



Providence Baptist Chapel Bedford

Growth & Decline of US Megachurches

“Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it”. 1 Corinthians 3:12,13

Intro: In the US originally, and more recently in the UK, a new format of church developed in the 1970's, which was wholly unbiblical. This new kind of church grew rapidly for several decades, but in the last decade, and especially since Covid, seems to be declining.

Definition: Protestant congregations, with average attendance of 2,000+ each week, a focus on a diet of stage performed, man-centred (sometimes outrageous) entertainment.

Our Aim: Explore the historical rise, characteristics, influence, challenges, and more recent decline of megachurches in the United States and the lessons that can be learned

1. Rise of Megachurches

After World War II the religious landscape in the US changed rapidly. Cultural and societal changes led to consumerist churches. To meet the desires of consumers scale was seen to be essential to be taken seriously. New technologies, radio, TV and the internet gave rise to a generation of celebrity Pastors and performers who could be exalted more easily.

2. Key Features of Megachurch Growth

Innovation: Use of emerging technologies, contemporary worship styles

Global Reach and Influence: American megachurches influenced global church practices

Cultural Relevance: Methods address societal issues, offer personal development plans

Celebrity Culture: 1 Corinthians 3:3–7

3. Notable Megachurches and their Founders:

i) Willow Creek, Illinois: Founded by Bill Hybels in 1975

Known for “seeker-sensitive” model, with neighbourhood questionnaires used to determine what would make people go to church, then, simply give them what they want. Peak attendance 25k, focussed on creating worship services that were accessible, relevant, and engaging for those unfamiliar with traditional church. This included contemporary music, and a welcoming environment.

ii) Saddleback, California: Founded by Rick Warren in 1980

Noted for “Purpose Driven” books; as Saddleback grew, it launched multiple campuses. Church known for innovative approach to ministry and large-scale events.

iii) Lakewood, Texas: Led by Joel Osteen, succeeding his father in 1999, Known for TV evangelism, 16k seat stadium; promotes message aligning with "prosperity gospel" teaching faith in God leads to personal success, health, and prosperity. Sermons focus on positive affirmations and practical steps for personal growth and fulfilment.

iv) Mars Hill, Washington St. Founded by Mark Driscoll, rapid growth in 2000's, multi-site. By 2013, Mars Hill was one of largest churches in the US, with about 15 locations.

v) Hillsong: Founded by Brian Houston in 1983 in Australia, Network of churches, also in S Africa, UK, US; initially known as Sydney Christian Life Centre, the church was renamed Hillsong in 1999. Gained popularity for its worship music style, sold globally.



4. Challenges

High-Profile Scandals (Moral, Abuse, Financial) involving key pastors: Bill Hybels (Willow Creek), Ted Haggard (New Life Church), Carl Lentz (Hillsong), Mark Driscoll (Mars Hill), Robert Tilton (TV Evangelist), Jimmy Swaggart (TV)

Other Challenges: The celebrity leader model led to difficult transitions when the leader fell and a business model requiring growth to sustain ministry and production teams.

5. Decline of Some Megachurches 2020+

Whilst cracks began to emerge following various scandals, amongst the well-known founders and leaders of these churches, in hindsight the Covid-19 pandemic was a turning point. Since the pandemic, there seems to have been an accelerating decline in the US megachurch model. Many previous attendees have not returned to worship, with congregations and income falling. Were the majority of attendees ever truly converted?

6. Reasons for Megachurch Decline ~ 1 Corinthians 3:12-15

- i) Many who attended these megachurches had only a superficial hold on God's truth
- ii) Diet of entertainment, music and performance does not satisfy - only Word of God
- iii) Cultural and Generational Shifts - changed and better priorities among Gen-Z
- iv) Erosion of trust - large churches lack personal accountability and personal connection
- v) Digital Fatigue - Covid gave rise to "easy worship" from sofas by internet surfers

7. Lessons Learned

1. Authentic Preaching & Prayer: The New Testament church pattern has only two principle methods:- i) preaching the Word of God, to young and old, and ii) fervent prayer

2. Life-changing Gospel: The Gospel changes lives, enabling believers to take our chief delights from God and His word. We no longer need or want to be merely entertained.

3. Scale: The New Testament pattern was to plant many churches, where the providence of God (e.g. persecution, circumstances) permitted, not to build megachurches.

4. Churches are Not Businesses: The Local church is pictured as a flock, and a family, and should never be so big that individuals are easily lost and uncared for.

5. God-given Governance: Churches & individuals need Biblical governance & membership, which provide God-given checks and balances. No Pastor should be a law to himself. We are subject to i) *one another Ephesians 5:21* ii) *those with the rule over us Hebrews 13:17*

6. Celebrity Pastors: Elevating Pastors to be worthy of personal praise and adulation is idolatry. Pastors are but "humble servants", who must not practice self-adulation. **John 3:30**

7. New or Old: New is rarely better, and innovation needs careful consideration as to its real motive, its true impact and whether the purpose is pleasing to God

Conclusion: We take no joy in plotting this development; many have unwittingly been caught up by it, and many harmed. We look to our Sovereign God to overrule. God's Word describes and prescribes the pattern for the Local Church. We are to follow His ways and not deviate.

Pastor

21st December 2025