

# U.S. Megachurches and New Patterns of Global Mission

Robert J. Priest, Douglas Wilson, and Adelle Johnson

Robert Wuthnow, a leading sociologist of religion, points out that while “the demographic center of Christianity is shifting to the global South, the organizational and material resources of global Christianity remain heavily concentrated” in North America and its churches. He argues that missiologists have not sufficiently appreciated the expanding role of American congregations, and especially of American megachurches, in shaping global Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Megachurches and their pastors are forging influential new patterns of North American congregational involvement in global mission. Their influence on mission patterns often surpasses the influence of denominational leaders, mission executives, or leading missiologists. And yet neither in missiological scholarship nor in the emerging new research on megachurches<sup>2</sup> do we find a systematic treatment of megachurch involvement in global mission. This article addresses this lacuna.

## The Research

Late in 2007 a 113-item survey on congregational involvement in global mission was sent to the person in charge of missions at 1,230 megachurches—that is, churches reported as averaging 2,000 or more in weekend worship.<sup>3</sup> Of this initial mailing, 12 surveys were returned as undeliverable. With additional follow-up,<sup>4</sup> 547 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 45 percent.<sup>5</sup> However, only 405 surveys reported that their church had an average weekend attendance of 2,000 or more. And since this is the commonly accepted definition of a megachurch, we used only the data drawn from these 405 surveys for the purposes of this article.<sup>6</sup>

## The Churches We Surveyed

These churches had an average (mean) weekend worship attendance of 4,312 and a median attendance of 3,100. Table 1 shows the size distribution.

Nearly half of these churches (47 percent) were from the South, with 24 percent from the West, another 24 percent from the Mid-

TABLE 1. Average attendance

| Attendance    | Churches |       |
|---------------|----------|-------|
|               | no.      | %     |
| >15,000       | 7        | 1.7   |
| 10,001–15,000 | 12       | 3.0   |
| 7,501–10,000  | 20       | 4.9   |
| 5,001–7,500   | 49       | 12.1  |
| 3,501–5,000   | 79       | 19.5  |
| 2,501–3,500   | 104      | 25.7  |
| 2,000–2,500   | 134      | 33.1  |
| TOTAL         | 405      | 100.0 |



Robert J. Priest (left) is Professor of Mission and Intercultural Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, where he directs the Ph.D. program in Intercultural Studies. —rpriest@tiu.edu

Douglas Wilson serves with Avant Ministries, Kansas City, Missouri, as an Intercultural Ministry Specialist. A missionary since 1987, he served twelve years in the Republic of Mali.

Adelle M. Johnson serves as Director of Research for Avant Ministries, after having served as a corporate Marketing Research Consultant for eighteen years.

west, and only 5 percent from the Northeast. Nearly a quarter of these churches (23 percent) reported a level of diversity where no single race or ethnicity represented more than 70 percent of total attenders. Of the other three-quarters of the churches, 4.5 percent were predominantly African American,<sup>7</sup> less than 1 percent predominantly Hispanic, 0 percent predominantly Asian, and 72 percent predominantly non-Hispanic white. In all, 37 percent were nondenominational, with 20 percent Southern Baptist, 6 percent Assemblies of God, 5 percent United Methodist, 2 percent each for Calvary Chapel, ELCA, and Four Square Gospel, and so on. In terms of age, 59 percent were founded before 1971, with 14 percent founded after 1990. The average 2007 total reported expenditure per church was \$6,869,118.

## Commitment to Global Mission

Perhaps the survey’s simplest measure of commitment to global mission was the answer to the question, “What is the approximate dollar amount of all your church’s expenditures in support of ministries and needs outside the United States in 2007?” The average (mean) amount was \$690,900, which comes to just over 10 percent of total annual expenditures. But as table 2 shows, there was wide variability in the percentage of annual expenditures given in support of global missions.<sup>8</sup> Only 349 (out of 405) respondents answered both the question about total annual church expenditures and the question about total expenditures for ministry abroad. Since the percentages in this

TABLE 2. Proportion of total annual expenditures directed abroad

| Percent spent abroad | Churches |       |
|----------------------|----------|-------|
|                      | no.      | %     |
| >25                  | 18       | 5.2   |
| 16–25                | 45       | 12.9  |
| 11–15                | 57       | 16.3  |
| 6–10                 | 106      | 30.4  |
| 3–5                  | 70       | 20.1  |
| 0–2                  | 53       | 15.2  |
| TOTAL                | 349      | 100.0 |

table were calculated based on the answers to both questions, we are able to report results only from these 349 surveys.

Over a third of megachurches direct 5 percent or less of their total expenditures toward ministry abroad, with another third directing 6–10 percent abroad, and a final third directing more than 10 percent toward ministry abroad.

## Support for Career Missionaries

An alternative and traditional way to consider congregational mission commitment involves asking “How many long-term missionaries serving outside the USA does your church support financially?” Table 3 provides the data on the response to this question.

