Introduction: The Megachurch Phenomenon

Stephen Hunt

The growth of the megachurch is undoubtedly one of the most exceptional religious trends of recent times, certainly within the Christian sphere. Generally, the term 'mega' is translated as 'extra-large'. Thus, the designation 'megachurch' would seem to imply both an architectural and congregational formation of considerable proportion and thereby drawing scholarly attention. Indeed, for their part, most informed academic studies, despite the varying perspectives adopted, appear to focus on the size of the congregation, that is, congregations with a weekly attendance (adults and children included) somewhere between 1,800 to 2,000 attendees (and that definition is mostly accepted in subsequent chapters of this volume).

The relevant studies, largely restricted to those megachurches found within the Protestant tradition,¹ invariably seek explanations for this development and those proffered are fairly straightforward. What is commonly termed the 'Megachurch Movement' (subsequently MCM) is not only frequently understood as a reaction to the shortcomings of the declining conventional Church, but amounts to a purposeful endeavour to render the Christian gospel message relevant to the contemporary setting or, as often preferred, the post-Christian Western society. In turn, the megachurch phenomenon is generally recognised as constituting the reflection of the prevailing cultural environment and, moreover, economic trends that have over-spilled into the sphere of religion. And, as a form of congregational life, the MCM has clearly spanned out beyond the United States from where it first emerged to diverse parts of the world Christianity has taken root and would appear to fulfil particular localised needs.

Drawing academic attention has been the fact that the total number of megachurches in the USA at the close of the twentieth century had increased considerably (from 350 in 1990 to over 600 in 2000, then, in the early twenty-first

¹ This is not to say that large-scale churches cannot be found throughout Christian history as the early chapters of this volume suggests, especially when the faith was of greater cultural and political significance than it is today. It might even be said that the earliest church in Jerusalem described in the New Testament (Acts 2: 42–47) formed the first 'megachurch'. Some Roman Catholic parishes currently number in excess of 2,000, but are normally not considered part of the MCM for largely structural, cultural and theological reasons – 3,000 individual parishes (churches) have 2,000 or more attendants for an average Sunday Mass ('Megachurch Definition', Hartford Institute of Religious Research database).

century from 1,200 in 2012 to currently somewhere in the region of 1,600, according to Hartford Institute for Religion Research data). In fact, the growth began to occur earlier from the mid-twentieth century: 25 percent of megachurches were founded in 1949 or earlier; 22 percent between 1950–69; 1970 to 1989 27 percent; and 26 percent after 2011 (Bird and Thumma 2011).² Given the timing of the growth, it is possible to tentatively evoke the notion that this has been part of a wider development whereby large structures and sizeable crowds in venues accommodating sporting or musical events, even shopping malls, have become a familiar part of the cultural landscape.

In simple terms then, it might be said that megachurches have come to reflect major current forms of organisational arrangements with the straightforward function of catering for the requirements, and not just spiritual requirements, of a considerable number of people. But there is more to the picture. The contemporary megachurch has evolved to allow for the needs of small groups of believers and accompanying dynamics, the use of modern technology, professional and commercial strategies, and not to mention what has come to be recognised as the ‘religious entrepreneur’ (for example, Greibel et al. 2011) – innovative charismatic pastors who not uncommonly initially established and sponsored the megachurch and are posited at the head of a hierarchical, mostly male dominated structure. It is the complexity of these organisational forms, which provide coherence to the MCM. Furthermore, as already noted, the adaptation to wider cultural shifts and changes in demographics has ensured that the megachurch can now be found throughout the industrialised, urban and suburban areas of the world where Christianity had long enjoyed a presence, while in numerous instances, the megachurch provides the basis by which the faith expands into fresh global fields.

1 Megachurches in the USA: Demographics

The USA is often viewed as the birthplace of the megachurch and in this national context clear developments can be discerned with the academic gaze focusing on several main concerns including the demographic features of church attenders/members, exploring the typical organisational structures of such churches, the factors behind their growth, and how megachurches have

² According to the Leadership Network, the Crystal Cathedral in Southern California is frequently cited as the first megachurch in the USA. However, it did not exceed the 2,000 membership mark until 15 years after it was founded in 1955.

subsequently manifested themselves in various parts of the world – sometimes conforming to the standard ‘model’, sometimes making significant departure from it.

As part of the prolific growth of megachurches in the 1970s in the USA there has discernibly been a consistent shift of members and attendees from smaller churches to larger churches, especially churches of a ‘mega’ scale (Rainer 2012). Further statistical evidence offered by Warren Bird (Leadership Network) and Scott Thumma (Hartford Institute for Religion Research), who have conducted several research surveys on the subject, provides key data on the number and scale of such churches. That of 2011 (the fourth such survey in a decade included 336 churches of 1,800 and upwards in attendance) estimated that while megachurches still accounted for less than one-half of one percent of all churches in the USA, more than ten percent of church attendance was concentrated in these churches on the average weekend or, as otherwise put, nearly 6 million worshippers were part of congregations that each drew 2,000 or more in total attendance. Moreover, if this group of churches were a Protestant denomination, it would amount to the nation’s second largest such constituency, catering for around 33 percent of all who worship in Christian churches on any given Sunday.

