

Coronavirus could set the church back 25 years



Twenty-five years ago, I began warning the church about its overemphasis on “attractational” strategies — that is, the come-to-us stance taken by many churches influenced by the church growth movement back then.

I wasn't the only one, I know. Other voices made similar pleas, urging church leaders to resist the temptation to become more like marketers and less like missionaries.

But it was difficult for some people to hear our cry. They had been shaped by an ecclesiology that emphasized numerical growth over all else. And they had come to believe that to grow a church you needed the right-sized building, in the right area, with ample parking, and friendly parking lot attendants.

They'd been taught that a growing church needed a certain kind of excellent preaching, as well as an inspiring contemporary worship experience delivered by positive, upbeat leaders.

They had given countless hours to trying to deliver the best children's and youth ministries in order to attract families, and a good program of cell groups built around a Christian education model to ensure pastoral care and a sense of community.

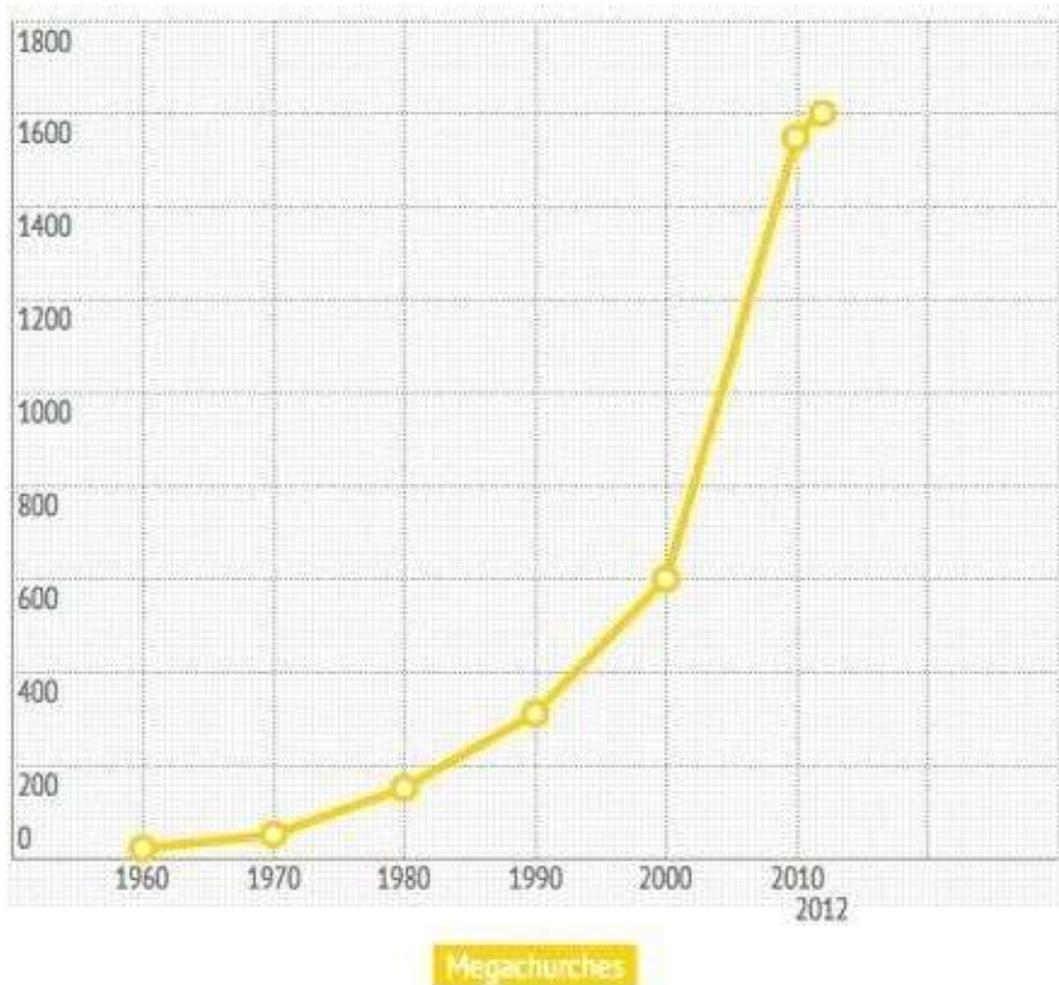
And because they knew every other church in town was trying the same thing, they had to make sure that next week at their church was better than last week in order to keep the people coming back.

This led someone to quip, “Church Growth – (1) advertise; (2) let people know about product benefits; and (3) be nice to new people.”

