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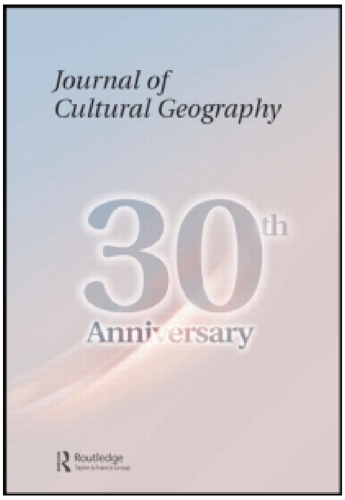

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Geographies of megachurches in the United States

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Perhaps the most rapidly growing element of the American religious landscape is the megachurch, commonly taken to mean religious establishments with 2,000 or more attendees. Typically Protestant in affiliation, although many are non-denominational, megachurches have grown explosively in the US. This paper situates megachurches within the broader context of religion in the US, and the literature on the geography of religion. It begins with a detailed examination of the causes of megachurches' rapid growth, focusing on the business-like model of religion that they offer. Second, using data from 2005, it explores their geographic distribution, noting their suburban, metropolitan and Sunbelt orientation; as an aside, it includes their location within political conservative jurisdictions. Third, it offers three brief case studies of black and white megachurches in the Chicago, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Atlanta metropolitan regions. The conclusion points to their growing presence internationally.

Keywords: megachurches; geography of religion; urban cultural geography

Long relegated to the margins of human geography, the geography of religion has recently enjoyed an important resurrection (Kong 1990, 2001; Tong and Kong 2000; Zelinsky 2001; Hervieu-Léger 2002; Stump 2008; Warf and Winsberg 2008). Largely ignored for decades, the spatiality of religion has undergone a sustained re-examination (Proctor 2006). In part, the renewed interest in geography reflects the surge in global religious fundamentalism since the end of the cold war (Stump 2000). Within the US, it also reflects the political power of religious conservatives.

The US is an exceptional laboratory in which to study the geography of religion for several reasons. By virtue of sustained immigration from various origins as well as the emergence of "home-grown" faiths (e.g., the Latter-day Saints, or Mormons), the country is arguably the most religiously diverse in the world (Eck 2001). In addition, the country is unique among economically advanced nations in the degree of its religiosity, or as Kohut and Stokes (2006, p. 103) put it:

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> By almost every measure, the United States is the most religious rich nation in the world. Indeed, it is the only religious rich nation in the world. … Americans are more religious than other wealthy, educated peoples because they live in a more open religious market, with more churches and greater variety of religious perspectives competing for their devotion. With more options, Americans have blossomed into great consumers of religion. Secular Europeans, in contrast, live in an uncompetitive market.

The religiosity of Americans may reflect, among other things, the intense competition among different faiths and denominations generated by the First Amendment and associated separation of church and state. It may also be related to the relatively low levels of public social services found in the US, in which case resort to private, faith-based services is understandable.

An increasingly important part of contemporary American religion is the megachurch, stereotypically held to be a suburban Protestant church, theologically evangelical in orientation, whose attendees may be 10, 20, or even 100 times more numerous than traditional churches. Their emphasis differs from the role played by traditional churches since it is more heavily oriented to servicing their members' needs and interests rather than adhering to a strict theological message. Megachurches often conduct market surveys in order to more efficiently meet the demands of their congregants.

To date, geographers have not examined the rise or spatial distribution of this phenomenon. This paper attempts to fill that void. It opens by situating megachurches within the context of the American religious landscape, including its diversity, religiosity, and the growth of consumerist forms of religious worship. Second, it turns to the empirical distribution of megachurches, starting with summary statistics of their size, denominational composition, and location within the urban hierarchy. Third, it maps the location of megachurches and their attendees by county. Fourth, it offers three short case studies, vignettes of megachurches in the Chicago, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Atlanta metropolitan regions, to disclose their characteristics and locational tendencies in more detail. The conclusion points to the significance of megachurches internationally.

Megachurches and the religious landscapes of the United States

Megachurches are typically defined in large part by their enormous size (Vaughn 1993; Thumma 1996; Chaves 2006; Thumma, Travis and Warren 2007; Ellingson 2007). Definitions vary, but usually rely on their large numbers of attendees, their most outstanding characteristic. Typically, megachurches are defined as having a minimum of 2,000 members, and some reach 10,000; the nation's largest "gigachurch", in Houston, exceeds

35,000. Most are housed in large, modern-looking buildings with open, attractive architectural styles inside and out (Figure 1).

Central to understanding megachurches is their spectacular rate of growth. Indeed, the size and growth of megachurch congregations is a major measure of their success. In 1970, there were only 50 megachurches in the country; in 1980, 150; in 1990, more than 300; and in 2005, roughly 1,310, an average annual growth rate of 10%. Collectively, they represent about 2% of all Protestant churches in the US, (Loveland and Wheeler 2003), and a much larger share of attendees. The number of megachurches doubled between 2000 and 2005, and their average size increased by 47%.