Megachurches have tended to grow to their considerable size within a very short period of time, usually in less than ten years, and under the tenure of a single senior male pastor, growing faster than many denominational churches. Bird and Thumma’s 2011 survey notes that despite occasional news reports that large churches are a Baby Boomer generation manifestation and subsequently on the decline, a steady growth pattern remains evident, with these churches averaging 8 percent growth per year for the previous five years. Thus, the stated average attendance for these churches grew from 2,604 in 2005 to 3,597 in 2010.

A number of these large churches occupy prominent land tracts of 50 to 100 acres near major traffic thoroughfares. The Hartford Institute’s database lists more than 1,300 such Protestant churches in the USA. The top five USA churches being: 1. Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas (25,060); 2. World Changers, College Park, Georgia (23,093); 3. Saddleback Community Church, Lake Forrest, California (20,100); 4. The Potters House, Dallas (18,500) and; 5. Fellowship Church, Grapevine, Texas (18,129). The 2011 survey confirmed that while megachurches could be found throughout the USA, they remain concentrated in certain geographical territories, with the southern and far west regions dominating. In these regions the majority of megachurches (over 70 percent) are located in the southern Sunbelt – with California, Texas, Florida and Georgia having the highest concentrations, located in suburban areas of rapidly growing sprawl cities such as Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, Houston, Orlando,

Phoenix and Seattle, and the reason why relates to a range of demographic variables and economic factors connected to population density and wealth in various proximities, and localised religious histories (Karnes et al. 2007).

Racially, megachurches are seemingly predominantly white with 82 percent having a majority of Caucasian participants. Megachurches are underrepresented among other racial groups compared to national race distributions, although this appears to be gradually changing as the demographic profile of the USA changes (Bird and Thumma 2011). The racial background of senior leaders varies rather from the majority race of the churches surveyed in Bird and Thumma's 2011 findings. Four percent of megachurches in the study reported having no racial majority in the church, while 10 percent were predominantly African American, 2 percent Asian, 1 percent Hispanic.

People attracted to the average megachurch are apparently younger individuals, family oriented and solidly middle class. According to the Hartford Institute many megachurches draw a sizeable percentage of young adults. The average age range was found to be in the 30s to 40s and a full 70 percent are under the age of 50. This means that megachurches are not merely appealing to adults but contain vast numbers of children and teenagers as well. As with nearly every church of any size, there were more women than men in the megachurch, but unlike most churches the balance between genders was relatively even (55 percent women to 45 percent men). Just over half of participants, so the 2011 survey found, had college degrees (52 percent) and, although most megachurches had a regional allurements, 60 percent of attenders lived within 15 minutes' drive of their church.

2 Distinguishing Features

Numerous chapters in this volume will discuss further distinguishing features of the megachurch in some detail, some accounts providing extensive analysis in relation to different global cultural and geographical contexts. Little more than a precursory outline and overview of allegiances, organisational structures, and changing dynamics is intended here, with the focus once again largely being on the MCM homeland of the USA, although some global variations will be briefly considered.

2.1 *Theology and Denominational Allegiance*

Despite forming organisational typologies in their own right (as discussed below), megachurches can be subdivided according to various criteria. The

Hartford Institute of Religious Research (Megachurch 'Defined') suggests that there are distinct types which relate to affiliations, leading to much variety within the MCM:

(1) 'Old' or programmed-based megachurches (30 percent of total), represented by some traditional Protestant denominational congregations that exceed 2,000. A large number are nondenominational (54 percent) but the majority are affiliated with established denominations. These account for 80 percent of all megachurches: Southern Baptist 16 percent; Baptist (unspecified) 7 percent; Assemblies of God 6 percent; Christian 5 percent; Calvary Chapel 4 percent; United Methodist 2 percent. Perhaps the intentional migration out of denominations and wish for greater autonomy underlies this shift that is indicated by the fact approximately 33 percent of the current non-denominational churches claim they were once part of a denomination. For those who are non-denominational, approximately one-third say they were previously under the remit of a denomination according to the Hartford Institute of Religious Research database. This development suggests the broader trend for the emergence of independent churches as part of post-denominational tendency.

The Hartford Institute found that almost all Protestant denominations have at least one megachurch including Southern Baptists, United Methodists, and Evangelical Lutherans. Smaller denominations like Foursquare, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Nazarene have also established mega congregations. Moreover, most denominational megachurches seemingly hold their denominational affiliation rather superficially as evidenced by churches such as Saddleback which is Southern Baptist, and LifeChurch.tv that is Evangelical Covenant. It is also clear that many megachurches are nondenominational, including Lakewood, Willow Creek, North Point and The Potter's House. These tend to constitute the following further categories: also identified by the Hartford Institute:

- (2) 'Seeker' churches (30 percent of total), megachurches focusing on 'seeker services' and bringing in the 'unchurched';
- (3) Charismatic, pastor-focused churches (25 percent), having been built up largely on the charisma of the founding pastor;
- (4) and New Wave/Re-envisioned churches (15 percent) of an innovating and experimental nature geared to cultural and organisational change.

Virtually all these megachurches display what is generally accepted as components of a conservative theology, even those within mainline denominations. Like their non-denominational counterparts, the denominational churches are to be found within the main evangelical stream. In terms of theology of the congregation, the label that megachurches, surveyed by the Hartford Institute selected to best fit their membership's orientation were as follows: Evangelical 71 percent; Moderate 7 percent; Missional 6 percent; Charismatic 5 percent; Pentecostal 5 percent; Seeker 5 percent; Fundamentalist 1 percent; Liberal 0.5 percent; Other 1 percent.