The median number of career missionaries supported was 16, and the mean 31.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the highest amount of annual support given to any single missionary or missionary family, the median was \$12,000 and the mean \$18,123. Many of these churches are committed to supporting career missionaries, with 61 percent of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that “Western career missionaries are strategically important at

this time, and should be generously supported." Of course this means that 39 percent either disagreed or only mildly agreed with this statement.

Forty-five percent agreed that "Our church is reluctant to support long-term missionaries who are not members of our church." Those agreeing with this statement provide support to fewer long-term missionaries<sup>10</sup> but do not support them at appreciably higher levels.

Financial support for career missionaries now competes against newer priorities, with support for career missionaries a shrinking proportion of total expenditures. In the survey, respondents were asked to numerically compare changes at their church in the last five years in five areas, with the answer "large increase" coded as +1, "unchanged" or "slight increase" coded as 0, and "decrease" coded as -1. On each of five areas, more churches claimed a "large increase" than claimed a "decrease." But the one area where this was barely true related to increase in support of career missionaries (see list below).

**TABLE 3. Number of supported long-term missionaries**

| Number of long-term missionaries | Churches   |              |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------|
|                                  | no.        | %            |
| >100                             | 18         | 4.7          |
| 61-100                           | 28         | 7.3          |
| 41-60                            | 36         | 9.4          |
| 21-40                            | 76         | 19.7         |
| 11-20                            | 84         | 21.8         |
| 6-10                             | 58         | 15.1         |
| 3-5                              | 34         | 8.8          |
| 1-2                              | 28         | 7.3          |
| 0                                | 23         | 6.0          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                     | <b>385</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

| Mean increase | In   |
|---------------|--|
| 0.388         | average weekly attendance                                      |
| 0.463         | total annual church income                                     |
| 0.455         | total financial expenditures for all outside the United States |
| 0.496         | number of church members going on short-term mission trips     |
| 0.127         | number of long-term missionaries supported                     |

Strong increases in average attendance and total church income were matched by a strong increase in total financial expenditures for all ministries outside the United States and a strong increase in the number of church members going on short-term mission (STM) trips abroad. By contrast, the reported increase in the number of career missionaries supported was low, especially given the well-known tendency of survey respondents to skew their answers in a positive direction. In short, for these growing churches the large increase in expenditures for ministry abroad was not channeled into a corresponding increase in support of career missionaries. Such a congregational softening of support for full-time missionaries is possibly one factor in the recent decline in the total number of Protestant full-time missionaries from the United States.<sup>11</sup>

### Short-Term Missionaries

In 2007 megachurches sent a median of 100 and a mean of 159 people abroad on short-term mission trips organized and sponsored by the church. The number of people traveling on a domestic mission trip of two days or more organized and sponsored by

their church was lower, with a median of 70 per church. Table 4 provides the distribution of STM participants who traveled abroad on short-term mission trips per church.

Roughly 3.7 percent of those in a megachurch on a given weekend traveled abroad on a short-term mission trip in 2007. The number of international mission trips taken did not differ appreciably between evangelical and mainline churches, but was somewhat lower for African American churches (with a mean of 49; mission-trip destinations for African American churches were also more likely to feature countries in Africa or with significant African-diaspora populations, such as Trinidad or Brazil). Fully 94 percent of megachurch high school youth programs organize short-term mission trips abroad for their youth, with 78 percent doing so one or more times per year.

**TABLE 4. Number of short-term missionaries who traveled abroad in 2007**

| Number of short-term missionaries | Churches   |              |
|-----------------------------------|------------|--------------|
|                                   | no.        | %            |
| >500                              | 16         | 4.1          |
| 301-500                           | 18         | 4.6          |
| 201-300                           | 47         | 12.1         |
| 151-200                           | 47         | 12.1         |
| 101-150                           | 62         | 15.9         |
| 51-100                            | 111        | 28.5         |
| 21-50                             | 61         | 15.7         |
| 1-20                              | 25         | 6.4          |
| 0                                 | 2          | 0.5          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                      | <b>389</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Robert Wuthnow estimates that nearly a third of all U.S. missions funding is currently channeled in support of short-term missions.<sup>12</sup> With an annual megachurch average of 159 short-term mission participants traveling abroad, expending an average of \$1,400 per traveler,<sup>13</sup> this comes to 32 percent of the total reported megachurch annual expenditures directed abroad, seemingly confirming Wuthnow's estimate.