The causes for the growth of megachurches include the gradual drift toward secularism to be found within many sectors of American society,

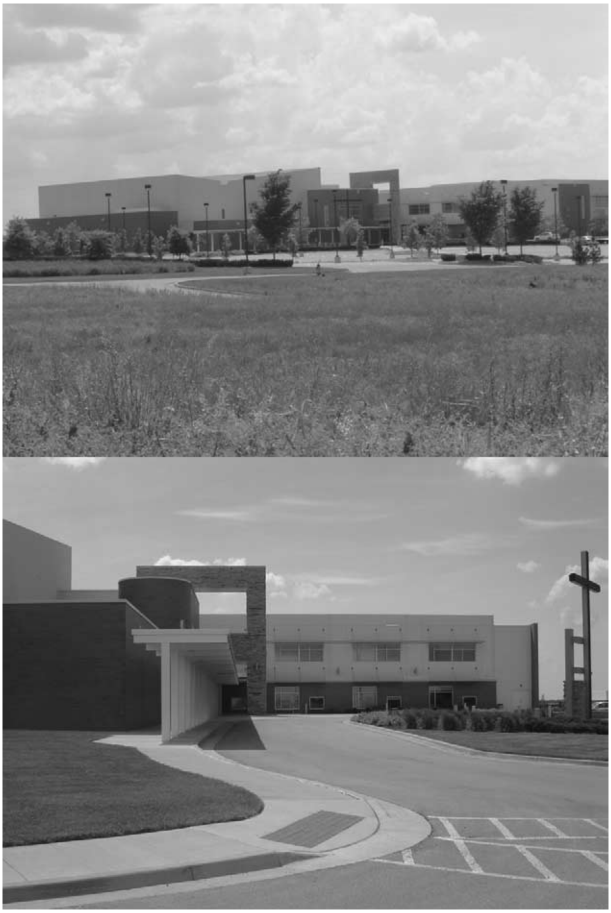

Figure 1. Westside Family Church, Kansas City. Source: authors.

a trend that has led traditional mainline Protestant churches to shrink in size as many adherents switch denominations (Ellingson 2007). The intense hyper-individualism characteristic of contemporary American culture and associated decay in communal social structures (Putnam 1993) may be a major force driving the revival of religion in the US, generally, and megachurches in particular, which stress social as much as theological issues. Because churches in the US, are most people's most important civic organization, they link political life to social life, promoting civic virtues, community and charitable service, and organizational skills (e.g., volunteer work, fundraising), and enhancing political consciousness (albeit in several possible directions). Religious affiliation forges social connectedness and dense, cooperative networks that allow members to practice such skills and generate social capital. In the rapidly growing suburbs and exurbs in which most megachurches are located, these ties are central to many people's overall happiness and quality of life.

Moreover, megachurches are well positioned to take advantage of economies of scale in the provision of religious as well as social services (Stonebraker 1993). Most offer modern architecture and ample parking, book stores, cafes and food courts, sports facilities, recreational outlets, and ancillary services such as psychological counseling, religious education classes, choirs, day-care facilities, or youth outreach programs, and often broadcast on local public-access television stations (Fitzgerald 2007). Typically, they offer a welcoming environment that makes it easy for "seekers" to join. Many offer "toned down," undemanding, multi-denominational approaches centered on positive spiritual, therapeutic messages rather than the guilt-laden doctrines characteristic of many traditional (especially Protestant) denominations. Services tend to the spectacular, with impressive use of lights and electronic music rather than hellfire-and-brimstone preaching, and encourage casual dress codes, making attendance as much a social event as a spiritual one (Axtman 2003). Ellingson (2007) maintains that megachurches offer a pragmatic and consumerist approach to religion that is more in keeping with contemporary American culture than many traditional denominations. As Fitzgerald (2007, p. 48) notes, "Megachurches have developed as they have in part because most of their pastors aim to attract people from a variety of religious backgrounds." Many megachurches are explicitly and aggressively multi-ethnic in character, and in their efforts to enlarge their congregation, often display these qualities on the Internet through elaborate webpages, podcasts, and YouTube videos.

Although megachurches do their best to establish close personal ties with their followers, critics frequently bemoan the loss of intimacy that they may entail. One may point to their ability to adapt religion to a culture in which entertainment has become the standard to which all discourses must aspire (Postman 1985), a view that underscores the appeal of televangelists and "gospel entrepreneurs." Some critics compare

"McChurches" to Walmart (Liu 2003; *Business Week 2005*), citing their secular, if highly successful, homogenized and unapologetic business models that succeed at the expense of smaller congregations. The business magazine *Forbes* has referred to "megapastors" as "essentially CEOs who successfully address many of the same issues that challenge their business brethren" (Buss 2007). Megachurches, in this reading, offer a flexible, consumerist approach to theology devoid of the rigor and sacrifice often demanded by traditional churches (Twitchell 2004), while simultaneously serving as havens for a moral community in an ostensibly evermore secularized society. Megachurches can be viewed as "the Christian version of the gated community" (Leigh Brown 2002). In this sense, megachurches' business models have been highly successful in expanding their "market share" of the American "religious marketplace" (Fink and Stark 2005).