And, new-wave or re-envisioned megachurches, an emergent set of churches attempting to reach a younger demographic.

Furthermore, megachurches, particularly those of a 'New Wave/Re-envisioned' persuasion because of their missiological and contextualisation process, construct what may be termed as 'local theologies', adaptable to local environments and congregations. This would seem to amount to a component of a wider 'experimental theology' (Beck 2011) in which an on-going 'dialogue' takes place between the teachings and revelations of scriptural text and the complexion and needs of the neighbourhood environment.

Despite conservative theological leanings, barely 1 percent chose labels at the two theological extremes – whether 'fundamentalist' or 'liberal'. In addition, the 2011 Bird and Thumma's survey also found that megachurches embraced "a high view of their own spiritual vitality". An overwhelming 98 percent agreed that their congregations are "spiritually alive and vital". In addition, 98 percent said they had strong beliefs and values, 95 percent that they had a clear mission. 2011, which for the most part is about winning converts and church members. Much in this respect would seem to be exemplified by Rick Warren's best-selling in-house book *The Purpose Driven Church* (1996) which is suitably sub-titled *Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*.

In more of an academic vein, Donald Miller's ground-breaking work *Reinventing American Protestantism* (1999) found an additional source of affiliation in the megachurches of Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Hope Chapel in particular. Megachurches among those which he designates 'New Paradigm Churches' perceived their own existence as part of the 'apostolic network' as reflected through their understanding of the teaching found in the Acts of the Apostles as related in the Christian New Testament. This conviction looks towards reconnecting with first century Christianity via restoring the importance of the spiritual leadership of Apostles, while using the medium of twenty-first century American culture as the vehicle of promoting

the gospel message. As a result, as Miller contends, the nation is experiencing a 'Second Reformation' through the MCM. That reformation is drastically changing the way these new paradigm churches challenge church structure and radicalise worship attitudes by reinventing the ways by which people can meaningfully worship, so as to be reconnected with that which is understood to be the sacred.

2.2 *Leadership/Structure*

The 2011 Bird and Thumma survey indicates that the younger-led megachurches (clergy who are on average 51 years old, male and have post-graduate degrees, and slightly younger and better educated than smaller church counterparts) tend to differ in the sense they have less emphasis on the best of possible facilities, are less formal, and place a greater eagerness to be an actively participant in their local communities (the 406 megachurches surveyed in 2005 averaged 20 full time paid ministerial staff persons, and 22 full time paid programme staff persons). Supporting these senior pastors are teams of between 5 to 25 associate ministers, and not infrequently hundreds of full-time employed staff.

In the 2011 survey – one finding which would seem to run counter to the observation above – indicates that people may be attracted to large auditoriums and events, and while megachurches have very large attendance figures, they often do not necessarily own massive sanctuaries. The average seating capacity of the largest sanctuary of a church in the survey was 1,778, with a median of 1,500. As found in previous surveys, it is apparent that megachurches make extensive use of multiple services to maximise their capacity, and many also are multi-site (one church in two or more locations). While virtually all had multiple Sunday morning services, 48 percent organised one or more Saturday night services, and 41 percent arranged one or more Sunday night services. Megachurches held on average 5.5 services from Friday through Sunday. Even given the multiple services and locations, many megachurches would wish to have larger spaces for services and other events. The 2011 survey found that multi-site megachurches are growing faster (95 percent growth rate) than single site ones (70 percent) over the previous five years; however, those churches were considering becoming multi-site in fact have the fastest average growth rate (133 percent). In addition, so the survey suggests, megachurch leaders display a concern with groups as the church mechanism for assimilation, evangelism, fellowship, ministry, and more in-depth teaching. Groups have different names: small (cell) groups, Sunday school, life groups, home groups, etc.

3 Growth of Megachurches

Returning to the question of the popularity and impressive growth of the megachurches, there is the perhaps obvious appeal of their very size. The *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*³ submit the view that when such churches reach a certain size, then the process of growth is self-generating, although the assumption that size is advanced by the leadership of such churches as a 'selling point' appears to be something of a 'myth' (Thumma and Travis 2007).

The megachurch is concerned with people's various needs; representing a new experience of church and of the Christian community. Donald Miller (1999) pointed out that the large new paradigm churches design worship services which appeal to non-church goers, and in doing so significantly depart from conventional views on worship. The concept of 'seeker friendly' worship services are geared to creating a non-threatening atmosphere. Indeed, the emphasis on being seeker friendly has led to many churches, despite their allegiances, to try to avoid being classified as 'Charismatic', 'Evangelical', 'Fundamentalist' or 'Pentecostal'. In their attempt to reach the 'unchurched' Sunday assemblies may be designed entirely around groups of 'seekers', endeavouring to be as inclusive and inoffensive as possible, wishing to avoid controversial subjects such as abortion and homosexuality and seeking to attract a wide range of people with an equally wide range of beliefs and cultural background.

