

3-6-2012

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Examining Growth: Religious Motivation and Megachurch Behavior

Kevin Bohm

March 6, 2012

Senior thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for a
Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics
at the University of Puget Sound

Introduction

The application of rigid, seemingly stoic theories to religious practices is controversial and at times offensive; however there is insight into the realm of religious behavior that can be gained through the application of sociological and economic exploration. Since Laurence Iannaccone's seminal article in 1994, "Why strict churches are strong," the focus of economic literature has revolved around the concept of utility maximization, which examines behaviors and choices through the lens of club theory, and how the maximum net benefits of religion for members of a congregation can be produced. However, most models constrain the discussion to extreme ends of strictness: strict-sectarian churches, or religious groups so lenient that they require no sacrifices of their members at all. This leaves a large gap in the club theory of religion as such extremes hardly represent the true ecosystem in the religious market. The economic models can explain the extremes well, but cannot account for success of moderate religious groups, and most notably, a class of congregations called megachurches.

Megachurch is not a pejorative term; it is a term that describes a class of Protestant congregations with over 2,000 members in weekly attendance. Megachurches are thriving in the religious market because they are able to draw in large numbers of members, and retain high levels of commitment. These congregations are able to make God accessible, and membership in the organization desirable to a diverse group by offering a variety of ministries and activity groups that engage and serve their membership more effectively than their mainstream counterparts.

Apart from the business savvy and marketing abilities of these congregations, there is an often overlooked, deeper level of commitment exhibited by both the

membership and the organization that leads to the success of such large groups, even when they exceed their theoretical optimal size, and expose themselves to the hampering effects of congestion and free riding as club theory predicts. However, despite predicted challenges, megachurches continue to grow. The simplifying conditions and constraining models described in the economics of religion have written off a fundamental factor driving an individual's and organization's choices and behaviors. The theories ignore the theological underpinnings that influence tastes and preferences, as well as a church's theological driving force for growth that ought to be reckoned with. By acknowledging the religious aspects of an organization, their behavior will be more predictable, and oddities observed will be less surprising.

The success of megachurches, typically with low expectations for members raises some doubts about the universality of strong churches *needing* to be strict. This paper discusses possible choices that are likely to be considered by individual consumers and congregations, and what drives the continual growth of a model congregation resulting in the formation of a megachurch. Possible shifters of an individual's given tastes and preferences will be discussed, as well as the organizational structure and product differentiation congregations choose in order to attract and retain members. I will argue that the level of product differentiation in megachurches is great enough to induce members who are marginally attached to other denominations to switch and join the nondenominational congregation. As the congregation grows, the benefit of membership continues to grow, further increasing incentives for new members to join, reducing the total transitional cost of switching for members coming from other denomination. Megachurches are then able to maintain large congregations by appropriately

differentiating, and adapting to the demand of the membership and community to effectively offer desirable services and efficiently grow. In doing so, the megachurch is able to successfully attract and retain members with a strategy and organizational form that both supports the current membership, and maintain proper incentives that foster innovation in order to overcome significant challenges such as congestion and the pitfall of rapidly declining marginal benefits per member.

The mission of a church is enveloped by doctrine, and is the reason for its existence. Disregarding it for the sake of simplification may not prove useful for understanding the outcomes from rational choice. Rational predictions of club behavior are oversimplified, and I believe that by reapplying the factors of belief as an inherent characteristic of behavior, a simpler understanding of the megachurch phenomenon can be reached.

Literature Review

The secularization of the modern world has been an anticipated event since sociologists like Max Weber brought more attention to the secularization thesis. The theory suggests that as modern society's understanding of science and rationality grows, there will be a "disenchantment of the world". However, the opposite is occurring. The religious environment in the United States is vibrant and thriving rather than withering away. Rates of religious belief show no sign of decline, and church membership has risen consistently for the past two centuries.¹

Not only has religious attendance grown, but so has the megachurch phenomenon. From 2000 to 2005, the number of megachurches in the United States has doubled.²

¹ Iannaccone, 1998

² Ruhr, and Daniels, 2010

Attendance at megachurches has risen 57%, from an average of 2,279 to 3,585.³ It is evident that in the marketplace of Christianity, megachurches are competing with other churches and denominational styles to attract and retain members, and are successfully overcoming the organizational challenges associated with large congregations.