Prominent examples of megachurches include Rick Warren's Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California; Joel Osteen's Lakewood Community Church in Houston, Texas; and Billy Hybell's Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago. Warren, author of the phenomenally popular volume *The Purpose-Driven Life* (2002), one of the best selling nonfiction books in history, employs a variety of strategies to recruit members, including: youth ministries; substance abuse programs; targeted mailings to specific socioeconomic niches based on demographic profiles; outreach programs to potential recruits at home, parks, and community centers; and Spanish language services. Black megachurches, such as T.D. Jakes' The Potter's House and Creflo Dollar's World Changers, use many of these strategies to attract congregants, but have gained much attention by preaching what has come to be called the "prosperity gospel," which emphasizes financial success over theological purity.

Because large numbers of people are involved, as well as considerable expenditures, megachurches can have significant economic as well as ideological impacts (Henriques and Lehren 2007). The average megachurch has an annual budget of $4.6 million, and larger churches may have funds of $20 million or even much more (Kroll 2003), some of which are acquired through tithing. For example, Lakewood Church in Houston, with an annual income of $70 million dollars, recently purchased the former Compaq Center for $90 million (http://www.americanpopularculture.com 2008). Many have staff that can range as high as 250 people, including some with M.B.A. degrees. Larger megachurches purchase radio and television advertising time, as well as printing and publishing, cleaning, and legal services, and may operate music recording studios (Kroll 2003). Typically, they rent or purchase space in shopping malls, empty corporate buildings, armories, and even sports stadia, and including bookstores and eating establishments (James 2003). Some, such as World Changers Ministries, have their own record label and graphic design suites. Others even offer product placements in pastor's sermons (Knowledge@Wharton 2006). Many have satellite campuses dispersed throughout their communities, and in a few cases, even in other states (*Business Week 2005*). Churches are exempt from income, sales, and property taxes, although they pay corporate income taxes on operations not directly related to their religious, educational, or charitable goals. Indeed, so corporatist has this model of religion become that there exists a publicly-traded company, Kingdom Ventures, whose sole purpose is to assist their financial growth. These effects vary with the size of the church as well as the nature of the community in which it is situated. In some low-income urban communities, megachurches act as *de facto* economic development agencies. As Karnes *et al*. (2007, p. 263) note:

> Churches in wealthy neighborhoods are not likely to have a significant impact on the living situations or personal circumstances of local residents, in terms of the services that they themselves provide. Churches in more modest neighborhoods have far greater potential to influence the local community's social service delivery structure. These are not trivial concerns.

The popularity of megachurches also reflects, among other factors, the increased visibility and power of conservative religious forces (Wilcox 1992; Hackett 2003; Heineman 1998; Phillips 2006). Much of the debate in this regard centers on issues such as prayer in the schools, reproductive rights and contraception, sex education, tolerance of homosexuality, the teaching of evolution, stem cell research, and a variety of other important topics that are often loosely lumped under the phrase "moral values." Such issues often assume political prominence among an economically distressed middle class: as Jacobs (2006) notes, the marriage of political and religious conservatives occurred precisely at the historic moment in which American economic and political hegemony was contested internationally, a moment in which multiculturalism and the postmodern relativity of moral values achieved widespread popularity. As a result, religion has become one of the most striking and important dimensions of US, politics, rivaling or exceeding the significance of class, race, or gender in determining electoral turnout and outcomes. Megachurches are important moments in the intersections of religion and conservative politics in the US, Aleksic (2007) suggests that "the megachurch can in fact be characterized as an ideal community of the American Christian Right: a planned collective environment governed in accordance not only with evangelical church doctrine, but also with a conservative social and political ethos." While many megachurches are open-minded in their approach to theological issues and do not subscribe to narrow interpretations of Christian doctrine, most are politically conservative, although not all engage in overtly political behavior.

Data and summary statistics

Data for this paper were drawn from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (http://hirr.hartsem.edu) on 1,310 megachurches in 2005. Unfortunately, the data do not include Catholics, nor do they allow for a temporal analysis. Moreover, since church attendance is reported by the churches themselves, the data may not be of the highest accuracy: some institutions may inflate their membership numbers. However, these data do represent the largest and most comprehensive set of information about American megachurches in existence.

Collectively, these institutions were the locus of worship for more than 4.5 million people (Table 1). While they ranged in size between 1,300 and 30,000 attendees, the median number was 3,475, and the vast majority has less than 5,000 members. Roughly 50 megachurches had 10,000 or more members, but only three exceeded 20,000 attendees.

Denominationally, megachurches tend to be evangelical Protestant or Pentecostal in theological orientation, although one-third are explicitly non-denominational or multi-denominational. Baptists (including Southern Baptists) comprise the largest single denomination of American megachurches, with 26% (Table 2), followed by unspecified Christian and nondenominational ones.

