

Megachurches experience growth through multiple satellite locations

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Megachurches known for big buildings, big schools and big crowds continue to grow. But a new study detects shifts in the way they are expanding.

“The general growth pattern is that about 90 percent of mega-churches report that they are growing, and many of them at very fast rates,” said Warren Bird, a researcher at the [Leadership Network](#), a Dallas-based church think-tank, and co-author of the study.

The average megachurch saw a growth of about 50 percent in attendance in the last five years; about 10 percent reported a decline or stagnation.

A service at Houston's Lakewood Church, where Joel Osteen is pastor.

The expansion of many of the nation’s estimated 1,250 mega-churches is occurring through satellite campuses, and they are shifting their training emphasis by running fewer schools and more pastors’ conferences.

“You have a tremendous amount of growth but not ... larger and larger buildings,” said study co-author Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary.

The churches, with worship attendance of 2,000 or more each weekend, increasingly are using satellite locations, with 37 percent using them in 2008, compared to 27 percent in 2005 and 22 percent in 2000.

The researchers found on average, megachurches surveyed this year had offered four services at each of two satellite locations each weekend.

Five percent of megachurches had six or more locations, where between one dozen and two dozen services occur each weekend.

Almost a third of the mega-churches surveyed—30 percent—said they had started using satellite campuses in the last five years.

Outreach magazine, a church leadership publication based in Vista, Calif., reports that for the first time, all the congregations on its list of 100 largest churches in the United States are attended by more than 7,000 people. It notes that experts predict half of all mega-churches will have multiple locations by 2010.

But as they continue to grow, fewer megachurches are involved in TV and radio ministry. The percentage of megachurches with a radio ministry dropped from 44 percent in 2000 to 24 percent in 2008. Likewise, the percentage with television ministries dropped from 38 percent to 23 percent.

Fewer also are operating Christian schools. In 2000, 42 percent of megachurches surveyed said a Christian elementary or secondary school was part of their ministry. This year, that figured dropped to 25 percent. The percentage with an affiliated Bible school or institute dropped from 30 percent in 2000 to 20 percent in 2008.

At the same time, more churches are offering conferences for pastors or other ministry leaders, increasing from 47 percent in 2000 to 54 percent in 2008.

Even though the majority of megachurches are affiliated with denominations, researchers said offering conferences, resources and mission opportunities suggests the rise of “mini-denominations.”

“They are creating alternative ways for churches and for religious people to get resources, to do ministry, to do missions, to connect with other churches,” said Thumma, author of [*Beyond Megachurch Myths*](#).

“All the things that were typically done ... from the national denominational structure are being done at a local-church level.”