And the observable fact is that it worked! Churches that employed these strategies *did* grow. And so much so, they gave rise to a new kind of church – the megachurch.

In the 1970s, when the church growth movement was getting started, there were less than 100 churches with more than 2000 members (the accepted size of a megachurch). By 2012, there were 1600.

Megachurches in the US



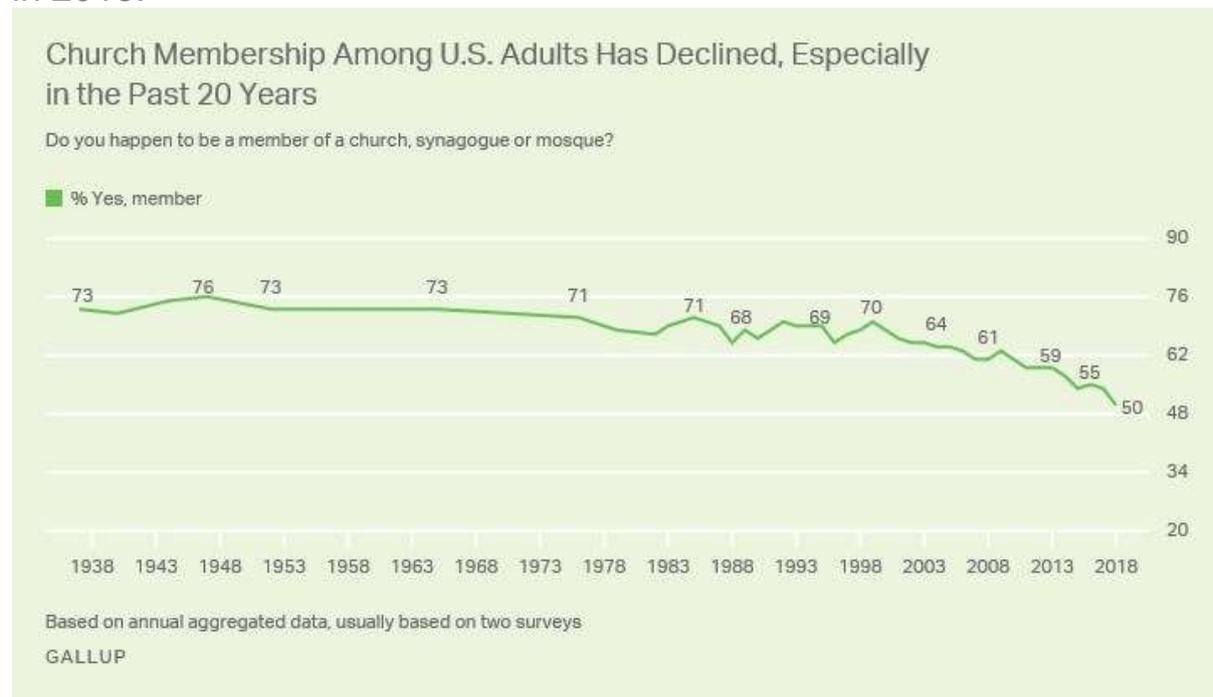
©2013 EdStetzer.com

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

The number of megachurches in America nearly doubled during every decade over the last fifty years. In 1960, there was one megachurch for

every 7.5 million Americans. In 2010, there was one for every 200,000 Americans. In fact, (fun fact) there are as many megachurches today in the greater Nashville area as there were in the entire country in 1960.

But as good as this sounds, it has to be compared with general church attendance records across the US. When you look at them you see that church membership has dropped from 71 percent in 1973 to 50 percent in 2018.