The distribution of megachurches by county population size reflects the profoundly urban locational bias of this institution (Table 3). The most common size category was counties of over one million inhabitants (477 churches, or 36%), indicating that megachurches are predominantly metropolitan institutions. Indeed, to attract sufficient numbers of adherents to qualify as a megachurch, locations in the top-most tiers of

Table 1. Size distribution of US megachurches.

Size	No. of Churches	% of Churches	Total Attendees	% of Attendees
<2,000	109	8.3	196,850	4.3
2,000–2,999	648	49.5	1,461,302	32.1
3,000–3,999	221	16.9	712,963	15.7
4,000–4,999	131	10.0	554,410	12.2
5,000–5,999	58	4.4	299,920	6.6
6,000–6,999	41	3.1	252,120	5.5
7,000–7,999	25	1.9	183,620	4.0
8,000–8,999	19	1.5	154,600	3.4
9,000–9,999	8	0.6	72,810	1.6
10,000–14,999	34	2.6	377,680	8.3
15,000–19,999	13	1.0	215,257	4.7
20,000–30,000	3	0.2	72,000	1.6
Total	1,310	100.0	4,553,532	100.0

Source: calculated by authors.

Table 2. Denominational affiliation of US megachurches.

Denomination	Number	%
Assemblies of God	79	6
Baptist	341	26
Calvary Chapel	52	4
Church of Christ	13	1
Lutheran	13	1
Methodist	66	5
Non-denominational	445	34
Unspecified Christian	301	23
Total	1310	100

Source: calculated by authors.

the urban hierarchy are necessary, but not inevitable. The number of megachurches declines monotonically toward lower tiers of the urban system, and only 18, or 1.3%, are found in nonmetropolitan counties with less than 50,000 inhabitants. Despite the generally higher levels of religiosity of rural areas and small towns in comparison to large urban conurbations, most such places simply lack the requisite population to generate sufficient attendees necessary to support a megachurch. A *New York Times* map identified Atlanta as having the largest number of megachurches per 100,000 people (Lehren and Ericson 2007). Other large metropolitan areas with high ratios of megachurches to population were Washington, DC and Dallas-Ft. Worth. Ratios were significantly lower in northeastern and Midwestern metropolitan areas, notably Boston, New York, and Chicago.

The geography of American megachurches

Surprisingly, the spatiality of megachurches has received remarkably little attention. Karnes et al. (2007) provide a broad overview, noting that the bulk are concentrated in the South and West, testifying to their Sunbelt

Table 3. Distribution of megachurches by population of county.

County Population	No. of Churches	%
>1,000,000	477	36.4
500,000–1,000,000	349	26.6
250,000–499,999	238	18.2
100,000–250,000	192	14.7
50,000–100,000	36	2.7
<50,000	18	1.4
Total	1,310	100.0

Source: calculated by authors

origins. However, Karnes *et al.'s* analysis is impoverished by its inadequate spatiality, which is confined to a few regression equations and lacks a single map. Statistically, megachurches are highly correlated with family income and a middle class clientele. Megachurches are a predominantly suburban and exurban phenomenon, locating in places accessible mostly (or only) by automobile, with ample parking, often near highway intersections (Eiesland 1997, 2000). Suburban locations are often home to substantial numbers of middle class families with children, many of whom are attracted to megachurches for social as well as theological reasons.

The distribution of US megachurches among counties points to both their metropolitan orientation and tendency to locate in the South and West (Figure 2). Thus, Southern California figures prominently, including Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties, which collectively contain 128 megachurches and 530,000 attendees. Similarly, metropolitan areas with eight or more megachurches apiece included Seattle (17 churches and 48,000 attendees), Dallas-Ft. Worth (45 and 148,000), Houston (42 and 210,000), Miami-Ft. Lauderdale (12 and 53,000), Atlanta (46 and 196,000), Chicago (36 and 141,000), Detroit (12 and 55,000), Minneapolis-St. Paul (14 and 52,000), and Philadelphia (8 and 31,000). In contrast, megachurches are absent in much of the agrarian Midwest, and almost entirely so in New England.