Laurence Iannaccone (1994) used a club model to describe the behavior and success of strict protestant denominations. He argues that an individual's private benefits are, in part, a function of the participation of other members in the congregation. For that reason, strict churches⁴ have an advantage over liberal-mainline denominations because they are able to limit free riders. Eliminating free riders, by maintaining high expectations of commitment and participation, results in strong denominations with high levels of participation, increasing the benefits of all remaining members.

The economic analysis of religion began with Adam Smith in 1776 with *The Wealth of Nations*. He argued that self-interest motivates clergy and that market forces constrain churches just as they do any other firms.⁵ Since Smith's first look, the economics of religion has developed and taken on a variety of forms beyond simple direct comparison.

Club theory is of particular interest because of the nature of a religious organization. Sociologists Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge offer a helpful definition for the religious organization that takes into account its unique product set. "A religious organization is a social enterprise whose distinctive purpose is to create,

³ Thumma, Travis, and Bird, 2005

⁴ Strict churches are congregations that have high full prices of membership, while mainline denominations are those that are not in high tension with society, and therefore have lower full costs of membership.

⁵ Iannaccone 1998

maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators.” Compensators are the distinct products of religious organizations for which there are no direct secular substitutes.⁶ Club theory applies to religious organizations because members, or consumers of religion, are simultaneously suppliers and producers.⁷ Beyond their club structure and collective production, there is added complexity because religious congregations are mutual benefit organizations supported by voluntary donations, which is a rare combination in the nonprofit sector.⁸

Iannaccone (1994) describes how the strictness of a religion leads to strength in congregations. He argues that an individual member’s benefit is a function, not only of an individual’s own belief but includes the commitment and participation of other congregants. As evidence of this, he points to the fall of the mainline Christian denominations and the rise of the strict evangelical denominations. The claim is that a strict church will mitigate free rider problems if it imposes higher costs on its membership, increasing the full price of membership enough so that those with low levels of commitment will leave, resulting in increased net benefit for the remaining congregants.

It is assumed that to minimize free riders, and to maximize the net benefits to the committed members of the church, a church would choose to be strict in orientation. Strictness is required because the religious product is a public good that is produced collectively by the members of the congregation. Free rider problems arise because each member of the church receives an average amount of the total product of the

⁶ Miller 2002, Stark and Bainbridge 1987

⁷ Miller, 2002

⁸ Zaleski and Zech, 1995

congregation, rather than in proportion to their individual effort.⁹ Iannaccone's argument assumes that there is an optimal level of strictness a congregation can choose to employ as tool to discourage free riding and marginally attached members from joining the congregation. This serves to maximize the average spiritual output of the congregation and increase the utility of the committed members. High cost of membership is a way to reach an optimal congregational size, so that the last member to join will not decrease the net benefits of the congregation's spiritual production, and will maximize the total value, as depicted in figures 1.1 and 1.2.

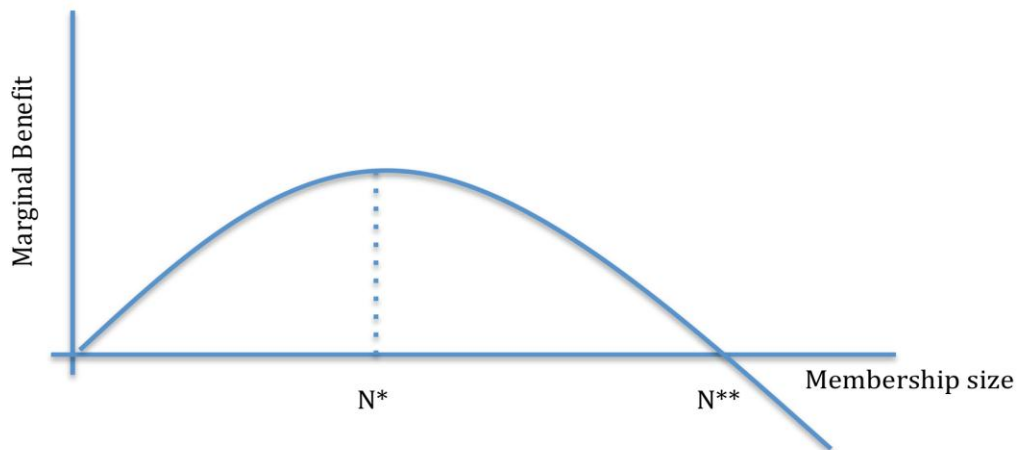


Figure 1.1 N^* is where the MB of the additional member is maximized. N^{**} is where the additional member's $MB=0$. After N^{**} , the addition of new members decreases overall benefit

