

New Models of Theological Education in the Megachurches

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The world of theological education is changing. The Association of Theological Schools, which accredits about 250 theological schools in the United States and Canada, asked me to research and write a perspective piece for its new multi-year “Theological Schools and the Church Project.”¹ Based on that research, I have concluded that because of new technology, the easy availability of educational resources, and the dramatic growth in educational alternatives, seminaries no longer corner the market on theological education. In many ways, the education of church leaders has become “globalized”—available to more people in more ways than ever before. To paraphrase the title and main point of Thomas Friedman’s recent bestseller, *the world of theological education is flat*.²

The Growing Impact of Megachurches

Most congregations in the United States are small: seven in ten have a weekly attendance under 100. For some time, the growing edge and most energetic segment in American religion have been the megachurches. In 2005, there were 1,210 Protestant churches in the U.S. with at least 2,000 in weekly attendance, which was almost twice the number in 2000. During the same period, the average attendance in these churches increased by 57% (from 2,279 to 3,585). Churches this large require a sizable staff. The average megachurch has 20 full-time/9 part-time ministerial staff and 22 full-time/15 part-time administrative staff. As might be expected, these figures vary substantially, depending on the size of the congregation.³

Church Size	Ave. Income	FT min. & admin. Staff	Volunteers 5hr+	Median 5 yr growth rate
1,800-1,999	\$3.7 million	21	126	38%
2,000-4,999	\$5.2 million	36	236	44%
5,000-9,999	\$9.14 million	64	533	56%
10,000+	\$24.8 million	131	904	74%

¹ Timothy P. Weber, “The Seminaries and the Churches: Looking for New Relationships,” *Theological Education*, 44, number 1 (2008): 65-91.

² Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

³ See Scott Thumma, Dave Travis, and Warren Bird, “Megachurches Today, 2005: Summary of Research Findings,” Hartford Institute of Religion Research (Hartford, CT, 2005), available at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_research.html. See also Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond the Megachurch Myths: What Can We Learn from America’s Largest Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

In the last decade or two many of America's largest churches have become important centers of theological education. These so-called "teaching churches" offer nationally advertised and well-attended ministry and leadership conferences. For example, Willow Creek Community Church schedules a number of annual conferences that attract attendees on-site and via-satellite by the thousands; and other churches have had similar success. In some cases, such conferences have generated new church networks that are larger than many denominations.⁴ In short, these teaching churches provide an easily accessible, practical, and even inspirational exposure to issues that church leaders really care about.

While these conferences are well-attended and extremely popular, some sponsors have suspected that providing extensive information and inspiration are not sufficient to change leaders and their churches. In 2000, the Leadership Network⁵ launched a pilot project to help nine teaching churches move from "information to influence." Using a more hands-on mentoring model, they are able to provide selected church leaders with personal consulting, roundtable forums, long-term coaching, and in-house residency and shadowing. In the project's first four years, the nine churches held 500 events that served 17,000 churches and other ministries and 61,000 people.⁶ To manage this new approach, all nine churches established separate non-profit organizations for planning, programming, and fund raising.⁷ In certain respects, then, the momentum has shifted from school-based to church-based theological education. While seminaries have the decided edge in the academic study of Scripture and tradition, many church leaders have concluded that there are better alternatives for the training of effective church leaders

Church-based Theological Education

Given changes in the religious ecology in which theological schools find themselves, many institutions are questioning their historic mission. To use the language of the marketplace: are schools in the business of preparing professional clergy or are they in the business of providing theological education for the churches? While many schools debate that issue, many megachurches have taken matters into their own hands. All nine teaching churches in the Leadership Network's pilot project also have significant "inside" programs for lay theological education; and many other megachurches are also breaking new ground in adult education.

⁴ The Willow Creek Association has 10,500 member congregations from 90 denominations in 35 countries.

⁵ The website for the Leadership Network may be found at www.leadnet.org.

⁶ Andy Williams, "How Teaching Churches Add Influence to Information: From Exploration to Deep Drilling," Leadership Network (2005), 2. The study is available at <http://www.pursuantgroup.com/leadnet/advance/nov05s1.htm>.

⁷ For a list of the participating teaching churches, see the appendix.