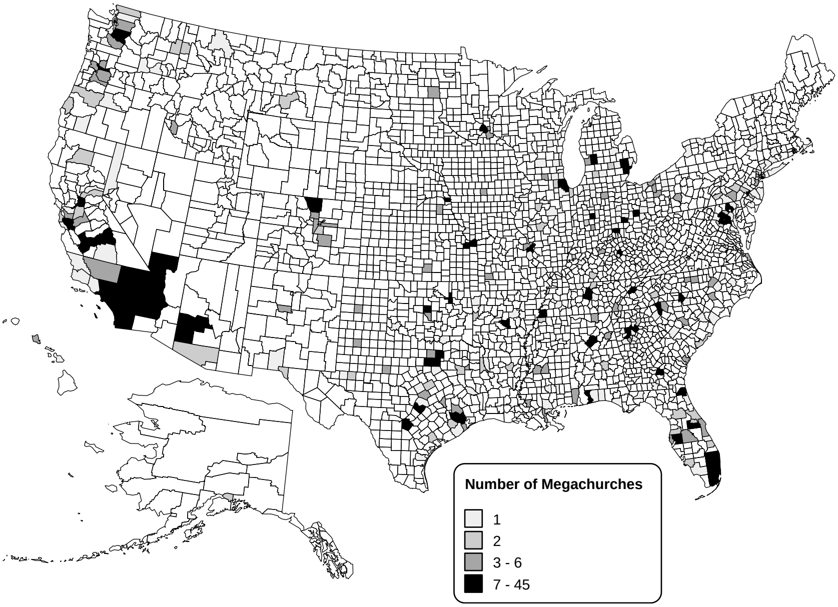

Figure 2. Total number of megachurches per county, 2005. Source: calculated by authors.

The geography of megachurch attendees closely mirrors the distribution of churches, with a heavy concentration in Southern California, Las Vegas, selected cities in the Midwest, and numerous metropolitan regions in the South. As a proportion of the county population, megachurches were most visible in a scattered series of small, typically Southern counties, where in some cases one-third of the residents attended such institutions (Figure 3). Such counties tend, on the whole, to be relatively conservative politically, even though metropolitan regions in which the bulk of megachurches are located tend as a whole to vote overwhelmingly Democratic. For example, on average, counties with at least one megachurch voted 55% for the re-election President George W. Bush in 2004, as compared to 51% for the country as a whole. A simple linear regression between percent of population attending megachurches and votes cast for Bush in 2004 supports this notion (Figure 4), revealing a consistent, statistically significant relationship at the 95% confidence level[1]. In some counties, in which the proportion of the total population attending megachurches exceeds 15 or even 20%, it is not unlikely that the conservative political views often spread through megachurches influence voting patterns, hinting at a bi-directional causality between these institutions and their local political environments.

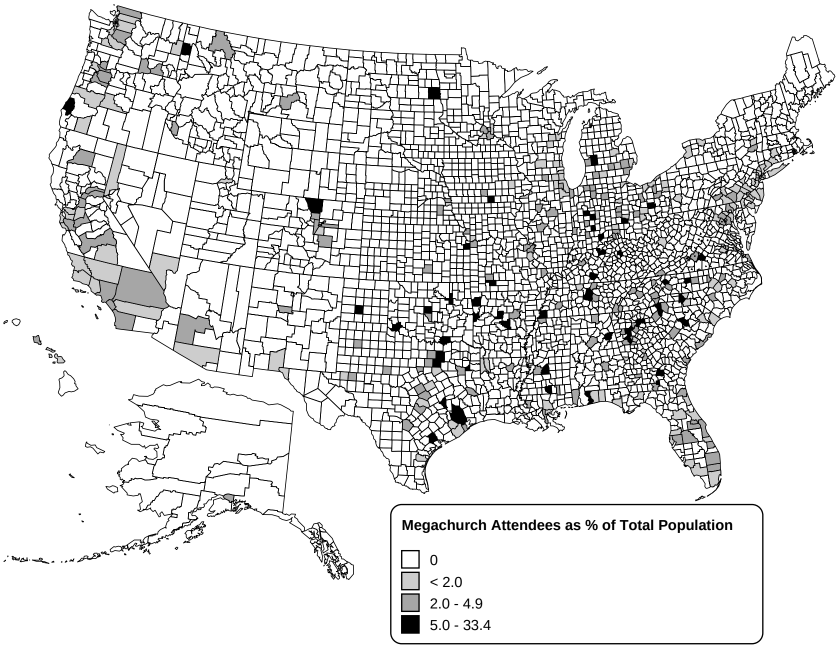

Figure 3. Total megachurch attendees as percent of county population, 2005. Source: calculated by authors.

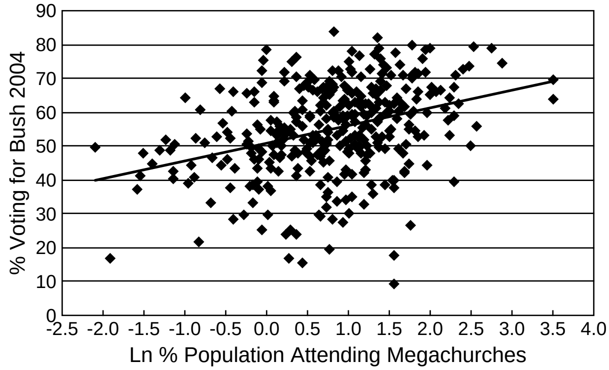

Figure 4. Regression of percent voting for George W. Bush in 2004 v. log of percent of county population attending megachurches.

Case studies

To shed more detailed light on the geography of megachurches at a more refined scale, three brief case studies are offered of different metropolitan regions, Chicago, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Atlanta. These places were selected to illustrate the similarities and differences among megachurches located in older Midwestern, newer Sunbelt, and older Sunbelt cities, respectively.