Wellman et al. (2012) have highlighted further attractions. Megachurches, which rarely refer to heaven or hell, are worlds away from the sober, judgmental puritan churches of previous times. Rather, all megachurch services share one further factor in common: they are entertaining. Most use varying degrees of video, contemporary music and drama in their services, giving a sense of being at a concert that attempts to create an emotion sense of well-being. Megachurches use stagecraft, sensory pageantry, charismatic leadership and an upbeat, unchallenging vision of Christianity to provide their congregants with a powerful emotional religious experience: a 'multisensory mélange' of visuals and other elements to stimulate the senses, as well as small-group participation and a shared focus on the message from a charismatic pastor.

There is also the matter of cultural accommodation. Alan Wolfe (2005), describes the megachurch phenomenon in his volume *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith as where* American faith

3 "Not Who You Think They Are'. A Profile of the People Who Attend America's Megachurches", Hartford Institute of Religious Research.

has engaged with American culture with the latter triumphing through an indulgent individualism. The atmosphere and ethos of megachurches is one of optimism, vitality and purpose. These giant social complexes have other distinctive trademarks such as gymnasiums, schools, divorce centres, aerobics studios, computer centres, shopping arcades, banquet halls (including in one case, a McDonald's restaurant). Virtually all aspects of life are catered to at megachurches; they are not just Sunday 'religious' experiences.

Further, these congregations have embraced the latest technologies which can be regarded as powerful signals to younger adults that these congregations are relevant and in touch with contemporary reality. The 2011 Bird and Thumma survey found 88 percent of the churches revealed that the church/pastoral leadership used Facebook or other social media on a regular basis, nearly three-fourths constructed podcasts, 56 percent blog and over a third utilised other Internet technologies such as streaming, Twitter, texting and online church services.

These developments would seem to give credence to conceptions of the religious 'supplier'/'consumer', 'religious marketplace' model. Hence, in the context of the USA Joseph Daniels and Marc Von der Ruhr (2012) suggests that megachurches are thriving in religious markets at a time when Americans are asserting their ability as consumers of religious products to engage in religious switching. The apparent success of megachurches, which often provide a low cost and low commitment path by which religious 'refugees' may join the church, seemingly challenges Iannoccone's theory (1994) that high commitment churches will thrive while low commitment churches will atrophy. Daniels and von der Ruhr indicate a match between what the church produces and what the religious 'refugee' wishes to consume in an effort to increase their membership. The model illustrates that megachurches expect little in regard to financial or time commitment of new attendees. However, once the attendees perceive a good fit with the church, these researchers suggest, the megachurch increases its expectation of commitment.

While the megachurch is now an important part of the USA religious landscape, they are not without its detractors with the most vehement voices appearing to focus on the very factors which would seem to make the MCM successful. For instance, MacNair (2009), a Christian and social scientist, has expressed concern of the movement on the grounds of its radical departure from tradition, lacking a sense of continuity with previous generations, and moreover, that it undermines conventional and meaningful forms of worship. To this he adds the business ethos of megachurches where money and success as measured in terms of members and church attendance replaces an emphasis on true spirituality. MacNair argues that none of these developments bode

well for the future of Christianity should the MCM come to dominate expressions of the faith since it sends the wrong message to followers and 'seekers' alike. To this list of complaints, more traditionally minded Christians also point to the tendency of megachurches to indulge in 'sheep stealing'. In other words, taking church members from other churches, since people are attracted to successful larger churches.⁴

4 Global Manifestations

The data included in Bird and Thumma's 2011 survey indicates the vast majority of megachurches are still located in the USA (estimating that there are about three times as many megachurches as those collectively found across the world). While there are broadly 230 to 500 such churches elsewhere in the world, these researchers found that of the cities with most megachurches 7 out of the top 10 were in the USA. In terms of attendance only 2 of the highest attendance of megachurches were in the nation. The reality is that globally, megachurches are a significant development in Protestant Christianity. In diverse parts of the world megachurches churches have adopted or at least adapted the familiar USA model, but in several cases such churches dwarf them in terms of congregational numbers.

No exact number of megachurches throughout the world, by using the standard criteria, have been ascertained. Nonetheless, Rick Noack and Lazaro Gamio (2015) in their survey of megachurches in Korea, Brazil, and several African countries indicate that they are often much larger than the North American counterparts (averaging 60,000 in attendance). The world's largest churches are: Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea (253,000); Works and Mission Baptists Church, Abidjan, Ivory Coast (150,000); Yotabeche Methodist Church, Santiago, Chile (150,000); Mision Carismatica Internacional, Bogotá, Colombia (150,000); Deeper Life Bible Church, Lagos, Nigeria (120,000); Elim Church, San Salvador, El Salvador (117,000); Nambu Full Gospel, Seoul, Korea (110,000); Assemblies of God Grace and Truth, Kyanggi-do, Korea (105,000); Kum Ran Methodist, Seoul, Korea (80,000); Vision de Futuro, Santa Fe, Argentina (70,000). In 2007, five of the ten largest Protestant churches were in South Korea, with currently largest megachurch in the world believed to be Yoido Full

4 There has, however, been a reaction to the MCC in the form of the Emerging Church movement which constitutes communities that practise a form of informal Christianity outside of the established denominations and with a particular dislike for megachurches and their culture (see Packard 2016).

Gospel Church, a Pentecostal Assemblies of God church, with more than 830,000 members as of 2007. They are experiencing varied fortunes with churches which had an attendance of 300,000 at some point, such as Ondas del Luz y Amor in Buenos Aires, have declined to about 70,000.