Prior research has shown that the majority of mission trips abroad are for less than two weeks<sup>14</sup> and that most short-term missionaries travel in groups ranging from a small handful up to a couple hundred or more.<sup>15</sup> Our megachurch survey asked which

**TABLE 5. Top destinations of three groups**

| Megachurch mission trips | U.S. tourists <sup>a</sup> | U.S. students studying abroad <sup>b</sup> |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Mexico                   | Mexico                     | United Kingdom                             |
| Guatemala                | Canada                     | Italy                                      |
| Honduras                 | United Kingdom             | Spain                                      |
| Dominican Rep.           | France                     | France                                     |
| Nicaragua                | Puerto Rico                | China                                      |
| Brazil                   | Italy                      | Australia                                  |
| South Africa             | Germany                    | Mexico                                     |
| Kenya                    | China                      | Germany                                    |
| Uganda                   | Bahamas                    | Ireland                                    |
| Haiti                    | Jamaica                    | Costa Rica                                 |

<sup>a</sup> Based on statistics for 2007, World Tourism Organization, "Outward Tourism by Country, 2003-2007: United States," [www.wtoelibrary.org/content/v486k6/?v=search](http://www.wtoelibrary.org/content/v486k6/?v=search).

<sup>b</sup> Karin Fischer, "For American Students, Study Abroad Numbers Continue to Climb, but Financial Obstacles Loom," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 55, no. 13 (2008): A24-25.

destination country received the most short-term missionaries from their church in 2007 (see table 5). If one lists in order the top ten country destinations for megachurch short-term missions and contrasts this with the top destinations for U.S. tourists and

the top destinations for studying abroad, a number of fruitful observations can be made.

Tourism prioritizes Europe and countries with beach resorts more than does short-term missions. Study abroad is markedly Eurocentric; STM is not. The only top-ten STM destination that is also a top-ten destination for tourism or for study abroad is Mexico, doubtless because of its size and nearness to the United States. That is, the divergence in destinations would suggest that motivations for short-term missions diverge from motivations for tourism or study abroad.

One clear focus of STM is on regions that are markedly less well off materially. The accompanying list shows the breakdown

| Percent | Destination   |
|---------|---------------|
| 59      | Latin America |
| 20      | Africa        |
| 9       | Asia          |
| 9       | Europe        |
| 2       | Middle East   |
| 1       | Oceania       |

overall in megachurch STM destinations and hints at another key distinctive of STM.

Megachurch STM trips are primarily going to the countries that Philip Jenkins identifies as new centers of global Christianity.<sup>16</sup> The country with the highest number of megachurch visitors per capita is Guatemala, a coun-

try that the Pew Foundation reports has a population that is 60 percent Charismatic or Pentecostal Christian.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, top STM destinations in Africa feature heavily Christian countries like Uganda, South Africa, or Kenya—not Chad, Mauritania, or Niger. If we examine these STM country destinations in terms of the typology used by David Barrett and Todd Johnson in distinguishing World A (least evangelized countries), World B (the somewhat evangelized countries), and World C (countries that are most Christian),<sup>18</sup> we discover that 6 percent of megachurches focus STM on countries in World A, 12 percent in World B, and fully 82 percent in the third of the world comprising World C. That is, short-term mission teams are not primarily going into spaces where there are no Christians but are channeling most of their efforts into regions where Christianity is numerically strong. Short-term mission trips involve collaboration with local Christians (and missionaries) in partnership projects designed to strengthen local churches and their witness.

While STM trips frequently combine multiple activities, the following in order of frequency from highest to lowest were the average reported annual number of short-term mission projects per church featuring the following activities:

| Number of trips | Activity on which participants focused |
|-----------------|--|
| 1.72            | building, construction, repair         |
| 1.66            | evangelism, church planting            |
| 1.38            | VBS, children's ministries             |
| 1.17            | medical, health care                   |
| 1.13            | relief and development                 |
| 1.08            | orphans, orphanages                    |
| .72             | vision trip, prayer walk               |
| .72             | music, worship                         |
| .66             | education: teaching English            |
| .55             | education: other                       |
| .53             | sports                                 |
| .49             | art, drama                             |
| .21             | environmental or justice issues        |

While the second item on the list is evangelism and/or church planting, the evidence suggests that this is usually done

in partnership with local Christians. All of the other activities on the list would seem to involve strengthening and supplementing the witness of local churches, rather than serving as independent efforts to evangelize in regions with minimal Christian presence.

Rather than megachurch STM teams going from spaces where there is Christianity to spaces where there is not, megachurch STM teams are going from places where Christianity is present and has comparative material wealth and going to spaces where Christianity is present in the midst of relative material constraint. Only 4 percent of megachurches listed a country for their largest STM destination that the International Monetary Fund identifies as an "advanced economy," with 96 percent identifying their primary STM destinations as ones that the IMF lists as "emerging and developing economies."

To summarize, STM destinations are affected by how near the country is (Mexico is the number one STM destination for 74 megachurches), whether there is a tourism infrastructure (for travel, accommodations, safety) enabling these brief trips, the extent to which there is a Christian presence at the destination site, and the extent to which there is a marked economic difference in the destination. That is, it would appear that megachurch STM is largely a paradigm of partnership, connecting Christians in resource-rich regions of the world with Christians in regions of poverty in joint projects of witness and service.

The following list, based on per capita funding expenditures of a 2005 STM church construction team to Peru, illustrates the funding structure of international STM trips.