⁹ *ibid*

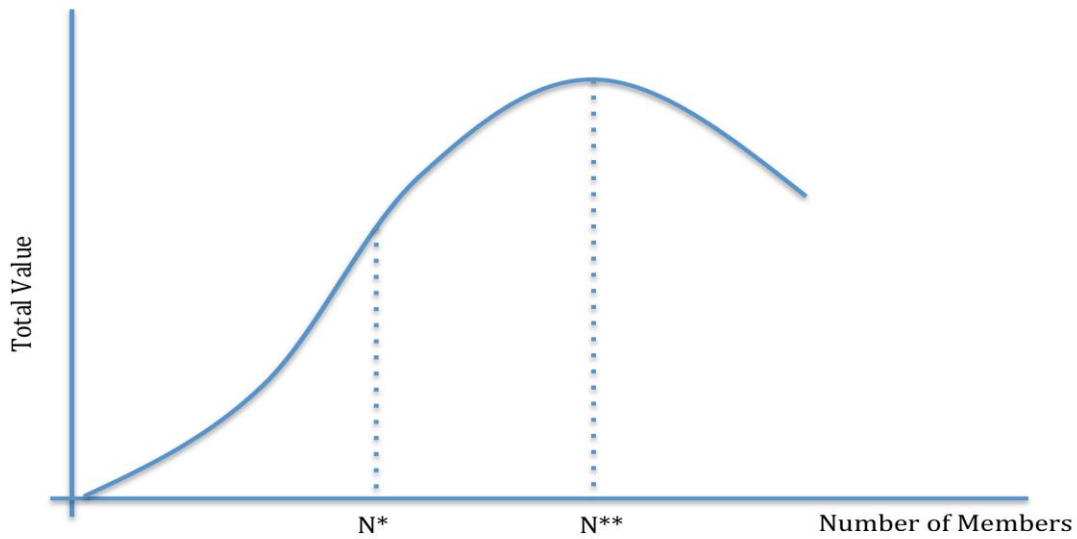


Figure 1.2 Total value of congregational membership, which is assumed to be a function of the membership's quantity and quality. At N^* the MB an additional member brings to the congregation is maximized, so the total value of the congregation increases, at an increasing rate for all N before N^* , and increases at a decreasing rate for N after N^* . N^{**} is the point where there the MB of the additional member is zero, so after N^{**} , the total value of the congregation will begin to fall as the MB of each additional member is <0 .

Raising the price of membership is accomplished by “increasing the cost of non-group activities, such as socializing with members of other churches or pursuing secular pastimes”¹⁰. Examples include imposing certain expectations on members’ diet, dress, or behavior such as the ban on alcohol in Mormonism or strict social protocols with some ultraconservative Baptist groups that serve to increase the full price of religious adherence. These seemingly unproductive behaviors are in fact beneficial because they induce the membership to deviate from social norms, requiring self-sacrifice, creating stigmatization for the group, and raising the full price of membership. This is a tool for selecting only the most dedicated members, and maintaining the congregation near the

¹⁰ Iannaccone, 1994

optimal N^* size, in order to maximize the MB of the last member. The demanding behaviors characteristic of particular groups are also productive because as well as creating high costs, the stigmas associated with a group build and enhance group cohesion through common norms, and also serve as a tool to discriminate between marginally attached members who may be unwilling to participate in the particular behavior, and the truly devout members. This sort of behavior is thought to increase average rates of participation, raise commitment, and enhance net benefits of the membership, thus strengthening the church by mitigating free rider problems.¹¹