In some parts of the world the spread of Christianity and the number of new converts partly explain the growth of megachurches. Given current trends it is possible that in the future it will be the non-Western world which will provide the fertile ground for the greatest growth of megachurches. Much has been illuminated by Philip Jenkins' insightful work, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2007) which explores the remarkable expansion of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere – broadly Africa, Asia and Latin America as the centre of gravity moves from the North, and that this trend is probably irreversible. For example, in 1900, there were an estimated one hundred million Christians in Africa, representing 10 percent of the entire population. Today, as Jenkin points out, there are some three hundred and sixty million, amounting to just under half the population of the continent and the population continues to expand.

In sum, two-thirds of the world's anticipated 2.6 billion Christians will be found in the global South, in countries mostly 'developing' (Barrett et al. 2008). As Jenkins points out, the regions where Christianity is advancing and mutating are also those contexts where the population levels are rapidly proliferating and the faith attracts the poor and marginalised. David Martin (2002) picks up this point by suggesting that large Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches in particular provide communities of support in the context of fast developing economics and social change. A few examples may be mooted.

The influence of the charismatic churches of Ghana and Nigeria are typical of megachurches in heavily populated urban areas. They provide a source of affiliation which seemingly transcends that of political parties or ethnic loyalties; providing their own sources of national socio-economic and political networks. Nonetheless, these churches may have a global reach. Benita Abenaa and Nyarko Uttenthal (2013) have traced how the head pastor of one such church, Matthew Ashimolowo in 1992, embarked on a 'reverse mission' to bring the gospel from Africa to the West. Ashimolowo founded Kingsway International Christian Center (KICC), now the fastest growing church organisation in western Europe. KICC was established to serve the socio-economic and spiritual needs of multi-cultural (Christian) communities but in reality serve a largely black Nigerian community (Hunt 2002). On the church's homepage, viewers can listen to podcasts, experience live streaming of sermons, engage with blogs, and make purchases in the online shop. In this way, the

megachurches can be viewed as good examples of the instrumentalisation of media and communication technology that is truly global (Lievrouw 2011, 6).

Young-Gi Hong (2016) has considered the case of South Korea, a very different context. The dynamism of Korean Christianity today has become a significant element in Korean society. Korean Protestant Christianity can be characterised by rapid church growth and the emergence of megachurches. The Protestant population increased enormously from 623,072 in 1960 to 6,489,282 in 1985, and to 8,760,000 in 1995. In 1995, with Korean Protestants (19.7 percent) and Catholics (6.6 percent) combined, Korean Christians represented about 26 percent of the total population. Most megachurches have many other sanctuaries where people can attend services by closed-circuit television, and have five to seven services on Sundays. Megachurches in China are, again, to be found in a very different environment and of a different structure. One of the smaller house church networks in southern China has an attendance of 400,000, larger networks number several million and constitute a form of underground Christianity – and these are networks rather than large church buildings. Most if not all such large regional house church networks exist in nations which persecute or repress Christians.

Using original research data, Terence Chong (2015) outlines three characteristics which have contributed to the rapid rise of independent Pentecostal megachurches in Singapore. It is evident that some explanations are universal and are in common to those in the USA, other explanations are more localised. Firstly, megachurches appeal to upwardly mobile people from working and lower middle class backgrounds, especially younger individuals, making them a converging point for class-transcending individuals who have a strong sense of agency.

Secondly, megachurches are shown to be more likely to combine spirituality with market logic as a 'seeker church'. These attitudes enable them to better engage with the contemporary marketplace as well as to appeal to young economically mobile Singaporeans generally. Thirdly, as part of the broader international evangelical movements, Singapore megachurches have learned to minister to the needy and disadvantaged in ways that avoid conflict with the state and thus are perceived as offering a useful social role. Yip and Ainsworth (2015), also through a study of Singapore, suggests that religion and business are often seen as inhabiting separate social spheres, yet megachurches combine them in ways which reflect their context. Citing the example of New Creation and City Harvest churches Yip and Ainsworth show how they use the discourse and techniques of marketing managerialism to promote growth, including through significant building projects justified in terms of their religious mission.

5 Current Developments

While megachurches continue to experience significant growth, the question to emerge is how are they adapting as the culture changes and the megachurch movement matures? While an 'insiders' account, Robert Crosby's overview (2013) of recent developments in megachurches and scrutiny of various sources of relevant literature, at least in the USA, is constructive in throwing light on their continued growth but also seem to be developing agendas for the future which global churches may or may not adopt, some of which have already noted above:

1. *Age of Pastors* – the average age of lead pastors in megachurches is reducing (as noted above) and that this is conducive in attracting younger people;
2. *A Spiritual Formation Reformation* – a felt need for megachurches to be more spiritual and find fresh ways of nurturing spirituality;
3. *The Growing Ethnic Church* – includes the growth of the Latino megachurch as this sector of the USA population grows;
4. *A Team Culture* – developing teaming cultures with the large ministerial teams of megachurches comprised of smaller teams. Against a culture of economic austerity, they attempt to accomplish more with less by utilising volunteer teams;
5. *Celebrity Pastor or Celebrating the Faithful?* – many megachurch pastors, perhaps because of criticism, are moving the spotlight away from themselves and onto their church's individual members;
6. *Leveraging Church Resources for Social Transformation* – an emphasis on a social gospel congruent with the social justice awareness of the young;
7. *The Quest for Better Metrics* – to put less emphasis on numbers attending, buildings and money, and more making changes in the community and to spiritually transform neighbourhoods;
8. *The Big Church Search for Small Church Intimacy* – identifiable needs to develop many smaller 'churches' within it for 'spiritual formation strategies' which includes restructuring smaller church experiences within the context of strengthening the large. And this is why more churches are becoming multisite;
9. *The New Collaborations* – more megachurches are moving away from established denominations to other networks which may be national, even global for strategic thinking, and;
10. *The Shifting Shape of the Virtual Church* – innovative use of technology, for example, LifeChurch.tv has thousands of churches in many different languages applying church online, and some 4,000 churches have signed up to use its free Church Online Platform to host their services.