The majority of the financial resources—in this case, 81 percent—went toward transportation, food, accommodations, and sightseeing for the North American travelers, with the

*Per capita expenditures of a typical STM church construction team to Peru*

|                             |         |
|-----------------------------|---------|
| Personal expenses           | \$1,215 |
| consisting of:              |         |
| International airfare       | 900     |
| Food and lodging            | 265     |
| Local transportation        | 25      |
| Sightseeing                 | 25      |
| Building supplies, ministry | 285     |
| TOTAL                       | \$1,500 |

remaining 19 percent directly contributing to a benefit for the partnering church. Measured purely in terms of resource transfer, 81 percent of overhead would appear excessive. But each STM traveler also donated free labor, in this instance 50 hours.

In attempting to calculate the value of STM labor, Robert Wuthnow has used a source which suggests that each STM volunteer hour is worth just over \$20,<sup>19</sup> which in this case would mean that each STM participant contributed \$1,000 of labor-value to the host church. The result would be that the host church received a total value of \$1,285 per STM participant. This 2005 team of 33 STM participants, however, included 32 individuals with no experience in construction. Furthermore, were the Peruvian church to contract local professional laborers for the same task, they would pay \$1 per hour, not \$20 per hour. Seen in this light fifty hours of labor in Peru supplies only a value of \$50, not \$1,000. Thus each STM participant on the team, funded with \$1,500, contributed labor worth \$50 locally as well as contributing an additional \$285 in cash toward construction costs—an amount in the local economy worth 285 hours of labor. This gift of a \$335 value per participant is more than the average monthly salary in Lima. Multiplied by 33, it equaled a significant total value (\$11,055) given to the Peruvian partner church. The total figure is equivalent to three times the average annual salary in Lima and is deeply appreciated by the Peruvian partners.

While the above funding pattern is common, some megachurch STM teams provide no financial or material resources to their partners. Others facilitate resource transfers worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Further research on these patterns is needed.

Other important contributions made by STM teams may be less easy to evaluate financially. For example, when white American Christians, in the name of Christ, engaged in lowly manual labor serving Trinidadian black brothers and sisters, this had a powerful impact on those who were historically stigmatized by race, with a value far beyond the actual manual labor itself.<sup>20</sup> Or when indigenous Christians are stigmatized, marginalized, and faced by many closed doors, they often find that partnership with a visiting megachurch STM group opens doors and elevates the visibility and respect given to their ministries—again, a value that cannot be quantified.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, high-status STM groups may provide influential assistance in helping vulnerable populations lobby successfully for social justice.<sup>22</sup> Only recently has research begun to identify the variety of ways in which STM teams make strategic on-field contributions.

Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that North American churches also look for benefits to their own members through STM. Some youth leaders and mission pastors bluntly say that even if STM is of limited value to recipient communities it is nonetheless worthwhile because of positive benefits to the sending congregation or youth program. For example, in *Youthworker* magazine Scott Meier explains that the “real reason” for STM is to benefit the STM participant spiritually.<sup>23</sup> Paul Borthwick acknowledges the limited value of most STM to recipients and states, “The number one purpose of a short-term mission trip is to change the lives of those who participate,”<sup>24</sup> that is, the short-termers. When asked, mission pastors are able to provide a long list of positive benefits of an active STM program for the sending church. This is good but does raise a potential caution. While older models of mission involved more purely altruistic mission expenditures not designed to serve the sending church, STM as a paradigm of mission channels mission funding in ways that serve the interests of the North American sending church as well as (sometimes more than) the interests of those being served.

## Church-to-Church Partnerships

In the conclusion of his research report entitled “Emergent Patterns of Congregational Life and Leadership in the Developing World,” Donald Miller ends with what he calls an immodest proposal “that every church in the United States should create a relationship with a church in the developing world.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, such church-to-church partnerships are already widespread.<sup>26</sup> In our own survey, 94 percent of megachurch mission leaders agreed that American churches should work to establish partnership relations with congregations in other countries. Fully 85 percent reported that their congregation currently has one or more church-to-church partnerships with congregations abroad. (See table 6.)

TABLE 6. Church-to-church partnerships with non-U.S. congregations

| Number of partnerships | Churches |       |
|------------------------|----------|-------|
|                        | no.      | %     |
| >5                     | 119      | 30.4  |
| 2–5                    | 173      | 44.1  |
| 1                      | 41       | 10.5  |
| 0                      | 59       | 15.1  |
| TOTAL                  | 392      | 100.0 |

These partnerships often entail resource-sharing, with 58 percent of megachurches reporting that “resourcing under-resourced churches in other countries” is a priority for them. Almost all megachurches (86 percent) disagreed with the old indigeneity principle that “American Christians should not share material resources with indigenous ministries since this creates dependency.”