The theory of dogmatic rigidity and behavioral incentives in churches has been very influential in the economics and sociology of religion. Iannaccone again builds on this theory, and highlights that fact that “throughout the world, fast growing religions tend to be strict...”¹². He claims that “virtually every measure of religious involvement, or commitment- beliefs, attendance, and contributions- correlates positively with the denomination’s overall level of conservatism, strictness, or sectarianism”¹³. This however is predicated on the assumption that donative support on the part of members is a proxy for the commitment, satisfaction, and strength of the congregation. Stark and Finke broaden the concept of strictness and instead discuss denominations in terms of exclusivity, and the level of tension that exists with society.¹⁴ Iannaccone orders protestant denominations from liberal (Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist and the United Church of Christ) to moderate (Reformed Church, American Baptist, Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Disciples of Christ) and conservative (Southern Baptist,

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Iannaccone, 1998

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Stark and Finke, 2007

Quaker, and Missouri Synod Lutheran) to ultra-conservative (Assemblies of God, Seventh Day Adventist, Mormon and Jehovah's Witness), and highlights the fact that the strict denominations are growing, while the more liberal mainline denominations have been in decline.¹⁵

Table 1.Changes in Protestant denominational growth.

Denomination Type	Change in denominational size, 1940-2000
Mainline:	
Methodist	-56%
Presbyterian	-60%
Episcopal	-51%
Church of Christ	-66%
Christian Church	-79%
Evangelical:	
Southern Baptist	37%
Church of God	1292%
Assemblies of God	221%
Pentecostal	2375%
Other:	
Latter-Day Saints	157%
Jehovah's Witness	200%

Membership trends from 1940 to 2000 of the largest denominational groups. Large mainline denominations have suffered losses, while evangelical denominations have been continuously gaining members. However, there has not been an overall decline in religiosity.¹⁶

Rather than strictly discussing costs and benefits, Stark and Finke (2000) assume that individuals act “within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, [and] attempt to make rational choices”¹⁷, and broaden the possible considerations individuals may undertake by

¹⁵ Iannaccone, 1994

¹⁶ Statistics from The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

¹⁷ Stark and Finke, 2000

considering tastes and preferences, and how those factors may change and develop. In their view of religious production, religious explanations are distinctive because they provide ways of attaining infinite value, in a supernatural context.¹⁸ Therefore, people will continue to demand religion because it is the only possible supplier of spiritual goods, since posthumous rewards are the major source of religious motivation, so omitting religious beliefs from any model that seeks to provide insight into the behavioral characteristics of organizations and individuals who are religious motivated should be considered a serious error.

Starke and Finke (2005) recognize that strictness is not the sole factor determining success, as Iannaccone seems to imply, but it is a necessary component for denominational vitality. They note “religious groups must find ways of adapting to ever-changing environments, without compromising their core religious beliefs. They must produce organizational innovations without compromising faith”¹⁹. The argument is that as a congregation grows, and develops into a “proper” denomination, it naturally will professionalize, and organize itself in a certain way. As long as that organizational form does not compromise the core values and beliefs of the faithful (i.e. liberalize too much), the church can continue to grow because there will still be strong attachment with the faith. If, however, the organization decides to try and expand in a way that lowers the attachment of the faithful, by altering doctrine significantly (or secularizing), the church will be too closely aligned with mainline society and misaligned with the membership. Members are no longer receiving the same benefits of membership, and the decline of the denomination will begin. This is what Stark and Finke argue is the cause of the decline

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

of the liberal-mainline denominations. The occurrence just described reminiscent of the sect-church process, wherein there are constant renewals, schisms, and new religious movements produced from existing churches as organizations liberalize, alienate members, and allow development of newly formed organizations to fill niches left by the drifting mainline denominations. Though new religious organizations are formed, they are closely related to the existing denominations. The new movements, or sects, tend to stress fundamentals of the denominational theology from which they came, hence the term fundamentalists.

Religious capital, which is similar to human capital, is an important factor when people make decisions, and may play a role in why spin-off groups tend to be similar to their original denominational identities. Iannaccone defines religious capital as “the skills and experiences specific to one’s religion including religious knowledge, familiarity with church ritual and doctrine, and friendship with fellow worshipers”.²⁰ When people make decisions that will affect levels of religious capital, they will act in a way to minimize the loss of their personal stock of religious capital.²¹ This works well with observed trends, since new religious groups tend to split with a mainline denomination but remain very similar in overall beliefs. 28% of Americans leave the religion they were raised in, and 16% of which have changed from one type of Protestantism to another, which suggests that when people switch religions or denominations, they tend to move within the same family of religion (Pew Forum).