6 Future Possibilities/Research Questions

Such current observable trends in the megachurches provide a number of clues as to how they will develop in the future. In turn, this provides some grounding for the most significant questions that will drive future research. A number of the contributions to this volume engaged with such prospects. However, it might be worth outlining a few in brief:

- Will the megachurch continue to expand and become the dominant model for Christian church life or will it be challenged by other ‘models’ and what will these ‘models’ look like?
- Will future megachurches conform to a single typology in terms of organisational factors or will localised culture, economics and demographics ensure that there will invariable be notable variations?
- What are the factors which could undermine the increasing dominance of the megachurch? For instance, critics have suggested that its place in the ‘spiritual marketplace’ will ensure that they are unstable forms of organisations, especially as they cannot guarantee the inter-generational allegiances that have conventionally been the basis of the traditional Christian denominations?
- Will the major megachurches be increasingly linked in global networks or will they be divided by such considerations as theological differences?
- Will aspects of social engagement encourage megachurches to become more politicised, especially in North America where politics are seemingly becoming more politics?

7 Overview of This Volume

The brief overview of the MCM above has focused on some important organisational features, alongside relevant demographics, explanations for extraordinary growth, and global reach, while providing scope for a consideration of future prospects. The chapters to come in this volume will add considerably more flesh to these bones and, indeed break into further areas of analysis. Their authors come from various perspectives including Sociology, Religious Studies, Church History and Theology, and their contributions come from both established and emerging scholars. Collectively, they provide a rounded and detailed analysis of the megachurch phenomenon. There are three sections to the volume each of which bring together a number of common themes: chapters considering the historical and contemporary relevance of megachurches; chapters examining the nature and dynamics of megachurches; and those chapters which explore megachurches in differing global environments.

The first cluster of chapters put megachurches in historical and cultural perspective. In the opening chapter Charity Rakestraw draws attention to the fact that megachurches are located in a long Christian history, and simply did not emerge in the 1970s. She points out that Protestants in Europe were long inspired to build large churches since the sixteenth century and came from the conviction to win endless converts. This endeavour continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and influenced the building of church structures, and into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through such developments as the Institutional Church Movement. Rakeshaw acknowledges that in these later centuries megachurches were always part of a marketing ploy appealing especially to the American middle classes, a ploy enhanced through movements of revivalism.

In Chapter two David Eagle comes to similar conclusions and commences with the observation that the dominant view of megachurches claims they represent a new religious form, born in the United States in the 1970s and bursting into the American consciousness in the 1980s. Contrary to this position, he is able to show that research demonstrates megachurches enjoy a long history with roots in the Protestantism Reformation, beginning in Europe. The megachurch scene also shifted to the United States through various movements of religious 'awakenings' and revivalism. The demographic shifts that occurred following WWII led to the proliferation of such churches in the USA. Eagle furthermore suggests that pastors and other leaders, capitalising on the appeal of innovation, reinforce the view that megachurches are something new. Eagle's research offers an important and timely corrective which helps situate megachurches in their proper historical context.

In the next chapter Gordon Melton strives to established typologies of a whole range of megachurches. In a survey of contemporary megachurches, while also acknowledging historical developments, he explores several features which allow the identification of typologies, providing impressive examples of specific classifications. Melton identifies four important factors which he explores at length. These are: denominational affiliation of churches, focusing on such phenomena as church-sect developments and non-denominational affiliation; their size, including comparisons with Roman Catholic megachurches; their location relative to the nearest urban complex, noting a tendency for them to be located in suburban areas; and their contrasting theological perspectives.

In Chapter four Simon Coleman and Saliha Chattoo explore the importance of popular culture to the development of megachurches, concentrating in particular on the advancement of such churches in this context. The authors utilise the concept of 'performance' which denotes the sense of both producing growth and expressing it via a variety of media. This illuminates how the

popular culture engendered by megachurches is typically marked by a creative if sometimes tension-filled negotiation between two models or ethical approaches to performing the mega: the 'enclaving' and 'encroaching'. Enclaving is directed towards fellow believers, inspiring them to recognise how apparently separated areas of their life can come under church influence, ranging from worship to leisure to family and even work. Enclaving constructs a moral boundary *around* different practices while re-establishing articulations *among* them, so that for example prayerful and pleasurable activities come to be juxtaposed ethically, socially, and spatially.