Megachurches directly support a median of five national Christian workers in other countries,<sup>27</sup> with an average (mean) maximum support of \$8,650 per worker per year. It appears likely that some of these national Christian workers are supported in the context of these church-to-church partnerships. Furthermore, 48 percent of all megachurches, and 78 percent of African American megachurches, act as their “own sending agency for some or all of the missionaries” whom they support. A significant minority of megachurches (24 percent) will not support long-term missionaries unless they agree to host short-term mission teams from their church. It appears that a significant number of long-term missionaries are supported within the context of partnership ministries initiated and planned by the supporting U.S. megachurch. Megachurch mission pastors in churches with church-to-church partnerships report higher numbers of mission trips that they themselves have been on. Also, the higher the number of mission trips mission pastors have traveled on, the more national Christian workers their church supports. That is, there appears to be a widespread pattern of church-to-church partnerships, supervised or monitored by highly mobile megachurch mission pastors, enabled by field missionaries and national Christian leaders, funded from the U.S. congregational base, linked through short-term mission trips, and carried out as an extension of the U.S. megachurch and its vision for ministry.

## Prioritized Concerns

Each survey respondent was asked to reflect on “the organized activity of your church, its teaching and preaching, its financial expenditures, and the personal commitments of its pastoral staff” and to evaluate the extent to which each of the following was a “prioritized concern of your church,” using a Likert scale from 1 (low priority) to 6 (high priority). The following list shows, in order, the prioritized mission concerns of U.S. megachurches.

| Mean | Concern with                       |
|------|------------------------------------|
| 5.00 | missions to “the unreached”        |
| 4.99 | church planting                    |
| 4.10 | evangelizing the Muslim world      |
| 4.02 | theological education              |
| 3.99 | medical missions                   |
| 3.87 | local Spanish ministries           |
| 3.81 | poverty relief                     |
| 3.75 | resourcing underresourced churches |
| 3.67 | more career missionaries           |
| 3.09 | Bible translation                  |
| 3.05 | racial reconciliation              |
| 2.98 | AIDS in Africa                     |
| 2.85 | social justice                     |
| 2.62 | global sex trade                   |
| 2.41 | Christian publishing               |
| 2.28 | interreligious dialogue            |
| 1.98 | environmental concerns             |

A number of observations can be made about the above list.

Church planting and evangelizing “the unreached” are said to be the highest values, with evangelizing the Muslim world a close third. If we ask about total financial expenditures abroad and the country receiving the most megachurch expenditures, only 12 percent prioritize countries in World A, the least Christian regions, while 35 percent prioritize World B, the somewhat evangelized, and 53 percent prioritize World C, the most evangelized countries of the world. The fact that short-term mission teams are even more exclusively focused on countries with a strong Christian presence (while still reporting that a primary activity of the STM team is evangelism/church planting) would seem to indicate that many churches are simply thinking of all non-Christians as “unreached”—and that any project with an evangelism or witness focus is framed as prioritizing “the unreached,” even though missiologically it might be better understood as a partnership activity. On the one hand, the fact that most megachurches see Bible translation as a relatively low priority would also suggest that most of these churches are not orienting their mission commitments to the least Christian portions of the world. On the other hand, 7 percent of megachurches name a primarily Muslim country as receiving their largest total expenditures. So there is a significant minority of megachurches focused on ministry in the least Christian portions of the world.

Factor analysis showed there was a tendency for churches to have clusters of priorities that correlated highly with each other. One such cluster included social justice, racial reconciliation, the global sex trade, environmental concerns, interreligious dialogue, and poverty. These items form a measure we can name “mission as social engagement.”<sup>28</sup> A second cluster includes missions to “the unreached,” evangelizing the Muslim world, and Bible translation; we may label this cluster “mission as gospel communication.”<sup>29</sup>

These two factors are independent of each other statistically, with megachurches varying in terms of whether they score high on one or the other, both, or neither. Megachurches with higher numbers of ethnic minorities as attenders and on their pastoral staff scored significantly higher on “mission as social engagement”<sup>30</sup> but did not score significantly lower on “mission as gospel communication.” Megachurches that scored higher on “mission as social engagement” were more supportive of church-to-church partnerships abroad<sup>31</sup> and were less concerned that sharing resources might create dependency,<sup>32</sup> while those scoring high on “mission as gospel communication” tended to be less supportive of such partnerships<sup>33</sup> and more concerned that sharing resources would create dependency.<sup>34</sup> Older churches—that is, longer established churches—scored higher on “mission as gospel communication,”<sup>35</sup> while younger churches, founded more recently, scored slightly higher on “mission as social engagement,” although not at a statistically significant level.

A high score on “mission as gospel communication” correlates positively with a commitment to supporting more career missionaries,<sup>36</sup> with frequency of mission conferences,<sup>37</sup> with e-mail circulation of missionary prayer needs,<sup>38</sup> with an interest in “partnering with mission agencies responsive to our concerns,”<sup>39</sup> and with a belief that “mission agencies are in a better position than our congregation to wisely supervise field missionaries.”<sup>40</sup> By contrast, none of these is correlated positively at a statistically significant level with “mission as social engagement.” And indeed “mission as social engagement” is negatively correlated with belief that “mission agencies are in a better position than our congregation to wisely supervise field missionaries.”<sup>41</sup> In short, megachurch “mission as social engagement” does not

appear to have a close connection with the career missionary enterprise.

