, "Church Growth Statistics."

I am very much aware that demographics play an important role in the growth of a church. The reality is that there are many factors that affect who we draw to our churches. It is important to realize that we have churches set in areas that are very affluent, where members' paychecks put them in tax brackets that some people only dream about, while other churches are located in areas where people are living paycheck to paycheck, unable to make ends meet. Since local churches are made up of so many different demographics, races, and economic statuses, I can only say that each pastor must have the faith to believe they can win the world for Christ. If they cannot win the world for Christ, at least they can impact part of the world for Him. The local church is growing and members are excited about God and what He is doing in and through them. By no means should we cast doubt on their love for God and the word.

Community Outreach

The word says in Acts 2:47 that "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." Therefore, we have to have strong outreach programs in our churches with a focus on evangelism. These programs should be directed by willing leaders with a desire to reach out to others to share God's word so that all may come to repentance. Growing a church may or may not have an impact on the local community, but churches must remember that Jesus consistently took His ministry to the people. The gospel accounts are filled with His interactions while he was out among the people. It is true that He did not have a modern church to lead and organize like pastors and leaders do today, but Jesus certainly had His own pressures to deal with, yet He always remained with the people.

The bottom line is that when people begin to see, sense and experience that the church cares about them, their perspective changes about who the church is in the community. This impacts their receptivity to the church's mission and the word of God. Perhaps some individuals may never attend the church, but observation and experience says that God is pleased with this kind of ministry and ultimately it does draw people to the church.

It is important for us to intentionally leverage our time, energy, and resources, along with whatever "success" God gives us, back out into the community rather than become fully consumed with those who already know Jesus. It is true that Christians will come to a church because what we offer is tried and true and comfortable, and there is nothing wrong with that. It is a simple fact that when churches get larger and really good at what they do, they often attract more Christians. But when a church serves people who are hurting, or who feel far away from God, that expression of compassion may not directly help the church, but the act of service is definitely aligning with the heart of God.

This is how churches stay relevant – by effecting change in the people and in the surrounding community so that people take notice and begin to understand that they matter to the church. Therefore, reaching the un-churched and impacting the community requires out-of-the-box thinking and compassion and a willingness to challenge the status quo to effect change.

Christ Builds His Church

I believe that with these important components in place our churches will grow. While all of these growth factors are certainly significant, it is also important to recognize

that church growth is not all about the numbers. Some church memberships may be growing weekly, but is there spiritual maturity? Are the members active? Does each member know their gift? Do they have an understanding of God's word, and are they applying it to their daily lives? We must also remember that God gives the increase. There must be obedience to God's word for there to be healthy growth, so our responsibility is to first lay a strong foundation that is built on His word.

The reality is that Jesus is the one who builds His church. In Matthew 16:18, He says, "I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." There are many different books, teachings and materials available to study on how to grow churches, but we cannot lose sight of Jesus and His love. The word is clear in Psalm 127:1, which reads, "unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it." As pastors we have to remain focused on living and preaching Jesus. If Jesus is effectively represented in our lives and churches, He will draw the crowd. We can't let our personalities take God's glory. His presence will have the drawing power to bring souls to His churches. John 12:32 says, "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me." So, if we put Jesus on display and give Him center stage, our churches have to grow, for this is the climate that creates the opportunity for growth. We must plant seeds of growth through love and allow them to yield offspring.

The word says in Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." The fruit of the spirit working in our churches is essential to growth. That fruit will be on display to our family, friends and co-workers, so in essence, the members in the pew are our most effective representatives. Getting members there is one thing; getting them to stay is

another. To retain and grow church membership, we must create avenues for visitors to develop relationships and get involved in all areas of ministry. This will stop the revolving door from spinning and start growing the church.

As pastors minister to their congregations the ancient archaic text, it becomes crystal clear that the word of God is just as relevant today as it was in ancient times. It may be old, but it is effective and needed today. The scripture holds true in John 15:7, which says, “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you shall ask whatever you wish, and to you it will come to pass.” There are pastors all over this world living out this word and God is blessing their ministries.

Let us not be confused – the word may be old but it is not obsolete; it is alive in each believer. The word of God gives us all the needed instructions to navigate through this life and be a light in a dark world. It is embedded into our Christian upbringing that we allow adequate time for the word because it takes priority over everything.

The Word of God

The word of God, better known as the ancient archaic text, is still relevant and essential in all of our lives. In my studies and research, I found that some churches place emphasis on things other than the word. The word of God is like dynamite; it is capable of destroying anything that would hinder us or try to stop us from doing God’s will and serving Him. It also clears the way for something new. We all face obstacles and problems, and at times it may feel like everything is closing in on us. It is at those times that we have to let God’s word do what it is intended to do so that we do not remain discouraged and dysfunctional.

Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” It is important for believers, when going through difficult times, to speak the word of God and speak it with authority. Release it into the atmosphere and trust and know that God will bring it to pass. We must let the word serve as a cleansing agent in our lives. It is during times when we have fallen short of His word and we are confused about what to do that we should remember Ephesians 5:26-27, which says, “That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word. That He might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” We must allow the word to penetrate our hearts and minds and cleanse us from all impurities so we can better serve God and His people.

The word gives us that hope in Romans 15:4, which says, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” At times when we do not feel like reading God’s word, all we need to do is hear His word and it will give us hope to go on, and it will bring us comfort and encouragement. The word gives direction, as Psalms 119:105 says, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” The word will shine a light on our path so that we will know the direction God wants us to go, and that light will be an example to dying men and women that God is able to direct us all.

His word will give meaning to our lives, for all of us have a purpose and the word will give clarity to that purpose. John 3:17 says, “For God sent not His Son into the

world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.” Jesus had a purpose to fulfill in his time here on earth, and we have a purpose to fulfill as well. As we grow and mature, it is important that we allow God’s word to be the main ingredient by which we grow. For us to grow spiritually we must stay connected to the word. To grow naturally we need food, and to grow spiritually we need God’s word. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:2, “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby,” and in order to thrive, we will need solid food. The word will help us defeat the enemy in our lives.

As Christians we are in a battle, and to be victorious, we have to use God’s word. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” Our weapon of choice must be the word, because we have victory over the enemy through the word. Luke 22:31-32 says, “behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” So, as there is victory in our lives, we must help our brothers and sister to be strong in the word. It is vitally important that our faith grows. For us to please God, we need the faith that comes from the word. Romans 10:17 says, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” We must not only study the word but we also have to hear God’s word proclaimed in church.

So, I would say the word of God should be our individual and church’s priority, to live by and grow that we may be faithful and pleasing to Him. For pastors and leaders to make this word that is so relevant today apply to each man and woman, we have to lend

an ear of compassion and love to a dying world. We need our faith in action to be aware of the needs of our communities and members. The word will continue to reveal regardless of the condition the world is in. Hatred has reared its ugly head and it is up to the people of God to be an example of God's love. We are not here to judge, but to love, and we can do more with His word and love than the enemy can do with hatred and guns.

As I go forward in my own life and ministry, the transformational effect of this study will be a refreshed approach to the way I preach and teach the word of God. This study has not only reinforced what I already knew to be true, but it has also stoked the fire inside me that yearns for even more knowledge and understanding of how I can have the greatest impact as a leader and servant of God. Indeed, as a preacher and a leader, I've been transformed – my eyes, my heart, and my soul have been opened to new and different ways of approaching the way I do ministry, and ultimately, the way I do life.

I want to compel believers to make God's word a priority each day and live His word each day that we may better serve this world. There are different approaches to the word, but the competency and responsibility of it must be universal. All of us are not called to preach, teach, or sing, but God can make each of us a great blessing to someone's life, so let us get in the word and let Him use us all. Trust that He will bless our lives and establish us.

APPENDIX 1
DATA AND FORMS

Q & A Interview

1. When did you start your ministry?
2. Is this your original location?
3. What was the membership at that time?
4. Two years later what was the membership?
5. When did you notice a major growth was taking place?
6. How important is location to growth?
7. Would you say the majority of your members live in the area or commute?
8. Can you say that the word is key in the growth or what part does it play?
9. What's the one thing you will say is important to any church's growth?
10. What's your church membership today?

Questionnaire for Members of the Kingdom in the Valley Christian Church

1. What was your church experience prior to coming and joining KIVCC?
2. Was this your first church experience?
3. What was your religious background prior to coming to KIVCC?
4. If applicable, name the last churches you were a part of in the past five years.
5. Did you attend church here in Phoenix, AZ, or did you move from a different state or country?
6. How did you hear about KIVCC?
7. What do you feel was a major factor that caused you to join the ministry?
8. Why do you attend KIVCC?
9. Was the transition from visitor to member any easy process?
10. Is the church's statement of faith consistent with the Bible's teachings?
11. Did the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ cause you to join this church?
12. What do you think about the Pastors' preaching? Did that help your decision to join the ministry?
13. Did the music and worship experience outside of the preached word help you make a decision to join the ministry?
14. Do you have a copy of the church doctrine and do you feel that it is something easy to live by?
15. Do you feel that the friendliness of the people of the church influenced your decision to join the church?
16. Did your children help you make the decision to join this ministry?

