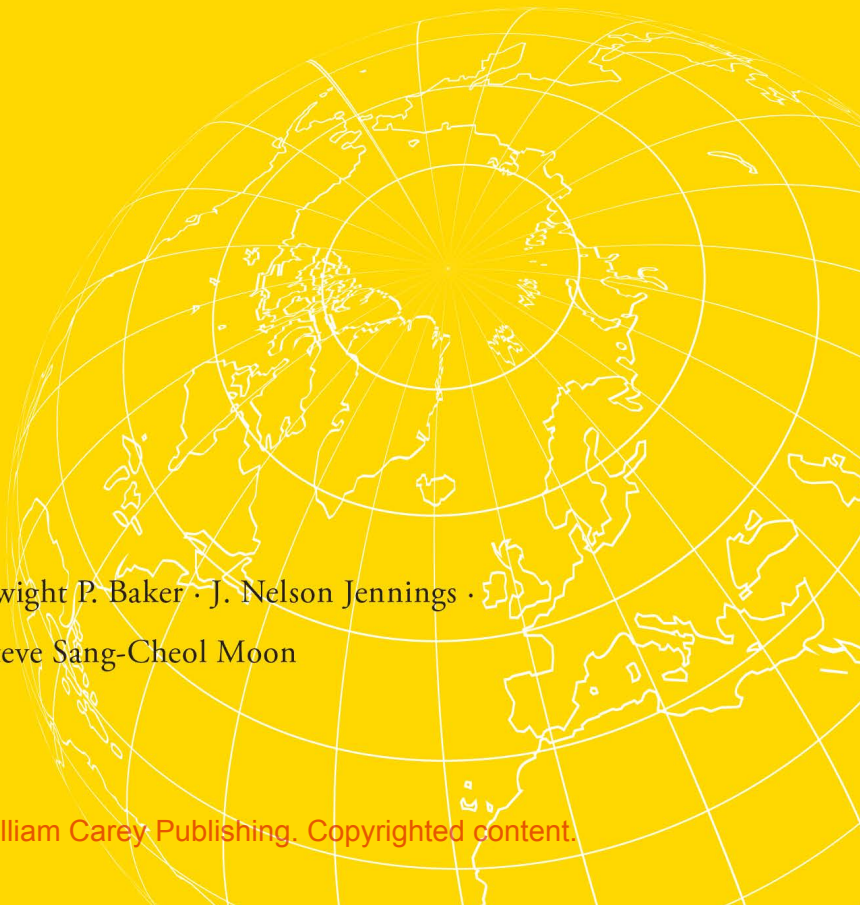
Megachurch ACCOUNTABILITY in Missions

Critical Assessment through Global Case Studies



Editors

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To Whom Is a Megachurch Accountable? A U.S. Case Study

Scott Thumma

The religious landscape in the United States has changed dramatically in the last fifty years as the nondenominational reality erodes traditional religious organizations, and as parachurch and independently networked groups proliferate. Since 1965, many denominations have lost significant membership. Increasingly, Americans—especially younger generations—require their social commitments to be personally meaningful, tangible, and physically engaging. Likewise, the world has shrunk through greater mobility, increased personal wealth, and, most of all, Internet technologies. This context has led to a shift from a complete reliance on denominational mission groups, or even on parachurch mission agencies, toward "hands-on" local congregational mission activities.

During this same period, the proliferation of Protestant Christian megachurches—defined as churches with at least 2,000 attendees in weekly worship—has created a new religious reality in the United States and, increasingly, globally. In 1965 there were fewer than 50 megachurches in the United States. Today there are roughly 1,650 dominating the religious landscape and reshaping what "church" means, with contemporary worship, cutting-edge technology, multiple locations, celebrity clergy with charismatic personalities, and quasi-denominational networks of like-minded churches.[1]

1. All information about U.S. megachurches is taken from the author's

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Yet megachurches are only the most obvious sign of the rapidly changing size of American churches. Over the past 100 years, the data from nearly every denomination show a dramatic concentration of its membership in ever-larger churches. Currently, the top 10 percent of American churches—roughly 35,000 congregations with 350 attendees or more—are home to more than half of the nation's religious citizens. At the same time, at least 60 percent of U.S. churches have fewer than 100 weekly attendees.[2] The implications of this striking size shift, when combined with other societal and cultural changes, are considerable for mission efforts.

What do mission activities look like in the nation's megachurches? Additionally, to whom and in what ways are they accountable? The missions approaches of megachurches are as diverse as the phenomenon itself. No single model of missions is distinctive to these large churches. In twenty-five years of studying the U.S. megachurch movement, I have found that mission activity is consistently a complex mix that may include partnerships with denominational agencies and nondenominational parachurch organizations, a focus on local and international missions, active engagement with mission trips, and other innovative and unique outreach efforts. Each particular megachurch's work is typically grounded in its distinctive vision and the interests that guide the church itself.

In this chapter, I explore the case of a Connecticut megachurch with a significant commitment to local and international missions. By highlighting this case, however, I do not mean to imply that it is a representative example of the nation's megachurches. Yet this case does demonstrate the breadth of mission efforts that can be accomplished by a large church, and the system of accountability that is at work.

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research and can be found at "Megachurches," http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurches.html, on the Hartford Institute for Religion Research website.

2. Information about the religious profile of the United States is drawn from "Fast Facts about American Religion" located on the Hartford Institute for Religion Research website, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html.