## The Role of Mission Pastors

Megachurches have large full-time ministerial staffs, as seen in table 7. (This table does not include office support staff or maintenance staff.) In some ways megachurches are structurally less like small single-pastor congregations than they are like seminaries with multiple faculty. And indeed their full-time ministerial staffs are, on average, larger than the faculties of ATS-accredited seminaries.<sup>42</sup>

TABLE 7. Full-time ministerial staff

| Number on staff | Churches |       |
|-----------------|----------|-------|
|                 | no.      | %     |
| >35             | 77       | 19.2  |
| 26–35           | 48       | 12.0  |
| 16–25           | 102      | 25.5  |
| 7–15            | 164      | 41.0  |
| <7              | 9        | 2.3   |
| TOTAL           | 400      | 100.0 |

And just as a seminary may have one or more faculty members devoted to missions, so many megachurches have someone on pastoral staff designated as the missions pastor.

In our survey directed to the person in charge of missions at each congregation, 4 percent of respondents self-identified as the senior pastor, 6 percent as a lay leader, 17 percent as “other,” and fully 73 percent as mission pastor. That is, roughly three-quarters of megachurches have a full-time person on the pastoral staff focused on global mission.

Mission pastors have had extensive experience with short-term missions, having taken an average (mean) of 25 mission trips abroad, and with only 1 percent reporting that they have never traveled abroad on a short-term mission trip. By contrast, 38 percent of mission pastors report that they have served in the past as a full-time missionary (29 percent for two years or more; 9 percent for less than two years). Most mission pastors report either that they do not speak a second language at all (26 percent) or “not well” (46 percent), with only 18 percent saying they speak a second language “very well” and another 10 percent saying they speak another language “well.” That is, fewer than a third of mission pastors appear to be functionally bilingual. Perhaps not surprisingly, bilingualism is strongly correlated with having served as a full-time missionary.<sup>43</sup>

Eleven percent of mission pastors report that they have never taken an academic course in missions or missiology, with 67 percent indicating they have taken one or more courses with a mission focus, and 22 percent reporting that they have a degree with a missions focus. Not surprisingly, those who have served as full-time missionaries are also more likely to have studied missiology. Mission pastors who have served as full-time missionaries are more likely to serve in churches that regularly schedule mission conferences, that give career missionaries a platform to speak, that are committed to evangelizing the Muslim world, that support higher numbers of long-term missionaries, and that provide more financial support for long-term missionaries. By contrast, mission pastors who have participated in the highest numbers of short-term mission trips are more likely to strongly affirm the statement: “God’s instrument of mission is the local church, not mission agencies.” They are also more likely to serve in churches that have a higher number of church-to-church partnerships abroad, that support higher numbers of national Christian workers abroad, and that give more money in support of ministry abroad.

---

---

## Conclusion

Megachurches are at the forefront of shifts in the social organization of missions, with the locus of agency and decision making shifting back toward the sending congregation and its leadership. A number of issues can naturally be raised:

*Responsiveness to new social realities.* American congregations are responding to new social realities to which older mission agencies sometimes fail to appropriately adjust, and much of this ministry is responsive to brothers and sisters in Christ serving under circumstances of greater material and social constraint.

*Issues of stewardship.* While missions giving was historically the portion of giving that was altruistic, that had no direct benefit to the givers or giving church, missions giving now is increasingly directed toward the dual goals of (1) meeting the needs of the givers and the sending church and also (2) serving others abroad. In part this means that any sort of ministry that the American congregation as an organizational form is unsuited to fulfill (such as Bible translation) is less likely now to receive strong support. The question must continue to be raised: Whose needs are being met through these new patterns of stewardship?

*Issues of paternalism and power.* American congregations channel enormous amounts of material resources into global mission, sometimes in ways that make the control of money, rather than wisdom and contextual understanding, the primary determinant of decision making and power.

*Issues of wisdom.* When the locus of decision making and power moves away from the field to the North American congregation

and its leadership, there are deep questions of whether contextual wisdom will underpin the patterns being forged for stewardship and global ministry.

*New patterns of partnership.* Mission in the contemporary world is most effectively carried out through partnerships. Partnerships of the right sort between mission agencies, mission training institutions, mission pastors, indigenous ministries, and U.S. megachurches can fruitfully bring wisdom and resources and energy together in a way that furthers God's missionary purposes in the world today.

*The role of the mission pastor.* In the world of global missions, the mission pastor is a new and absolutely strategic person to missions. Each megachurch mission pastor plays a central role in influencing how more than \$690,000 per year will be spent abroad on global mission. Mission pastors serve as gatekeepers to those who seek support. They educate their churches and cast the vision for mission, providing leadership of an enterprise increasingly being directed from the North American congregational base.