Ruhr and Daniels highlight the growing importance of religious switching in their analysis of the growth of megachurches. They argue that megachurches are significantly

²⁰ Iannaccone 1990 p. 299

²¹ Stark and Finke 2000

different from traditional churches and denominations because they “often have a flexible and modern look, downplay denominational affiliation, and employ otherwise secular activities in their programming” as well as encouraging new attendees without early commitment or affiliation.²² Their argument is that “megachurches initially reduce the full price of membership to bring [new members] to the church, but are later able to increase the full price for those that have found a good fit between their needs and what the megachurch offers” and become full members.²³ They discuss how megachurches offer a price of membership that is initially low by not demanding participation in activities, or donations of time or money from the potential new member. This allows religious seekers to express interest and try out the church, but as affiliation strengthens and the individual is baptized and officially joins the church, full price of membership is increased. This seems to be a reordering of the traditional logic. Rather than weeding out marginally attached members and only leaving the most committed, Ruhr and Daniels stress the development of the new member into one that will *eventually* participate fully in the congregation.

Discussion

The highly restrictive theories offer insight into the overly complicated market place of Christianity as a whole, but these same theories are not very useful for describing one of the largest congregational movements in modern Christianity, the megachurch. The evolution of the megachurch is incredibly interesting because it seems to defy the generally accepted theories of strictness and congestion within religious organizations. In order to grow to such a large size, reaching over 1 million members in the case of Yoido

²² Ruhr and Daniels 2010, page 18

²³ *ibid*

Full Gospel Church in South Korea, a congregation must develop and refine an organizational approach that allows it to overcome the difficulties club theory predicts would plague traditional congregations.

This paper examines the choices that individuals face when seeking a congregation, and how megachurches are organized to attract and maintain members. The idealized example megachurch is an organization with a particular theological doctrine, but one that is marketed in a nondenominational manner. This nondenominational status serves to remove the social tension or stigma associated with any particular denominational identity. Nondenominational status also allows former members of other denominations to transfer some of the religious capital gained from past religious training, further lowering the price of membership for potential new members. It is also assumed that individuals face choices, and act in a way to maximize their private benefit. The megachurch is thought of as a distinctive denomination of its own; as such the megachurch has complete autonomous control over its behavior, and can allocate resources as it sees fit in order to react to various market pressures quickly and continue to grow and reach new members. It is also assumed that the organization is structured in a way where there is transparency between the members and “clergy”²⁴ as to avoid principal-agent problems within the congregation.

Choice and Rationality

What is it that determines the conversion and later commitment of an individual? Iannaccone’s theoretical work in “Why strict churches are strong” suggests that as the cost of religious membership in a congregation increases, so do the net gains to the

²⁴ Clergy is used loosely to describe the individuals leading the organization. Most megachurches do not have theologically trained leaders, in the traditional sense, but instead rely on founding pastors or volunteer leaders from within the congregation.

membership as a whole.²⁵ Assuming religion is a commodity good that is collectively produced, the relative high cost of religious membership should serve to maximize the production of religious benefits by maximizing the average product for members. By increasing the cost of membership, the congregation would prevent freeriding, thereby increasing an individual's participation in the collective production of the good, yielding an increased supply by limiting the makeup of the congregation to a more committed group of members. An example of this can be a person's enjoyment at a particular service; if a person's experience is related to how full the congregation is, and the general membership's enthusiasm, participation and perceived commitment, then implementing costs that raise factors related to enjoyment will be worthwhile as they serve to increase the average enjoyment, confidence and commitment of the congregation.

But, one must first become a member in order to receive the full benefits of belonging to the congregation. Some benefits an individual may consider are network benefits, and the sense of community that membership provides. The value of such a network is related to the size of the congregation, the qualities of the membership, and the values and beliefs of the group. The size of the network is also important because the larger the membership, the more authority the group has in its relationship with society as a whole. For example, the Catholic Church and its membership are not in high tension with the general population, and devout followers are simply considered religious, however Scientology is considered a cult, and its members are often mocked for certain beliefs because the group has not gained acceptance by mainstream society as a legitimate religion. Another factor relating to the value of the network is how similar an individual's values, and tastes and preferences are to the group. If the person values

²⁵ Iannaccone 1994

diversity and the opportunity for discussion with different points of view, a larger and more liberal congregation may be a better fit than a smaller more homogenous group.