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CROSSROADS COMMUNITY CATHEDRAL: A MODEST MEGACHURCH

At first glance, Crossroads Community Cathedral, in East Hartford, Connecticut, probably would not be recognized as a megachurch. In contrast to the usual stereotype—that megachurches are flashy and extravagant—Crossroads' physical structure suggests a reserved demeanor. It is more horizontal than vertical, set back from the road, and anything but ostentatious. In fact, its low profile accurately embodies its bearing as well as its appearance. The church is mostly inconspicuous in the religious landscape of Connecticut, even though it is one of only a handful of megachurches in New England. Its sanctuary seats 900, roughly half the size of an average megachurch's primary sanctuary. Attendance at its four weekend services totals around 2,200 adults and children; it is one of the 40 percent of megachurches that fall in the 2,000–3,000 weekly attendance range.

The church began in 1951 as a mission venture of the Assemblies of God (AG). Thirty years later, Terry Wiles came to this congregation, which then had approximately 150 attendees. By 1990 the church had moved to its present location and began worshiping in a gym reconfigured as a temporary sanctuary space. Though the church is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, a visitor would not readily perceive this association, given its name and lack of identifiable AG logos, symbols, or literature.

The overall culture of Crossroads Community Cathedral is marked by an emphasis on discipleship and mission service, with a serious and authentic congregational culture. This approach has produced gradual, steady growth during the thirty-four-year tenure of senior pastor, now bishop, Terry Wiles, and it continues with his son, Sean Wiles, who is the primary congregational leader and executive pastor. Most church members are lower-middle-class professionals or service and blue-collar workers. The church's services are energetic, with a contemporary worship style and a solidly evangelical theology.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the congregation is

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its multiracial membership, represented for the last twenty years in almost equal percentages of Caucasian, Latino, and African American families, as well as a smattering of Asian American and African families—many of whom are first- and second-generation immigrants from a number of different countries. Additionally, worship services are translated into Spanish, and the leadership of the church increasingly reflects the congregation's racial diversity.

A MISSIONS-MINDED PASTORAL VISION

Since the arrival of Terry Wiles, the church has purposefully demonstrated his dedication to missions, which he often articulates simply as "reaching the lost." Fifteen years ago, Wiles told a group of my students at Hartford Seminary, "We have a mission, and that's what we consider ourselves to be doing, to serve God and man by reaching nonreligious people and turning them into fully devoted followers of Christ." More recently, after a powerful retelling of the encounter with God that shaped this commitment, he related, "I came [to the church] with a missions mind-set. . . . One of my major objectives has been to promote mission, . . . both home and world missions. . . . I wanted to build a missions church." Indeed, this purpose has been realized throughout his ministry—powerfully shaping the church's culture of evangelism and outreach activities.

The early years of the senior pastor's tenure focused primarily on local mission work and expanding the church itself, while also contributing significant monetary support to a large number of AG missionaries. In fact, field notes from my first encounter with the church seventeen years ago describe a long hallway covered with the photos of nearly two dozen foreign missionaries the church was supporting. From the beginning of his ministry at Crossroads, Pastor Wiles has committed himself to preach a mission-focused message every second Sunday of the month. Early on, these efforts also included occasional mission trips, along with the consistent support of a number of home missionaries. Reflecting on their mission outreach history, Wiles commented, "Initially we were operating in various countries like Mexico, Brazil, Honduras, and Guatemala. We were going down, working with Assemblies of God missionaries who were down there, and then we got away from

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that and started doing things on our own. Now everything we do outside the United States is disconnected from the AG."

This gradual shift away from the Assemblies mission structure was a pivotal change in the church's outlook. It began in the 1990s with an independent focus on Guatemala when the church established a long-term commitment to a particular region of the country. This change occurred by creating a partnership with an existing megachurch, Elim Central Church, in Guatemala City, and through the establishment of the ministry Cocina del Amor (Kitchen of Love), started by a Crossroads member who was a native Guatemalan. Since then, Crossroads has built more than forty churches and trained and developed relationships with more than 250 pastors.

This focused mission approach was expanded through the influence of another former AG missions-oriented megachurch pastor. In the early 2000s Charles Blair, then the senior pastor of the nondenominational megachurch Calvary Temple, in Denver, Colorado, was receiving attention for his efforts to plant 1,000 churches in Ethiopia. Blair described this mission effort as the "Ethiopian Call." In 2004 Pastor Wiles and his wife, Nita, traveled to Ethiopia to participate in this effort.

Not long after this mission trip Pastor Wiles had a "Peruvian Call"—a vision of replicating Blair's effort in the Loreto region of the Peruvian Amazon. "God directed me to build 100 churches and train 100 pastors," Wiles recalled. At the time, he was nearing sixty years of age and celebrating twenty-five years of ministry, while Crossroads was in the midst of building its 900-seat sanctuary and had by then expanded to around 2,000 attendees at its multiple worship services. Wiles realized he had accomplished many of the goals he had set for himself as a local pastor and was actively exploring God's direction for the coming ten years of his ministry—a direction he increasingly perceived as involving direct international mission work.

Today, Bishop Wiles estimates that 70 percent of his time is spent on missions. "I may be the senior pastor, but I am also the church's missions pastor," he said. As he transferred the church's daily leadership to his son, he noted that he received a clear message from church members: "We want to free your hands to do

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