17. Did the Children and Youth ministries at KIVCC factor into your family becoming members of KIVCC?
18. Do you tell other people about KIVCC?
19. Do you feel comfortable worshipping with different ethnic groups?
20. How do you like being a part of the megachurch experience at KIVCC?

APPENDIX 2

SELECTED ARTICLES ON MEGACHURCH GROWTH

[Home](#) > [2013](#) > [February](#)

FEB 19, 2013
[LEADERSHIP](#)

The Explosive Growth of U.S. Megachurches, Even While Many Say Their Day is Done

ED STETZER

One of the more popular series last year on the blog dealt with the question "[Can Megachurches be Missional?](#)" It was part of a continuing-- and important-- dialogue within the Christian world.

Several people have written and researched at length the trends found in megachurches. Whether it is our [LifeWay Research/Outreach Magazine list of the 100 Largest Churches in America](#) or [John Vaughan's helpful research](#), Elmer Towns' articles for *Christian Life*, or what [Warren Bird](#) and [Scott Thumma](#) are researching, megachurches are of interest to many.

The fact is that many practices found in smaller churches trickle down from larger ones, but also because we are a numbers-oriented culture-- we want our church to grow, so we try to copy what the growing churches are doing.

While imitation is often the greatest form of flattery and many copy their methods, their terminology, and their programs, megachurches tend to face scrutiny-- some fair and some unfair. In the process, several unhelpful things are said about them either out of jealousy or ignorance. One piece of misinformation spread about megachurches is that they are a dying breed.

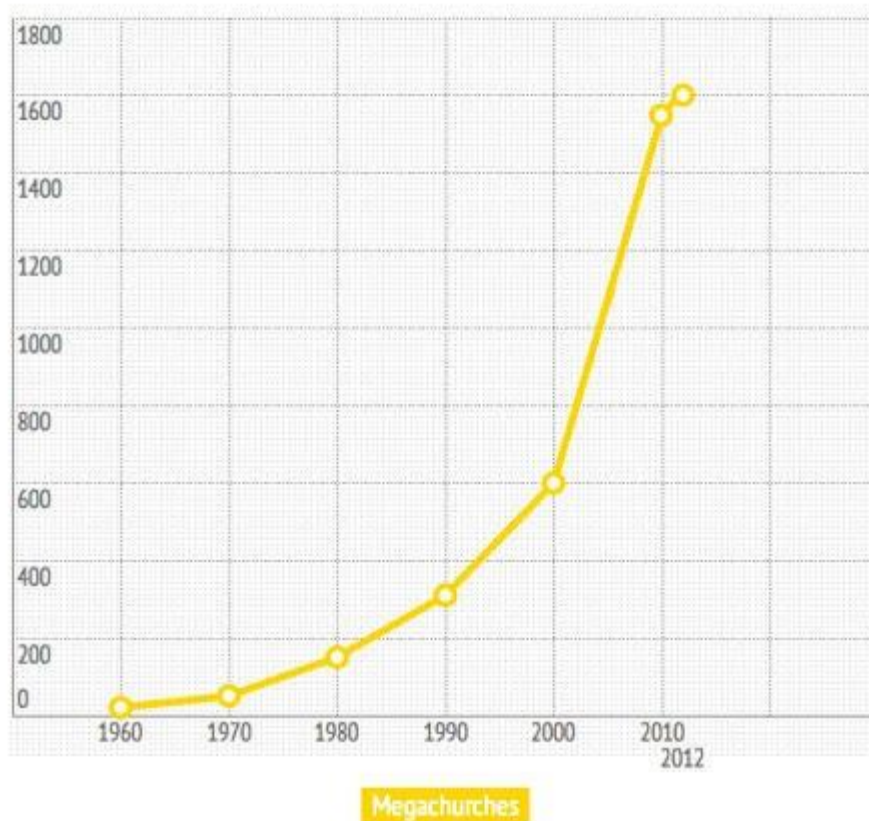
I have heard this over and over again-- that the megachurch is dying out. That people are wising up and getting into organic churches. That the mindless robots who blindly follow a the charlatan megachurch pastor have seen the light. The day of the megachurch is done.

One problem: the claims are just not true (and some of it is quite insulting to many passionate believers who attend megachurches [who actually have higher levels of involvement and service according to the best research](#)).

Facts are our friends-- and we need some here. And the fact that Christians are choosing megachurches-- and megachurches are thriving-- is not a matter of debate, it is simply a matter of math. (This is not to say that there are issues to consider, but it is helpful to get this fact straight.)