Individuals engage in religious behavior because they expect rewards at some point. If someone decides to participate, there are benefits that flow from religious activities, either personal fulfillment, which includes posthumous rewards, or in the form of social benefit and interactions. The readiness to bear religious costs needs to be compared to the expectations created by particular theologies. Economists often stress the concept of marginal cost being equal to marginal benefit, so it should be reasonable for religious beliefs to be included when evaluating the behavior of decisions involving the religiously inclined, especial megachurches, since they are organizations based on promotion of religious beliefs.

Motivation: Personal and Organizational

Intrinsic religious commitment is the motivation for experiencing and living one's religious faith for the sake of the faith itself. The person's religion is an end unto itself, a goal pursued in the absence of external reinforcement.

(Gorsuch, 1994)

Individuals are assumed to be utility maximizers, matching potential benefits with their tastes and preferences. Individual behavior and decision-making, as discussed by Lavric and Flere, laid out a scheme where individuals are religiously motivated by two sets of factors, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic factors are the personal motives like faith, while extrinsic factors such as the psychological and social benefits of belonging to a congregation, are more overtly utilitarian. The extrinsic motivations describes ways in which the member "uses" their religion as a tool to gain benefits, either psychological in the case of support and personal development groups or through involvement in social activities within the congregation, and taking advantage of network externalities.

A particular theological disposition influences a person's decision making process by acting as a reference point and is a way to rationalize particular behaviors and judgments. Behaviors vary from person to person and can be influenced by religious beliefs, so theological rationalizations of behavior is a constraint that should be considered when evaluating individuals' characteristics, as well as an organizational constraint. Faithful individuals will exhibit an innate, self-generated set of tastes that will manifest themselves in the choices and actions a person chooses or undertakes.

Unlike extrinsic motives, intrinsic motives are sets of characteristics that are related to the innate spirituality of the person, meaning the religious nature of an individual is taken as a given and is a variable that influences the person's tastes and preferences for other possible choices (i.e. the balance of "pure religion" versus the social offerings of a congregation). Furthermore, intrinsic religious levels need not be homogenous across a congregation; megachurches can draw from both pools of devout spiritual seekers as well as the loosely attached social-church-goers by offering a variety of services and activities, and allowing the members to self-select into their groups of choice.

Organizational behavior is also influenced by theological constraints. A church will no doubt be subject to material constraints just as any other firm will be in the market; however, a church also faces theological constraints just as the members do. These constraints drive the church to grow, as there is a strong incentive for evangelization:

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

This theological drive to grow, exemplified in the previous biblical quotes, is evident in the statements of belief of many congregations; it is central to a church’s mission to connect people with their savior and religion’s focal point, and to do so, the organization must grow by adapting and devoting resources to expand in order to meet the needs of the current membership, and also find ways of reaching out to potential new members. This sort of behavior can be seen when congregations expand current locations or by opening satellite ministries. The expansion strategy helps megachurches increase total membership while avoiding congestion at any particular site, while maintaining a single identity. Churches that tend to set up satellite congregations are also likely to help “plant” or start congregations that are separate from their own.²⁶ Church planting, i.e. creating competition, is counterintuitive for a firm in the traditional mindset of revenue maximization or those in competition for the most members, but may be an altruistically motivated action on the part of the organization and its members possibly reflective of their religious motivations. This motive can be explained if there is a genuine interest of growing for “a cause” as opposed to strictly for self-benefit. Church expansion need not be spatial growth though, as most megachurches will first begin to offer multiple services.

²⁶ Thumma, and Bird, 2008, page 8

Table 2. Mean attendance, sanctuary size, and services for Megachurches

	Weekend Attendance	Sanctuary Size	Services Held
2000	3,857	2,040	4.3
2005	3,585	1,709	4.4
2008	4,142	1,794	5.3

Mean megachurch attendance has increased, but the mean sanctuary seating available has not, instead there number of services held has increased.²⁷

Instead of expanding to multiple locations or providing more room for members in the sanctuary, there has been growth in the weekend services held by megachurches. By offering more services, the megachurch can not only accommodate more people; there is also the opportunity to offer more variety in the services. By offering more variety of services, the congregation can reach a broader group of people by catering to different preferences in worship style. In 2008, 60% of megachurches looked at by Thumma and Bird had multiple worship services, and said that they offered alternative services that were different in style from their main service. This altering of style shows that the megachurches are innovating, and this innovation has so far been associated with higher attendance and rapid growth.