In addition to the nine churches in the Leadership Network’s pilot project, I surveyed five other megachurches to discover what they were doing in the theological education of adults.⁸ Their programs vary considerably in terms of their size, format, educational goals, educational seriousness, and structure; but all of them are substantial attempts to take adult Christian education to “the next level.” This is not the place to provide a detailed analysis of these programs; but it is possible to make some general observations about what they are doing.

- **What’s in a name?** One indication that these churches are moving beyond the older adult education model is their choice of names for their new programs: Disciple U,⁹ North Coast U,¹⁰ Ginghamburg U,¹¹ Spiritual Formation Institute,¹² Fellowship Institute,¹³ and The Bethlehem Institute,¹⁴ to cite a few. Such names make it clear that what is being offered is not “your grandparents’ Sunday school class.” These programs are different: they are attempting to dig deeper.
- **Curriculum.** Course offerings differ widely, both in terms of educational levels and subject matter. Some churches distinguish between beginner, intermediate, and more advanced courses. Some courses require reading and homework; and some do not. Some churches offer more or less a set curriculum of survey courses in OT, NT, theology, history, apologetics, and mission—and offer a diploma or certificate for completing the prescribed program. Others provide a wider variety of classes in life skills (parenting, marriage, dating, personal finances, art, basic car care), Bible knowledge, theology (specific issues, comparative religions, business ethics, works of C.S. Lewis, popular culture issues, etc), and ministry skills (music and worship, how to teach the Bible, mission-trip preparation, spiritual formation, small group leadership, etc). A very few churches offer college- or graduate-level courses, usually in conjunction with an accredited institution.
- **Format.** Most courses meet weekly for 1, 1.5, or 2 hours and last for only 2, 4, or 6 weeks. The exceptions are the seriously academic courses that may go for 10 or 12 weeks. Most churches schedule their classes during multiple “terms,” usually in the fall, winter, and spring, and sometimes offer special, one-time events in the summers. In addition to their weekly classes, some churches schedule one-time-

⁸ First Presbyterian Church, Boulder, CO; First Presbyterian Church, Colorado Springs, CO; Redeemer Presbyterian Church, NYC; The Chapel, Akron, OH; and Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN.

⁹ Wooddale Church, www.wooddale.org.

¹⁰ North Coast Church, <http://www.northcoastchurch.com/ncu/index.html>

¹¹ Ginghamburg Church (United Methodist), <http://ginghamsburg.org/ministry/adult.htm>

¹² New Song Church, Irvine, CA, <http://sfi.newsong.net/>

¹³ Fellowship Bible Church, LittleRock, AR, <http://www.fbclr.com/grow/FellowshipInstitute.asp>

¹⁴ Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, <http://www.bbcmpls.org/>

only Saturday seminars that may last all morning or even into the afternoon. In one church with a set curriculum, the same class is offered in three different “sections” during the week: 6:00 to 7:30 a.m. and 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. on Thursdays, and 6:30 to 8:00 pm on Mondays. Most churches schedule their classes during the week, frequently in conjunction with youth, music, or other programs (and often after a common meal), or on Sunday evenings so as not to compete with their other Sunday-morning educational offerings. In those congregations without the more traditional fellowship-based, life-stage adult classes, the new-style courses are offered Sunday mornings as well. One church with adult life-stage classes offers other short-term courses at the same time, as elective offerings, so that adult class members move in and out of their large fellowship groups as interest dictates.