*The need for missiology to connect with and inform this new leadership.* Most mission pastors are currently not well-trained missiologically. At the same time missiologists have not done their research and writing with mission pastors or youth pastors in mind, and missiology programs have not been organized to be responsive to and helpful for the person with a mission pastor or youth pastor job description. Changes in missiological focus and in manner of communication are urgently needed so that mission pastors will find missiology to be helpful and responsive to the realities they live with and the job description they fulfill.

---

## Notes

1. Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2009), pp. 94, 5, 240.
2. Such as Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007).
3. Our list came from Scott Thumma's "Database of Megachurches in the U.S." posted at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research Web site, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>, as it appeared in October 2007.
4. After the initial mailing (November 26, 2007) and a postcard reminder (December 10), a second and third mailing (on January 21 and February 28, 2008) were sent to nonrespondents.
5. Based on the 1,218 that are presumed to have reached their destinations.
6. Funding for this research was provided by a grant from the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding (HCTU) at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and by Avant Ministries, although views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and are not intended to express the views of Avant Ministries or the HCTU. We also wish to thank all those who helped with the initial address list, with phoning or using Internet information to identify persons in charge of missions, and with mailing the surveys: Andrew Anane-Asane, Rochelle Cathcart, Valentine Hayibor, Blaine Lee, Timothy Nyasulu, Andrew Pfleiderer, David Priest, Shelly Priest, and Jason Tan.
7. "Predominantly" is here defined as including more than 70 percent of the average number of attenders.
8. Since churches vary in whether missions expenditures are or are not part of the formal budget, our survey asked about actual expenditures, not about budget. Note that in tables 2, 3, 4, and 6 the percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.
9. A number of denominational churches indicated that, in addition to the number of missionaries they directly supported and reported on in the survey, they also supported their denomination's missionary program. Others answered this question by filling in the total number of missionaries supported by their denomination, usually with a note of explanation. In all such cases we did not count this number. It is possible that a small handful of the higher numbers reported actually refer to denominational counts rather than to missionary units directly supported by the church. Therefore the median of 16 may be a more reliable indicator than the mean of 31.
10. A mean of 25, compared with a mean of 36 who disagree,  $t(373) = 1.98, p = .004$ .
11. Between 2001 and 2005 there was a 5.2 percent drop in the number of full-time missionaries from the United States serving abroad for one to four years, and a 3 percent drop in those serving four years or more, as reported in Scott Moreau, "Putting the Survey in Perspective," in *Mission Handbook, 2007-2009: U.S. and Canadian Protestant Ministries Overseas*, ed. Linda Weber and Dotsey J. Welliver (Wheaton, Ill.: Evangelism and Missions Information Service, 2007), pp. 11-75, esp. pp. 24-25.
12. Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*, p. 180.
13. The data for this statement is provided in Robert J. Priest and Joseph Paul Priest, "'They See Everything and Understand Nothing': Short-Term Missions and Service Learning," *Missiology: An International Review* 36 (2008): 57.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 59-60; see also Kyeong Sook Park, "Researching Short-Term Missions and Paternalism," in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing It Right!* ed. Robert Priest (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2008), p. 512; Robert Wuthnow and Stephen Offutt, "Transnational Religious Connections," *Sociology of Religion* 69 (2008): 218.
15. For statistics on this, see Priest and Priest, "They See Everything," pp. 59-60.

16. Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).
17. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Spirit and Power: A Ten-Country Survey of Pentecostals, October 2006," <http://pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/>.
18. David Barrett and Todd Johnson, "Global Map 4: Trends in Evangelization and Christianization in Worlds A, B, and C Countries, AD 2000," in *World Christian Trends, AD 30-AD 2200* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2001), p. 912.
19. [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org); see Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*, pp. 171, 294.
20. Kevin Birth, "What Is Your Mission Here? A Trinidadian Perspective on Visits from the 'Church of Disneyworld,'" *Missiology* 34 (2006): 497-508.
21. See, for example, Robert Priest, "Peruvian Churches Acquire Linking Social Capital Through STM Partnerships," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2 (2007): 175-89.
22. Hunter Farrell, "Cleaning Up La Oroya," *Christianity Today*, April 20, 2007, pp. 70-73.
23. Scott Meier, "Missionary, Minister to Thyself: The Real Reason Behind Mission Work," *Youthworker* 17, no 5 (2001): 24-28.
24. Paul Borthwick, "Short-Term Missions" (tape of GMC Triennial Chinese Mission Conference, Philadelphia, December 29, 2004).
25. Donald E. Miller, *Emergent Patterns of Congregational Life and Leadership in the Developing World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Divinity School, Pulpit and Pew Research Reports, 2003), p. 23.
26. In Roman Catholic settings this is known as "parish twinning," with Catholic parishes in North America twinning with parishes, for example, in Kenya, Tanzania, or Haiti. One scholar reports that this Catholic twinning movement has exploded; the link just between North America and Haiti, for example, "now includes over 660 parishes" (Tara Hefferan, *Twinning Faith and Development: Catholic Parish Partnering in the U.S. and Haiti* [Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 2007], p. 9). For other research on church-to-church partnerships, see C. M. Brown, "Friendship Is Forever: Congregation-to-Congregation Relationships," in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions*, ed. Priest, pp. 209-37; David Keyes, *Most Like an Arch: Building Global Church Partnerships* (Chico, Calif.: Center for Free Religion, 1999); and Samuel Broomfield Reeves, *Congregation-to-Congregation Relationship: A Case Study of a Partnership Between a Liberian Church and a North American Church* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 2004).
27. A few churches supported an extremely high number at low levels of faculty, which gave a mean of twenty national workers supported per megachurch. But since only 13 percent of megachurches supported twenty or more, the mean is a less helpful measure of central tendency here than the median.
28. This six-item scale has a Cronbach's reliability alpha of .828.
29. This three-item scale has a Cronbach's reliability alpha of .514.
30. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .158, p < .01$ .
31. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .134, p < .05$ .
32. Pearson Correlation:  $r = -.131, p < .05$ .
33. Pearson Correlation:  $r = -.100, p < .05$ .
34. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .188, p < .01$ .
35. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .220, p < .01$ .
36. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .392, p < .01$ .
37. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .319, p < .01$ .
38. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .323, p < .01$ .
39. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .265, p < .01$ .
40. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .135, p < .01$ .
41. Pearson Correlation:  $r = -.166, p < .01$ .
42. Based on a comparison of the megachurch survey data with seminary faculty data at [www.ats.edu/Resources/Publications/Documents/AnnualDataTables/2007-08AnnualDataTables.pdf](http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Publications/Documents/AnnualDataTables/2007-08AnnualDataTables.pdf).
43. Pearson Correlation:  $r = .572, p < .01$ .

## The Latin American Doctoral Program in Theology

The Latin American Doctoral Program in Theology (LADPT) was created by Latin Americans in response to the need for graduate-level theological studies to be offered in Latin America, by Latin Americans, in the languages of Latin America, for the church in Latin America. Its mission is to offer contextual theological education at the Ph.D. level by means of a creative methodology in order to equip the leaders of the church.

A conversation in 2000 between Pablo Deiros from Argentina and Charles Van Engen who grew up in Chiapas, Mexico, led to the founding that year of the Latin American Christian Ministries (LACM) with the purpose of providing "teaching and church leadership mentoring skills, programs, and resources for Christian ministries and pastors in Latin America."

The vision was refined through discussion with Enrique Guang in Quito, Ecuador, in September 2000 at the Fourth Consultation of the Latin American Congress of Evangelization (CLADE IV). Guang, founding president of the Evangelical University of the Americas (UNELA) in Costa Rica, stressed the need to gain government accreditation as a Ph.D. program.

In March 2001 thirty-six Latin American Protestant professors from twelve countries, representing twenty-three denominations, mission agencies, and theological education institutions, met in Miami, Florida. As they prayed, dialogued, and dreamed, the vision of a continent-wide advanced theological education program took further shape.

Academically linked with UNELA, LADPT is the first Protestant multisite Ph.D.-level study program to be accredited at the university level by a Latin American government. Known in Latin America as PRODOLA ([www.prodola.org](http://www.prodola.org)), LADPT is designed to wed face-to-face classroom experiences

with on-location and in-ministry research. This fits with the requirement of the government of Costa Rica that all Ph.D.-level study programs include an empirical, field-based research component in addition to library-based research. Doctoral candidates in LADPT are actively involved in designing, shaping, modifying, and guiding their own study programs.

Launched in Brazil in 2004 with twenty-one students from fourteen countries and eighteen denominations, by January 2010 LADPT had ninety-five students, of whom thirteen are women, from seventeen Latin American countries plus Angola, Canada, Great Britain, Korea, Spain, and the United States. The students represent seventy-one ecclesial and mission entities. LADPT's first student to complete all requirements, including the dissertation defense, will graduate in mid-2010.

Accredited by the Costa Rican government in May 2007, LADPT was accepted in June 2008 as an unaccredited affiliate member of the U.S. and Canadian Association of Theological Schools. The core faculty of sixteen is augmented by twenty Latin American scholars as adjunct faculty.

More information on LADPT can be found in Charles Van Engen, "Latin American Doctoral Program," in *Diversified Theological Education: Equipping All God's People*, ed. Ross Kinsler (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey International University, 2008), pp. 207-25.

—Charles E. Van Engen

*Charles E. Van Engen, Arthur F. Glasser Professor of Biblical Theology of Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, serves as Director of the Doctoral Program in Theology (PRODOLA), Evangelical University of the Americas, San José, Costa Rica.*

Copyright of International Bulletin of Missionary Research is the property of Overseas Ministries Studies Center and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.