

Small congregations err in copying megachurch style, experts say

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ATLANTA (BNG)—Most any pastor of a congregation located near a megachurch has heard suggestions of how to emulate the worship, technology or hospitality ministry of a fast-growing neighbor.

“Yes, I get those,” said Shaun King, senior pastor at Johns Creek Baptist Church in Atlanta, a congregation located within 10 miles of two satellite campuses of North Point Community Church, the multisite megachurch led by evangelist Andy Stanley.

It’s only natural that members or visitors to Johns Creek suggest the congregation adopt some of the state-of-the-art practices that push North Point weekly attendance to 36,000, King said.

“Our members are neighbors with their members ... and rubbing shoulders and learning from each other,” he said.

Recent and long-time research consistently shows megachurches have much—including incredible attendance growth figures—to be envied.

But congregational health experts say churches jealous of such trends need to tread carefully in copying the styles of worship and ministry that contribute to phenomenal attendance figures.

Report documents megachurch growth

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research recently released its 2015 Megachurch Report. It documented megachurches—congregations of 2,000

members or more—are growing rapidly. Very large megachurches—those with attendance of 30,000 or more—reported a median growth rate of 26 percent during a five-year period, the report said.

Nearly half of megachurches average five services per weekend, and 62 percent of those services are held at multiple locations.

“Overall, the worship at these very large churches continue to be contemporary, highly technological and is self-described as inspirational, joyful, nurturing of faith, thought-provoking and filled with the sense of God’s presence,” the report said.

Many smaller churches want to adopt some or all of the practices of megachurches to reverse downward trends in attendance. But the success of megachurches does not always rest on outward signs such as worship styles or having dynamic leaders who ooze charisma, experts insist.

Willingness to change spurs success

It’s actually something much riskier than that, said Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and co-author of the study released in early December.

“Part of the success of the megachurch is its willingness to change and adopt and alter what you are doing,” Thumma said. “It really helps the church keep growing and developing.”

The demographics of the megachurch also drive its growth, he said. Those with younger pastors seem to be more flexible and grow faster, he said. However, those with older memberships have higher rates of member commitment.

“You want to be always reinventing yourself so you can draw from both sides of that dynamic,” Thumma said.

Smaller churches retain members

But smaller churches likely would want to avoid copying some aspects of megachurch life—turnover and infrequent attendance among members.

Megachurches are less likely than smaller churches to have regular attenders, Thumma said. Smaller churches also have more long-term members.

“As many are coming in the front door as going out the back door” of a megachurch, Thumma said.

Megachurches face same challenges as other congregations

And megachurches, just like everyone else, are struggling to attract and keep young adults, according to the Hartford report. That fact didn’t escape George Bullard, a South Carolina-based church consultant.

The Hartford report contains much to allay the concerns of smaller churches and to keep them from envying those much larger congregations.

“Nonmegachurch pastors and their churches often have misconceptions about megachurch,” said Bullard, president of the Columbia Partnership. “I want to demythologize those. I want them to see megachurches are having some of the same challenges in reaching young adults, as an example.”

“Non-megachurch pastors and their churches often feel they must compete with megachurches,” Bullard added. “I want to emphasize the need to see their own unique mission and vision and for them not to be copycats of megachurches. ”

Be true to your calling

That’s an argument Bullard and other church consultants counter with a major principle behind successful church development—be true to your

own calling.

“The best approach is not to copy what another church does, but to determine what are your own strengths and calling and community context,” said David Hull, southeast coordinator for the Center for Healthy Churches.

That’s easily forgotten when a megachurch, or any local church, is enjoying rapid growth, Hull said.

“Other churches see that, and sometimes the temptation is to say, ‘Let’s do what they are doing.’”

The problem is, that approach likely ignores the smaller congregation’s core strengths, he said.

“That’s grafting onto something that may not be who you really are,” Hull said.

In fact, those are the same principles that make megachurches successful. In 2006, the Hartford Institute published 10 suggestions titled “What Can My Church Learn from a Megachurch?”

Tips include:

- Don’t strive for size; strive to serve God.
- Know your strengths and put them to work.
- Create participants, not members.
- Whatever you do, do it with excellence.

As a consultant, Hull encourages any church to embrace those suggestions.

“I try to lead our churches to do every one of those things,” he said.

Similar principles help Johns Creek Baptist stay focused when proposals arise to emulate megachurch programs and ministries, King said.

“We stay on course by remembering who we are trying to be in our own unique space,” he said.