Table 3. Services Offered By Megachurches versus Non-Megachurches

	Friday	Saturday	Sunday AM	Sunday PM
Megachurch	0.248	0.714	2.645	0.787
Non-Megachurch	0.187	0.22	1.221	0.559
P-Value	0.239	0.000	0.000	0.000

Results from data analyzed by Ruhr and Daniels (2010) show that for Saturday, and Sunday morning and afternoon, megachurches offer more services than non-megachurch congregations.

²⁷Ibid, page 6

By expanding the number of services, the congregations can temporarily avoid the problem of congestion that would otherwise become a limiting factor. If the sole purpose of the congregation were to maximize the utility by ensuring the greatest possible output of a congregation, the incentives would be aligned such that the church would have high costs of admission in order to keep membership restricted so that the smaller group would receive higher average benefits from their congregation. But, by taking into account the theological inclination towards growth and expansion, it is not surprising that the congregations seek to operate in a way to maximize total membership, and more impressively, the expansion of the religion as a whole by helping other churches start up. The congregations open their arms to the communities they are in by providing a wide array of ministries and social opportunities, as seen below in table 4. Megachurches are far more likely to offer secular services to their members than traditional congregations are:

Table 4. Percent of Congregations Providing Secular-Based Group Activities

Type of Group	Megachurch	Traditional
Community Service	89%	66%
Parenting/ Marriage Enrichment	88%	29%
Choir	90%	58%
Performing Arts	90%	45%
Book Discussions	71%	30%
Self-help	88%	30%
Fitness	77%	18%
Sports Teams	83%	26%
Youth Groups	91%	68%
Young Adult Activities	88%	35%

The groups in table 4 seem to be constructed in a way that they target specific audiences, and groups of people, not only in terms of composition (e.g. young adults ministry) but also by targeting these groups and catering to specific preferences and offering small group experiences along with the large congregational worship services. This type of behavior and success is inconsistent if the framework of analysis is built on the notion that strict churches are stronger than more moderate congregations seeking to cater to the masses. Instead, the integration of theology as an organizational constraint should be introduced as a way to examine the incentives and behavior of religious groups.

“When people feel comfortable, they **STAY**.
When people stay, they **CONNECT**.
When people connect, they **ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS**.
Relationship cultivates **INFLUENCE**.
Influence will **CHANGE LIVES**.”
From The Stay Café at Life Center Church, Tacoma Wa.

This above inscription from is a great example of the guiding principles of the religious nature of a megachurch. The organization is structured in ways that help promote the greater Christian mission of promoting salvation for all. Megachurches offer a variety of experiences, including secular ones in a way that promotes religious socialization. Most megachurches are also nondenominational in appearance to have generic evangelical appeal. These are ways to help people feel comfortable and enjoy the time spent with the congregation. The congregation also extensively uses small groups as a way to form connections between the members, no matter their intrinsic religious intensity. These adaptations have allowed socially moderate congregations disregarded by traditional economics of religion to succeed. The megachurch organizational style

seems to have developed methods of overcoming congestion and free riding by embracing the factors that cause the problems in the first place. Congestion should only be a problem if the membership is homogenous, but by offering variety and seeking a diverse membership, megachurches can avoid this issue by providing variety in both groups and worship styles. Free riding can be handled by simply being disregarded. If the group is truly religiously motivated, all people will be welcome, regardless of their intrinsic religious level, which is consistent with the organizational approach of the megachurch phenomenon, and developmental history. The all-or-nothing viewpoint of religious participation is inappropriate when the end-goal is to “influence and change lives”, and a by-product of this shift could be the recent movement to self-generated religion and the high percentage of religious fluidity seen in the American population.