In the final chapter of the opening section Martyn Percy offers a sociological account of megachurch, alongside a theological critique of the theology they embrace. Contemporary culture appears to be obsessed with measuring everything by size, equating success by numbers attending. Calling on the theology of Barth and Newbigin, Percy suggests that the 'good church' – one rooted in a virtue ecclesiology rather than a size-related paradigm – does not count success in the same way the secular world does. This means that the very vehicle and content of Christian communication is under scrutiny in this respect. The church growth and megachurch advocates present a brand of Christianity rhetorically, and in largely functional terms. It is useful for meeting individuals or groups in need, averting anxieties or crises, overcoming personal limitations, or other problems. Percy concludes that this is largely a pathological approach to the centrality of Christian mission.

In the first chapter of the second section of this volume, which focuses on the nature and dynamics of megachurches, Marc Von der Ruhr takes up the theme of the 'religious marketplace' in the USA, documenting the fluid nature of church membership resulting from a consumer driven approach to choosing a church, and in doing so provides some significant insights into the structure and leadership of these churches. He calls on literature drawn primarily from economics and sociology explaining how and why churches succeed or fail. Megachurches have been strategic in approaching the religious marketplace, emphasising flexibility in their offerings in religious products and allowing for a customised spiritual experience to attendees, from the physical nature and décor of churches, to the styles of services, to integrating members. Von der Ruhr ends by examining the challenge that the newer megachurches will invariably face: that of managing pastoral succession.

In Chapter seven James Wellman, Jr. and his colleagues address the questions: what is so compelling about megachurches? Why are they able to operate successfully as total environments? They argue that rather like a 'drug', these churches emit emotional energy which stimulates intense loyalty and visceral desire to return repeatedly for a recharge and facilitates a total environment. Megachurches have perfected ways to produce and mark human

experience so that it is reproduced and creates a positive and life-sustaining energy. The authors attempt to show how Durkheim's notion of *homo duplex* is addressed through megachurch rituals. Wellman et al. present their own theory for how people are drawn to participate and invest in these rituals; *embodied choice theory*, supporting their theory with qualitative data from interviews with megachurch attendees and pastors.

In Chapter eight Mark Cartledge considers megachurches as educational institutions for a particular sector of contemporary Christianity. This sector is largely, if not exclusively, represented by Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, although there are clearly conventional Evangelical examples as well. For the purposes of his discussion Cartledge focuses on this sector within the Christian tradition, which is mostly represented by independent churches. He elucidates the significant features of these churches which lend themselves to religious socialising processes and to reflect on them in the light of the relevant literature in order to offer some evaluation and suggestions for future possible trajectories.

In the following chapter Stephen Hunt explores in detail what would seem to be the reciprocal relationship between megachurches and revivalism, especially given that megachurches have frequently grown accompanied by the imperative of constant growth; 'big is beautiful', 'big is good' and that revival can be the instrument for this endeavour. The connection is however problematic. First, it depends on precisely what is meant by revival; secondly, that some features of the megachurch would seem to mitigate against the cause of revival. Nonetheless, the fact that the Pentecostal/Charismatic form of Christianity forges the basis of many megachurches would seem to confirm such a connection. This chapter explores the historical relationship between revivalism and megachurches with an emphasis on the present day.

Andrew Davies, in Chapter ten, considers the role of megachurches in the area of outreach and social engagement. His focus, albeit not exclusively, is upon those of a Pentecostal and Charismatic persuasion, noting that social engagement came later in their history. Davies is particularly interested in the question of not so much what the megachurches actually do, but how and why they do it. What sets the megachurches apart is the diversity and the scale of their activities and the sheer numbers they can engage with. It is such churches which have the considerable resources and personnel to accommodate these endeavours. Davies however acknowledges that the megachurches frequently encounter challenges in aligning ministry and professional commitments.

The opening chapter of Section three, which focuses on global environments and globalised aspect of megachurches, Richard Burgess examines the increasing development of 'reverse mission' as it relates to megachurches of

Nigerian provenance, especially those of Pentecostal forms. Nigeria has given rise to some of the largest megachurches in the world with multiple branches nationwide as well as in other African countries, North America and Europe. This development adds to the growing recognition that megachurches are a global religious phenomenon exerting significant social influence in urban contexts around the world. Burgess examines the phenomenon of reverse mission as it relates to megachurches in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora in Britain. He explores the actual achievements of Nigerian Pentecostals against the background of European secularism, considering whether the growth of Nigerian Pentecostals in Britain supports the idea that in certain European contexts religion may be gaining rather than losing strength in modern times.

In Chapter twelve Michael Wilkinson and Peter Schuurman overview the megachurch phenomenon in Canada, with special reference to religious change in the country. Such change includes the decline of traditional Christianity as measured by way of mainstream church attendance. Secondly, immigration into Canada, especially the significance of Christians arriving from Asia, Africa and Latin America. These changes are explored with reference to the Canadian Large Church Study, the first of its kind in the nation. The authors note the megachurches themselves talk about church growth in terms of these recognised changes. Wilkinson and Schuurman suggests that even if research continues to show megachurches benefit from transfer growth, the conversion of new immigrants and the non-religious also serve as powerful tropes.

In the following chapter Torsten Löfstedt offers a reminder of the very different context of Russia and a number of ex-Soviet countries that megachurches emerge against different religious cultures and history including relationships with the state, very different to the North American context from which they occurred. The religious situation in these areas is unique. The vast majority of the population in Russia and after World War II were largely unchurched as a result of Communist rule. While many in these populations, should they embrace a religiosity, have returned to the traditional loyalties of Roman Catholicism and varieties of the Orthodox Church and Protestants still form a small minority of the population. As elsewhere, Protestants have found a home in megachurches and this has consequences for their relationship to the state and thus their ability to build worship centres and develop ministries.

