



HAVE WE SEEN THE LAST MEGA-CAMPUS?

JIM TOMBERLIN



THROUGH THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA, THE MINISTRY OF A LOCAL CHURCH IS NO LONGER CONFINED TO ITS FACILITY.

Megachurches are not going anywhere. Their number is increasing, and so is their attendance. But it's becoming less common for megachurches to bring all their worshippers together at a single campus. At the end of the 20th century, megachurches developed huge tracts of land and large mall-like facilities with thousands of sanctuary seats. These days that strategy is fading, and new mega-campuses are rarely built. Why? These massive facilities struggle to serve their primary purpose over the long haul. Some pastor-centric churches will manage to keep their existing mega-campuses going, but many others will sit half-empty in the next decade as their aging senior pastors retire.

FORCES OF CHANGE

What's changed in the ministry environment that is making mega-campuses obsolete? Here are four major factors:

COMMUNITY VALUES.

Church buildings were once seen as key assets in communities across America. Today these facilities are increasingly viewed as liability. In the eyes of people who see little value in attending church, religious facilities cause traffic headaches, create noise pollution, and reduce property tax revenues. As a result, there is increasing community resistance to churches buying land and building facilities—especially large facilities. Leadership Network reported that the size of new church sanctuaries shrank from a median of 1,500 seats in 2010 to 1,200 seats in 2015.¹



TECH INNOVATIONS.

The technological revolution has radically extended a church's potential impact beyond the walls of its building and geographic location. Until recently, growing churches had only one option: expand through buying more land and building larger facilities. Many of these churches became megachurches, with 2,000+ people in weekend attendance. But through the internet and social media, the ministry of a local church is no longer confined to its facility. Any congregation can deliver its message and ministry anytime, anywhere on the planet—creating an alternative to buying land and building a bigger sanctuary.

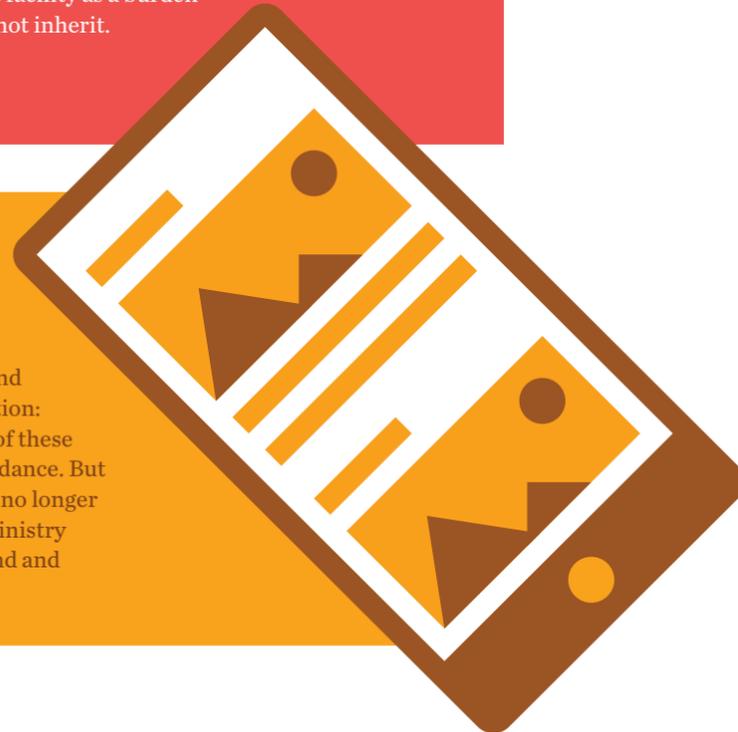
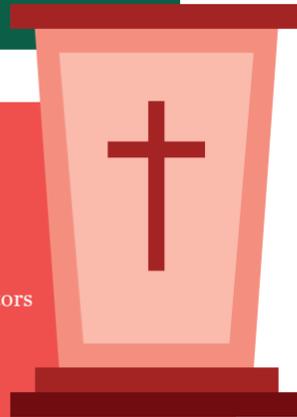


FINANCIAL RESOURCES.

In the United States, the economic recession of 2007–2009 liberated churches from building excessively large and expensive buildings. Even though the economy has recovered, churches today have lost their appetite for purchasing large parcels of land and spending tens of millions of dollars on a single campus.

AGING PASTORS.

We are at the beginning of a tidal wave of changes in church leadership. At many Protestant megachurches, baby-boomer senior pastors are retiring or leaving to pursue other ministry projects. And unlike previous generations, incoming pastors tend to view a large facility as a burden they'd rather not inherit.



THE MULTI-SITE MINDSET



The decline in mega-campuses doesn't mean a decline in ministry. Quite the contrary! Churches today are learning they can grow faster by inviting people to smaller facilities in multiple neighborhoods. In some multi-site churches, each location has its own worship team and preacher; in others, the worship service at one location is streamed live over the internet to other gatherings. While going multi-site is not cheap, it is much less expensive than building and maintaining one massive facility.

The multi-site approach allows a church to extend its geographic reach beyond the distance people are willing to drive to attend a mega-campus. The same church can have congregations in the city, in the suburbs, and in surrounding rural areas. And the cost and time of launching each site can be reduced by using existing facilities—schools, theaters, and commercial spaces.

Because they aren't limited to a single location, many of yesterday's megachurches are now becoming gigachurches with 10,000+ weekend attendees. Experience is showing that the multi-site strategy can reach more people with the gospel better, faster, and cheaper than operating a mega-campus. ■

¹ "Recent Shifts in America's Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Report," Leadnet.org, 2015, <http://leadnet.org/megachurch>.

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HOW ARE MEGA- CAMPUSES ADAPTING?

Like the empty cathedrals of Europe, a few mega-campuses will probably become historical landmarks—inspiring, but empty. Some will be sold and used for non-religious purposes or torn down. But many mega-campuses are *repurposing* and *readapting* their facilities in creative ways.

REPURPOSING involves right-sizing and retrofitting a facility to accommodate a smaller congregation:

- Reducing seating space by closing off some areas with curtains, or by creating larger aisles and shorter rows
- Replacing fixed seating with other options, such as sofas or café tables and chairs
- Converting portions of the worship space to “comfort” or “family” rooms to create alternate spaces for families with children
- Converting massive stage platforms and choir lofts into “back of house” functions like greenrooms, storage spaces, set-building workshops, and office suites

READAPTING involves converting a campus into a mixed-use facility:

- Remodeling some portions of the facility for retail, housing, and commercial uses
- Inviting ethnic congregations to use some of the facility
- Sharing office and meeting space with nonprofit organizations, food banks, and clothing centers
- Renting space to a preschool or childcare center
- Offering after-school mentoring programs
- Opening a community café
- Partnering with the city and schools to use the facility for conferences, artistic performances, and community events
- Leasing office and parking space to businesses or local government agencies



Adapted from *Church Locality: New Rules for Church Buildings in a Multisite, Church Planting, and Giga-Church World*, by Jim Tomberlin and Tim Cool (Rainer, 2014)

WHAT'S YOUR MULTI-SITE EXPERIENCE?

Has your church made a transition to a multi-site model? Is your church considering it? Share your experiences and questions at Faithlife.com/MT-Multisite.