So, the number of megachurches is not declining. Recent analysis from Scott Thumma and Warren Bird show the opposite, actually. There are more megachurches every year, not less. And, they have exploded in number in the last few decades.

Megachurches in the US



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Sources: John Vaughan, Elmer Towns, Warren Bird, and Scott Thumma

You are entitled to your opinion about megachurches, but not to your own facts. The fact is, they are not going away. Instead, they keep coming.

The graphic might show a slowdown in the last two years from the explosive growth (from explosive to electric?) we saw over the past decade, but Warren and I don't think so (yet). Two years does not make a trend, and the trend is quite remarkable when it comes of the number of megachurches.

For example:

- The number of megachurches in America has nearly doubled during every decade over the last half century.
- In 1960, there was 1 megachurch for every 7.5 million Americans. In 2010, there was one for every 200,000 Americans.
- There are as many megachurches today in the greater Nashville area as there were in the entire country in 1960.

Now, I don't think that every megachurch is good-- I assure you, I think some are quite terrible and fulfill every stereotype out there. Yet, there are also some great ones, and for that I am thankful. I want to understand them more and, when possible, to encourage them on their journey.

We are actually considering some learning communities (with D.Min. credit available) for megachurch pastors who want a peer group to considering that question. More soon on that, but for now... you have the facts.

Megachurch Trends



The number of megachurches in the United States has grown tremendously over the past 20 years, which suggests this innovative American institution has taken root and is thriving.

In 1990, the United States had one megachurch per 4 million people but by 2005 the terrain had shifted to four megachurches per one million Americans.

Recent studies, by the [Hartford Institute for Religion Research](#) and the Dallas-based church resource center [Leadership Network](#), have mapped the dramatic growth of Protestant churches in the United States with a weekly attendance of 2,000 people or more. Many of these churches are located in the South and in the West, and nearly all of them worship in a contemporary style that embraces the latest technology.

[\(Read: "The Definition of a Megachurch"\)](#)

In 1970 approximately 50 such churches existed, growing to 150 by 1980, 310 in 1990 and at least 600 by 2000. The number doubled to 1210 by 2005. This rapid growth has slowed slightly with an estimate of over 1350 US megachurches currently. This dramatic increase surprised researchers and confirmed their hunch that the movement is not only popular, but spreading rapidly.

People have said, "This is a baby-boom phenomenon. The megachurches reached their apex and are waning," said Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, the lead researcher. "I never believed that. But I did underestimate how rapidly the phenomenon was spreading."

In addition to the growing numbers of megachurches, the study found individual congregations grew quite rapidly. The average weekly attendance at megachurches rose to 3,585 in 2005 and 4142 in 2008,

compared to average attendance of 2,279 people megachurches reported in 2000. These studies found that the more recently a megachurch was founded, the more rapidly it was growing and the larger the average size of the worship attendance. This may indicate that these recently founded churches are born with a large church model in mind and are taking advantage of the lessons of older megachurches, borrowing their strategies to boost attendance. [Click here for more specifics about the megachurch research.](#)

Although megachurches still account for less than half of 1 percent of all congregations in the United States, they are drawing an increasing share of members, estimated at 7 to 10 percent of all Protestant worshippers on any given week. [A searchable database of megachurches is available here.](#)

"If all megachurches together formed one denomination," said Warren Bird, director of research at the Leadership Network, "they would be the fifth-largest Protestant body."

In nearly all megachurches the senior pastor is a main attraction and is one of the primary draws for new members. Nearly all megachurches use electric guitars and drums, as well as visual projection equipment. Ninety percent of megachurches described their services as spiritually alive, joyful, inspirational, and thought-provoking.

"Whatever they're doing in worship, it is clearly resonating with a lot of contemporary folks," said Thumma. "This is what many people want in terms of the presentation of the Gospel."

Megachurches share other characteristics. Between 35 and 40 percent of these churches are non-denominational. Many others minimize their denominational ties, most obviously by dropping the affiliation from the church's name. Theologically, 65 percent of the churches chose the designation "Evangelical" and another 11 percent "Pentecostal or Charismatic." Politically, 33 percent of respondents identified themselves as predominantly conservative, and another 44 percent said they were somewhat conservative.

Still, the researchers caution that not all megachurches are alike. Older megachurches do not look like newer ones and larger ones function differently than smaller one. Likewise, the race of the pastor makes

some difference as does the theological orientation of the church. Therefore, like with every shifting terrain, the mapping of this phenomenon must continue.

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