Chicago

Cook County, with 36 megachurches (six of which are predominantly African-American) and 141,237 attendees, exemplifies the locational configuration of megachurches in older, well established metropolitan areas. Examples include the Willow Creek Community Church, one of the first megachurches in the country, which is often cited as an exemplar of megachurch architectural design, as well as the Trinity United Church of Christ, former church of President Obama and until recently led by Pastor Jeremiah Wright. The number of Chicago megachurches might have been much larger if the Catholic Church had participated in the Hartford Institute survey: the region's huge Catholic population has undergone a significant demographic transformation rapidly with the rapid growth of Hispanics in the inner city and the southern and eastern Europeans migrating to the suburbs. The Catholic Church in recent years has had to close a number of churches and schools in the city's older neighborhoods and build more in the newer parts of the city.

Although most of Chicago's megachurches are situated in the suburbs or the outer fringe of the central city (Figure 5), several large ones have emerged in predominantly black sections of the city, including Trinity United Church of Christ, previously mentioned. In 2005, the 10,000-seat

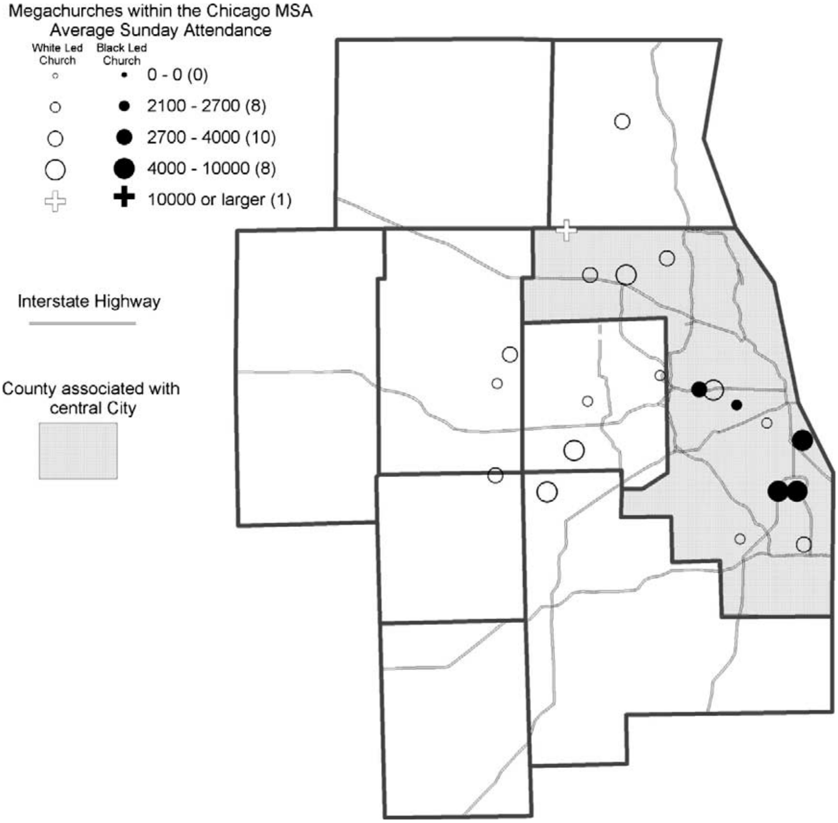
Megachurches within the Chicago MSA
Average Sunday Attendance
White Led Church
Black Led Church
0 - 0 (0)
2100 - 2700 (8)
2700 - 4000 (10)
4000 - 10000 (8)
10000 or larger (1)
Interstate Highway
County associated with central City

Figure 5. Distribution of megachurches in the Chicago metropolitan area. Source: authors.

House of Hope, in the city's southside Roseland neighborhood, was dedicated. It exceeds the capacity of Willow Creek Community Church, until then the city's largest. The House of Hope, located just off an exit of an interstate highway, was designed as a multipurpose auditorium with ample parking. At a cost of 50 million dollars, it is so big that the Chicago Bulls plan to use it for basketball camps, and the church intends to rent it out for conferences and concerts. The church's pastor, who also is a state senator, hopes that it will become an economic and social engine to revitalize the economically depressed neighborhood in which it is located.

Dallas-Fort Worth

Forty-five megachurches (five of which are African-American) with 148,145 attendees can be found in this Texan metropolitan area. The largest includes the Cathedral of Hope, which began with 12 people in 1970, has since mushroomed to become the fourth-largest establishment within the United Church of Christ (http://www.cathedralofhope.com). The location of megachurches in Dallas-Ft. Worth differs from those in Chicago, as they are scattered evenly throughout the twin central cities as well as the suburbs (Figure 6). The central city exerts a pull despite the large and affluent population of the metropolis's suburbs. For example, Dr. W.A. Criswell, long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church, which has roots extending to the nineteenth century but today occupies seven buildings in the CBD, noted "We are downtown because we choose to be downtown" (http://www.firstdallas.org/About). Most are in close proximity to limited access highways, reflecting the auto-reliant character of most Sunbelt megachurch attendees.