- **Faculty.** Megachurches with such innovative programs emphasize the importance of qualified faculty. In some cases, the churches themselves already possess such teachers in their memberships; but frequently churches look to the outside, to faculty members from nearby academic institutions, proven leaders of specialized ministries, or other experts in their fields. One church in Manhattan has corporate officers from some of NYC’s leading investment houses offering classes in personal finances. In short, not just anybody is allowed to teach: they must be qualified to do so. Quality is a major concern.
- **Staff support and financing.** Since these programs are difficult to “add on,” they take considerable administrative leadership and oversight. Most churches that develop such programs eventually must have a dedicated staff to manage them. Of course, these programs do not necessarily start out requiring large, new staffs, but as they get larger, staffing needs increase. None of these programs supports themselves financially because fees are either non-existent or are kept to a minimum. Students are usually charged for required reading materials, class hand-outs or workbooks, and the like; and some churches charge “tuition”—commonly from \$25 to \$50 per course—if students are pursuing a certificate or the class is being taught by an outsider who will be paid an honorarium. But none of these charges is sufficient to cover even basic expenses, which means that the churches must budget to cover staff salaries, advertising, basic overhead, and the like. Likewise, churches use different structures for governance: does a church committee oversee the project, an advisory board consisting of those both inside and outside the church, etc? Approaches vary.
- **An integral part of the church’s mission.** All of the churches surveyed see their programs in lay theological education as central to their mission. As American culture becomes increasingly postmodern, post-denominational, and post-Christian, the role of lay people is even more crucial in promoting Kingdom business. Accordingly, they need to be prepared to assume a more strategic place in a society that no longer privileges organized religion and the Christian faith. Thus these churches develop these programs to play an integral part in their

overall vision for ministry. They support, rather than compete against the other essential emphases on corporate worship and small groups.

- **Partnerships with other educational institutions.** Most of the churches surveyed have not developed partnerships with neighboring Christian universities or seminaries; but there are exceptions. Bethel Theological Seminary has made Willow Creek Community Church an essential part of its Master of Arts in Transformational Leadership degree program: students take their “academic” courses in St. Paul, then move to Willow Creek, where they take their courses in practical theology and become ministry apprentices. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL, has worked out a similar arrangement with The Chapel in Akron, Ohio. The student thus gets to experience the best of both worlds and learns how to integrate the rigors of graduate-level theological education with practical training in the ministry.

I believe that this is the next “new thing” in theological education—the development of new partnerships between such megachurches and theological schools. In a nutshell, my hunch is that such partnerships will go through a number of developmental steps:

The church uses seminary faculty as teachers in its educational programs. This is the easiest place to begin. Such exposure will do both churches and seminaries good.

The church becomes an extension site for the offering of occasional seminary classes. This is the next logical step; and from the standpoint of the accrediting agencies, it is an easy step to take, especially if the church is close enough to the seminary campus so that students retain easy access to the school’s various academic and student services. Some church members may want to “test the waters” of graduate theological education by enrolling as an auditor or even a special student (most seminaries make such a thing quite simple), which would be a win-win for both church and school.

The church and school become partners in the training of ministerial students. As described above, it is possible to create an authentic partnership between churches and theological schools. Of course, such partnerships are complicated from both sides—each entity must bring something substantial to the table. The partnering church must have the ministry and staffing resources to provide students with significant apprenticeship experiences, not just field-education assignments; and the schools must be ready to cooperate in how a significant part of their curriculum is delivered.

As the current economic crisis works its way through both schools and churches, these institutions will be looking for ways to do things differently. Already a number of long-established theological schools have had to face institutional life-and-death decisions involving draconian steps that include selling off property, merging with other

schools, and cutting back on programs and staffs. They must adjust to declining denominational support and the emergence of non-seminary pathways to ordination. Competition for students and the inability to maintain traditional programs will bring many schools to the brink.

Now may be the time for theological schools to forge new partnerships with churches to deliver accessible theological education to a larger number of people using church-based educational formats. Some of America's largest churches are already demonstrating how it might be done.

Appendix

The Leadership Network's Nine Pilot Teaching Churches

Community Church of Joy, Glendale, AZ
Joy Leadership Center
www.joylead.org

Fellowship Bible Church, Little Rock, AR
Fellowship Association
www.fellowshipassociates.com

Fellowship Bible Church North, Richardson, TX
Center for Church Based Training
www.ccbt.org

Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church, Tipp City, OH
Ginghamsburg Global
www.ginhamsburg.org

New Song Church, Irvine, CA
www.newsong.org

New Hope Christian Fellowship, Honolulu, HI
New Hope International
www.enhi.org

North Coast Church, Vista, CA
North Coast Training Network
www.northcoastchurch.com/resources.htm

Vineyard Church, Columbus, OH
Vineyard Leadership Institute
www.vineyardcolumbus.org/resources/vli/

Wooddale Church, Eden Prairie, MN
Wooddale Center
www.wooddale.org/wooddalecenter