Conclusion

Religious beliefs are often written off by academics as either a variable that must be controlled for or as an irrational emotional attachment, either of which ought to be removed from the discussion of economic theories even when pertaining to organizations inherently theological in nature. If religious beliefs are simply characteristics that are to be disregarded, there is a limit to what can be gained from studying megachurches. However, if religious beliefs are instead viewed as important dogmatic aspects that guide peoples’ lives, then that emotional connection is not as random or irrational as one might initially assume. From the perspective of a believer, their religious beliefs are true and absolute, and will often form the foundation of their outlook on life and the decisions they make. Though their decisions may seem irrational or even bizarre to those not of the

same mindset, their dogma provides a rational basis for their behavior. Specific actions, odd to others, can be logically traced back to their theological roots and explained.

If understood, and given adequate importance, glimpses of the basis of certain peoples' thought process can be seen, and information that was written off can be used to provide a fuller explanation for the behavior of megachurches. Though most megachurches are known to have few if any religious symbolism and weak denominational affiliations, they are still Christian organizations nonetheless. They provide a center of worship, regardless of style, and also provide many nonreligious services to their members. These nonreligious services, ranging from counseling to athletic activities, serve to improve their relevance to the mainstream population and allow for the organization to reach a broader spectrum of people than they might have otherwise.

The megachurch, as a distinct institution style, is separate from the "normal" congregational or organizational motifs that are generally discussed in club theory. They are a relatively new organizational style, and have just begun to grow into prominence in mainstream society. As they grow, more questions will arise about their sustainability, growth potential, and their distinctive innovational styles. Can a megachurch grow indefinitely? How are the costs associated with a large congregation comparable to smaller congregations? Are there really economies of scale to be exploited? These are questions that have yet to be answered, and though interesting are outside the scope of this paper. However, following the discussions up to this point, I think the most important aspect concerning megachurches is to note that they are at their cores theologically motivated organizations. A comparison can be brought that is opposition to

my notion of growth incentives; Jewish congregations will purposefully limit their size, and when they have outgrown a certain size, they are split into separate groups. My response may seem trivial, but I believe it to be in line with the argument that I have attempted to convey in this paper. My response is that the Jewish congregation is not a Christian group, and does not have the same theological incentives. Judaism is not known as a religion that proselytizes, while Christianity certainly is. Granted, that was a single case, but what about when comparing other Christian denominations instead of groups outside the faith? This is not a simple question, but I believe the way that Christianity has developed can offer something to the discussion. There are over 25,000 Christian denominations²⁸, each with its own unique theological lineage. My argument attributes part of the success of the megachurch movement to the organization's ability to distinguish itself from the mainstream groups, essentially becoming a separate religious form. With their loose ties to mainline denominations, each megachurch can be viewed as an independent entity, deciding for itself how to best serve its members and attain long run goals. It is interesting to think about the future of the megachurch movement and what will happen if they continue to be successful and innovative. I think that for now, the megachurches will seek to exploit their current success for as long as possible, expanding their groups under specific brand identities. However, in the long run, I see the current mode of action as just a growth phase that this particular type of congregation has managed to make successful, but just as Christian groups have done for the last 2,000 years, their growth will cease to be a phenomenal oddity or exciting topic of discussion, and the movement will fade into the mainstream of society with the successful groups evolving into the denominations they originally were alternatives for.

²⁸ Professor Greta Austin. *Comparative Christianities*. Spring 2011

Currently, the megachurch movement is a new mode of evangelization for the modern American culture. The often-ridiculed commercialization of religion is responsible for the spread of religious messages the speed at which they are conveyed, be it through media (TV, or the internet) or through the ubiquitous contemporary music that engages and excites people in the megachurches' services. But the messages being conveyed are essentially unchanged from the original forms offered in many other Christian groups; they are for the most part stylistic differences. If the modern cultural aspects of megachurches are stripped away, the theological core is the same as most other traditional congregations. This theological core²⁹ is what drives the most basic and long-standing Christian obsession of spreading the "good news" of the religion's central figure: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:19-20)

²⁹ I understand that there is incredible variety within the Christian religion, but for the most part, the denominations seem to have exhort the same behaviors and values, and much of the difference comes from specific disagreements on notions as to divinity of Christ, and the organization of the institution. But, nearly all ascribe final authority to biblical teachings, especially in the Protestant and Evangelical movements.

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