Perhaps Dallas-Ft. Worth's most well-known megachurch is The Potter's House, whose pastor, the Bishop T.D. Jakes, has built one of the nation's largest congregations, exceeding 35,000 members, and in the process has emerged as a nationally recognized African-American religious leader. In 2009, Jakes was asked to lead the early morning prayer service at President Barack Obama's Washington, DC inauguration. Like African-American megachurches in other large cities, The Potter's House is heavily involved in outreach programs to the local community, but also with programs elsewhere in the US as well as in Africa. Jakes, like a number of well-known Black ministers, preaches the highly controversial "prosperity gospel," which teaches that God bestows material prosperity on those

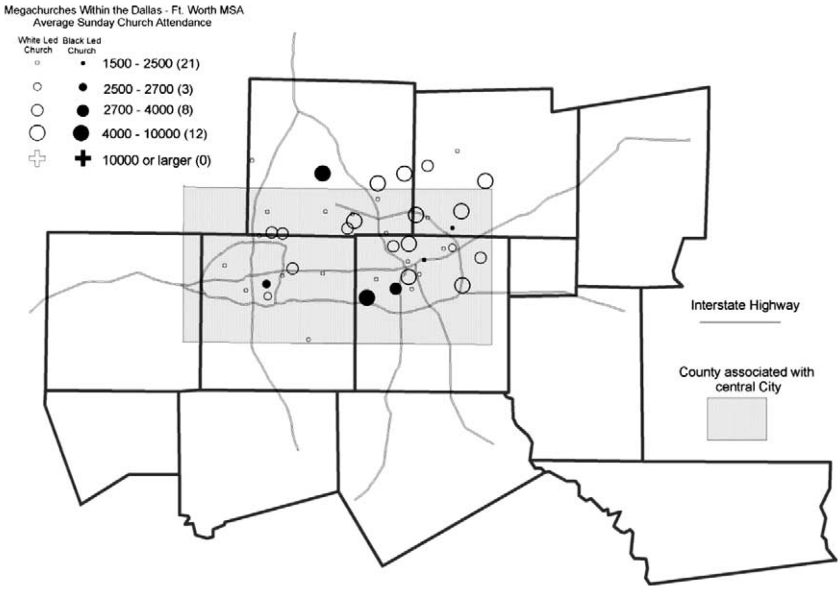
Megachurches Within the Dallas - Ft. Worth MSA
Average Sunday Church Attendance
White Led Church
Black Led Church
1500 - 2500 (21)
2500 - 2700 (3)
2700 - 4000 (8)
4000 - 10000 (12)
10000 or larger (0)
Interstate Highway
County associated with central City

Figure 6. Distribution of megachurches in Dallas-Ft. Worth metropolitan area. Source: authors.

he favors, and that his favor is gained through the "attitude and obedience" of adherents.

Atlanta

It is generally accepted that no metropolitan area in the nation has a greater concentration of megachurches than that centered on Atlanta, which sustains 46 megachurches with 196,096 attendees (over half of which are led by African-American ministers). Atlanta has a relatively recent history of these institutions but has seen them grow rapidly (Thumma 1996; Ingram 2005; Blake 2003). Figure 7 reveals that megachurches are widely spread throughout the metropolitan area: African-American megachurches are more closely identified with the inner city where the city's black population has concentrated, and white megachurches are located in the predominantly white suburbs. Like in the other two metropolitan areas here examined, the city's largest megachurch is led by a black minister, Creflo A. Dollar, who, in the matter of a little more than a decade, built a congregation of over 30,000 with an 8,500-seat sanctuary fully

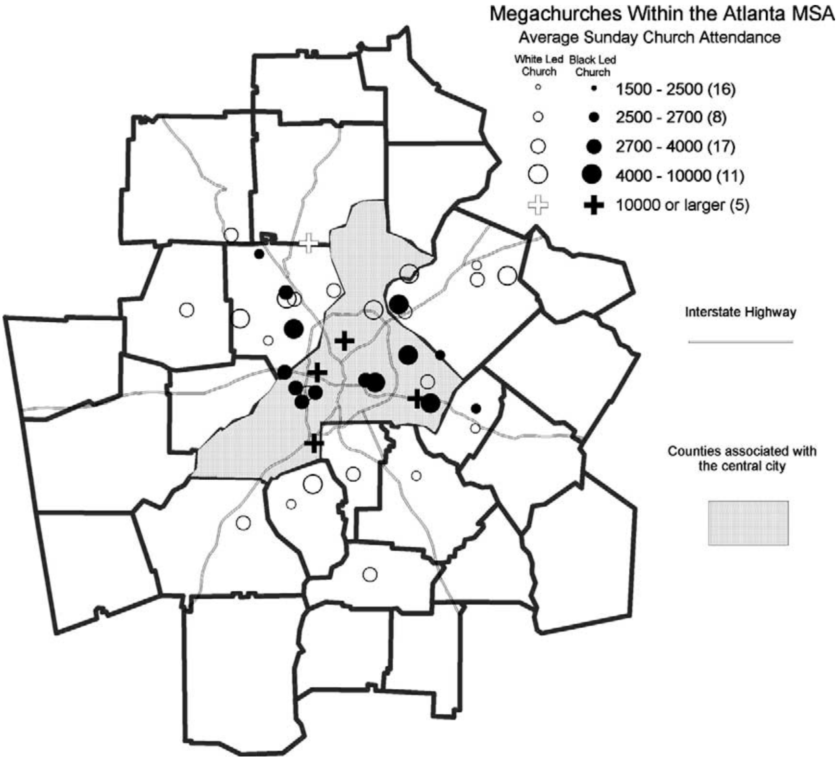
Megachurches Within the Atlanta MSA
Average Sunday Church Attendance
White Led Church
Black Led Church
1500 - 2500 (16)
2500 - 2700 (8)
2700 - 4000 (17)
4000 - 10000 (11)
10000 or larger (5)
Interstate Highway
Counties associated with the central city