In the penultimate chapter Jonathan James examines Calvary Temple in Andhra Pradesh, India which is primarily known for building a gigantic church in 52 days. Built in 2011 to seat 18,000 people, it now has a membership of over 100,000. James describes how Calvary Temple was created, how it operates organisationally, and how the church undertakes its ministry in a nation that is

not traditionally favourably disposed to Christianity. He also contemplates whether the church is navigating a new path, perhaps as a 'trailblazer' for the future of the Christian community in India.

In the final chapter Asonzeh Ukah commences his contribution by acknowledging that over the last 150 years, no continent has been transformed so rapidly and in so short a time as Africa. Moreover, that religious transformation can be seen as accounting for much of the speed and spread of social change in Africa. Echoing the work of Philip Jenkins, Ukha notes moreover that sub-Saharan Africa will have profound for the outward spread of both Christianity to other parts of the world, especially Europe. This spread will be of particular significance because of increasing African migration to the continent. It is the megachurch which constitutes the primary organised form of church in both Africa and Africans in diaspora.

References

- Abenaa, B. and Uttenthal, N. 2013. "Inside the 'Charismatic' Megachurches of Africa." *New Community Media and the African Charismatic Church*. October 7th, <http://wpmu.mah.se/nmict132group4/2013/10/07/new-community-media-and-the-african-charismatic-church/>.
- Barrett, D., Johnson, T., and Crossing, P. 2008. "Missiometrics 2005: Status of Global Mission." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. 29:1, January, 27–30.
- Beck, R. 2011. *Experimental Theology*. Kindle Edition.
- Bird, W. and Thumma, S. 2011. "A New Decade of Megachurches. 2011 Profile of Large Attendance Churches in the United States." <http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/megachurch/New-Decade-of-Megachurches-2011Profile.pdf>.
- Chong, T. 2015. "Megachurches in Singapore: The Faith of an Emergent Middle Class." *Pacific Affairs*. 88:2, March. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277414023_Megachurches_in_Singapore_The_Faith_of_an_Emergent_Middle_Class.
- Crosby, R. 2013. "Megachange: 10 Trends Reshaping the American Megachurch." *Outreach Magazine*, September 29, <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/5465-megachange-10-trends-reshaping-the-american-megachurch.html>. Accessed 29/6/2017.
- Daniels, P. and von der Ruhr, M. 2012. "Examining Megachurch Growth: Free Riding, Fit, and Faith." *International Journal of Social Economics*. 39:5, March, 357–372.
- Greibel, J., Park, J. and Neubert, M. 2014. "Faith and Work: An Exploratory Study of Religious Entrepreneurs." *Religions*. 5:3, 780–800.
- The Hartford Institute of Religious Research, "Megachurch 'Definition'" <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html>.

- Hong, Y-G. 2016. "Encounter with Modernity: The 'McDonaldization' and 'Charismatization' of Korean Mega-Churches." *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*, 15, <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj15/Hong.html>.
- Hunt, S. 2002. "The Redeemed Christian Church of God. Black Church Revival in the UK." *Pneuma, Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*. 24:1, 62–74.
- Jenkins, P. 2007. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Karnes, K., McIntosh, W., Morris, I. and Pearson-Merkowitz, S. 2007. "Mighty Fortresses: Explaining the Spatial Distribution of American Megachurches." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 46:2, 261–268.
- Lievrouw, L. 2011. *Alternative and Activist New Media*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- MacNair, W. 2009. *Unraveling the Mega-Church. True Faith or False Promises?* Santa Barbara, CAL: ABC-CLIO.
- Martin, D. 2002. *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Miller, D. 1999. *Reinventing American Protestantism. Christianity in the New Millennium*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Noack, R. and Gamio, L. 2015. "How Megachurches Are Taking Over the World." *Washington Post*. July 26.
- Packard, K. 2016. "The Emerging Church: Internationally Marginalised Community." In S. Hunt, ed, *Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity: Movements, Institutions & Allegiance*. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 317–335.
- Rainer, T. 2012. "Seven Updated Trends on Megachurches in America." *Christian Post*, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/seven-updated-trends-on-megachurches-in-america-81860/>.
- Thumma, S. and Travis, D. 2007. *Beyond Megachurch Myths*. San Francisco: John Wiley.
- Von der Ruhr, M. and Daniels, J. 2012. "Subsidizing Religious Participation Through Groups: A Model of the 'Megachurch' Strategy for Growth." *Review of Religious Research*. 53:4, 471–491.
- Warren, R. 1996. *The Purpose Driven Church. Growth Without Compromising Your Message of Mission*. Michigan, MI: Zondervan.
- Wellman, J., Corcoran, K. and Stockly-Meyerdirk, K. 2012. "'God is Like a Drug': Explaining Interaction Ritual Chains in American Megachurches." Paper presented at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. August 19.
- Wolfe, A. 2005. *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Yip, J. and Ainsworth, S. 2015. "'Do Business Till He Comes': The Business of Housing God in Singapore." *Pacific Affairs*. 88:2, 237–257.