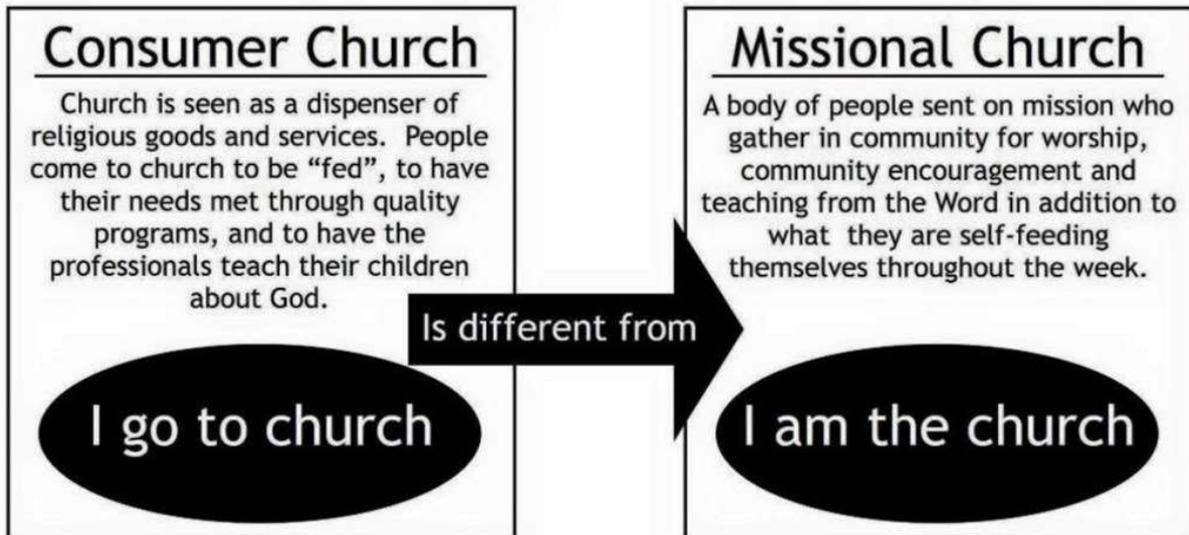


In other words, the US has more megachurches than ever before and less people attending churches than ever before.

I'm not suggesting all megachurches are bad. It could be argued that church membership stats would be even worse had it not been for megachurches. But as a strategy to reach more people with the gospel, the church growth movement, by its own measure, has failed.

As I said earlier, many of us have been calling the church to abandon the attractional mode and shift toward a more missional approach, one where growth isn't merely measured by the 3 B's; **bodies, bucks, and buildings**.

We've yearned for churches that aren't simply purveyors of religious good and services, but communities of mission-shaped disciples.



I thought we were making progress. I was under the impression pastors and church planters were getting the message. I honestly thought the church was shifting from its attractional stance to a more missional one.

Then the coronavirus hit, and churches went into lockdown, shuttering all their services and ministries and putting everything online.

And the result?

Since COVID-19 hit, church growth has spiked 300 per cent!

That’s right, according to the weekly polling undertaken by Carey Nieuwhof’s [Church Pulse Weekly](#) in association with Barna Research, 49% of all churches are growing right now.

Compare that to the 10-15% that were growing before the pandemic was unleashed.

Nieuwhof [reports](#), *“So literally in 30 days, we’ve moved from a tiny percentage of churches growing to virtually half of all churches growing. What’s even more surprising is that the growth trend holds up in every church size category... if you have 75 people attending, 750 or 7500.”*

You’d think this was a good thing, and Carey Nieuwhof clearly thinks it is. But I don’t.

It’s the church growth movement on steroids!

The church growth movement began before the Internet. Back then, “church shoppers” had to drive around to their few favorite churches to try what each one had to offer on any given Sunday. The bigger ones advertised on billboards and television, but it was still a “try-before-you-buy” arrangement.

Then, with the Internet and the proliferation of church websites and advertising campaigns, church shoppers could check out who was preaching or what was on offer (like viewing a menu) and then attend whichever service caught their fancy. But they still had to get in their car and turn up to the service.

Now that all these church services are online every Sunday, they don’t even need to leave the comfort of their own home. Church shopping has taken on a whole new meaning. It’s UberEats for churches.

And every time someone logs onto an online church service, even for just part of the time, it’s recorded as an attendance and up, up, up go the numbers.

My grave fear is that this spike in online attendance will be as illusory as the growth of megachurches last century. It will serve to mask the reality that less and less people are devoted to a wholehearted commitment to Christ, and more and more people see church as an event, a shot in the arm, a convenient uplift that doesn’t challenge their everyday life in any way.

*There’s an old marketing saying that goes, “**What you win them with, you win them to.**”*

If you’re winning people to a ten or fifteen minute viewing of a prepackaged worship and teaching experience, devoid of community, mission, correction, reconciliation or justice, you’re not growing the church. You’re fostering religious consumers.

Please don’t mishear me. I have no doubt that in all those hours and hours of online content there is plenty of beautiful biblical teaching and God-honoring worship.

To all those erstwhile pastors and worship leaders and tech people who are engineering all these services to be accessed online, all power to you!

You've got to do whatever you can to maintain a semblance of belonging during this lockdown.

But my fear is that this deadly virus might cause the kind of glitch in church-business-as-usual that sets us back 25 years, competing with each other to attract the largest audience share, expecting less and less of our viewers, and mistakenly calling it "church growth."

by Michael Frost