Figure 7. Distribution of megachurches in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Source: authors.

equipped with radio and television facilities. Dollar, like the Reverend T.D. Jakes in Dallas, preaches the Prosperity Theology, obviously with great success; his World Changers Church International today has ministries elsewhere in the US and overseas.

The late theologian Nancy Eiesland (1997, 2000) wrote of the intense competition for congregants that arose with the arrival of a new megachurch in an Atlanta suburb. This competition entailed an enormous investment in facilities on the part of the megachurch to create a church "campus" with sufficient amenities to attract large numbers of attendees, drawing many from established churches in the area and causing some to close.

Atlanta also provides a good example of just how fragile a megachurch's popularity can be when confronted by scandal, a situation not uncommon. Under the dynamic leadership of Earl Paulk, the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, which was formed in the 1960s, rose to approximately 10,000 members, with 24 pastors, and included a Bible college and a television ministry. However, allegations of Paulk's sexual misconduct arose, and culminated in the discovery that his nephew, son of his brother, a pastor in the church, was in reality his biological son. Under the sustained publicity of this scandal, allegations from other female members of the church were made, and were followed by a steep decline in the church's membership. In 2008, the church, which by then included a 53-acre campus, including a 5,500-seat auditorium, 1,100 seat atrium/ fellowship hall, multiple classrooms and offices, and a 2,000-space parking lot was put up for sale, listed at US$ 24.5 million.

These three examples point to the diversity of megachurch experiences. These institutions may be located in inner cities or suburbs, have primarily white or African-American populations, range from comparatively modest to enormous, are located in depressed and wealthy communities alike, and exhibit widely varying forms of worship, architecture, leadership, and outreach. Thus, despite the ostensible similarity that unites them under a common label, megachurches exhibit a surprisingly broad set of characteristics.

Concluding thoughts

As the landscapes of American religion and religiosity fluctuate over time, megachurches have become an increasingly important institution to the spiritual and social lives of millions of residents. In part, their rapid growth and success reflects the successful employment of a sophisticated business model designed to attract the maximum number of followers and offend as few as possible. Ironically, these religious institutions have flourished in large part because they use secular tools. Typically, such institutions attract middle class members who value their church experiences as much for their social and recreational dimensions as the religious ones. Politically, they lean toward the conservative.

Geographically, megachurches are primarily located in the Sunbelt, and are notably absent in New England. Southern California, Atlanta, and Florida contain particularly large concentrations, as do, to a lesser extent, cities in Texas, Washington state, and Chicago. They tend to be overwhelmingly metropolitan in orientation. Highly auto-dependent, these places of worship tend to be found most often in suburban areas near freeways and offer ample parking facilities.

Megachurches thus both reflect the steady and widespread commodification of American culture and help to contribute to it. The business-like approach to religion, its consumerist trappings, and the sophisticated management of money that underlie their success, point to these institutions as the new face of American religion, a threat that many traditional denominations have understandably viewed with alarm. As megachurches take advantage of economies of scale to grow much more rapidly than most religious institutions, they point to a gradual oligopolization in the provision of religious services. In this respect, although they are religious in design and intent, their causes and consequences are every bit as much social and economic in nature.

Finally, one measure of the significance of megachurches also lies in their expanding international dimensions. Once confined to the US, megachurches have expanded into Australia (Connell 2005), New Zealand, Canada, Britain, France, Ukraine, Moldova, Brazil, Nigeria, South Korea, and even Indonesia (Reuters 2008). In part, this jump into the global change reflects the mounting attention to foreign areas paid by American megachurches, who often work in conjunction with Christian non-governmental organizations (Gramby-Sobukwe 2009). Warren's Saddleback Church in California, for example, offers numerous conferences dedicated to marketing its organizational structure and style, and claims to have trained 500,000 pastors worldwide (van Biema 2008). Indeed, even Muslim mosques in the US, and elsewhere have begun to imitate the megachurch model (Rao 2008). In this light, the significance and growth of megachurches may be even greater in the future.

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Note

1. The exact relationship is $\% B = 50.8 + 5.2 \ln(\%\text{pop})$, $r = .39$, $N = 351$.

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