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Megachurches in 2020 Are More Multiracial—And Larger Too

By Warren Bird and Scott Thumma

It’s true that many overall indicators of traditional belief or practice were in solid decline prior to the pandemic, and who knows what the faith landscape will look like in the coming years. Yet most people who attend America’s largest-attendance churches would likely not believe that “American religiosity has been declining for decades,” as a recent scholarly book concluded after it mapped out downturns in everything from church finances to success engaging millennials.

By contrast, America’s megachurches—those drawing 2,000 or more adults and children on a typical weekend—began this year more robust than ever, according to a national study of large churches, mostly done pre-pandemic, that we have conducted every 5 years since 2000. The survey is part of research into churches of all sizes, whose findings will be released in coming months by Faith Communities Today (faithcommunitiestoday.org).

Below are five of the biggest patterns we identified.

Megachurches Are Becoming More Multiracial

We’ve known for a while that the larger the church, the more likely it is to be racially diverse. This year’s survey makes that point emphatically. Michael Emerson and his colleagues have popularized the definition of a multiracial church as one where at least 20 percent of the congregation is racially different from the majority racial group. His logic for that threshold? Research on a variety of organizations has shown that it takes 20 percent or more of another group to have their voices heard and to effect cultural change on an organization.

The first time we discussed the racial diversity in megachurches was our 2005 survey. At that time, 36 percent of megachurches claimed a 20 percent or more minority presence – up from 21 percent just five years earlier (2000). Back in 2005, our report said, “Thirty-six percent of churches reported having a 20 percent or more minority presence and 10 percent [of those] claimed to have no majority racial group.” That racial blend was significantly greater than what was found in churches of other sizes at that time—as only 7 percent of all congregations were multiracial then.

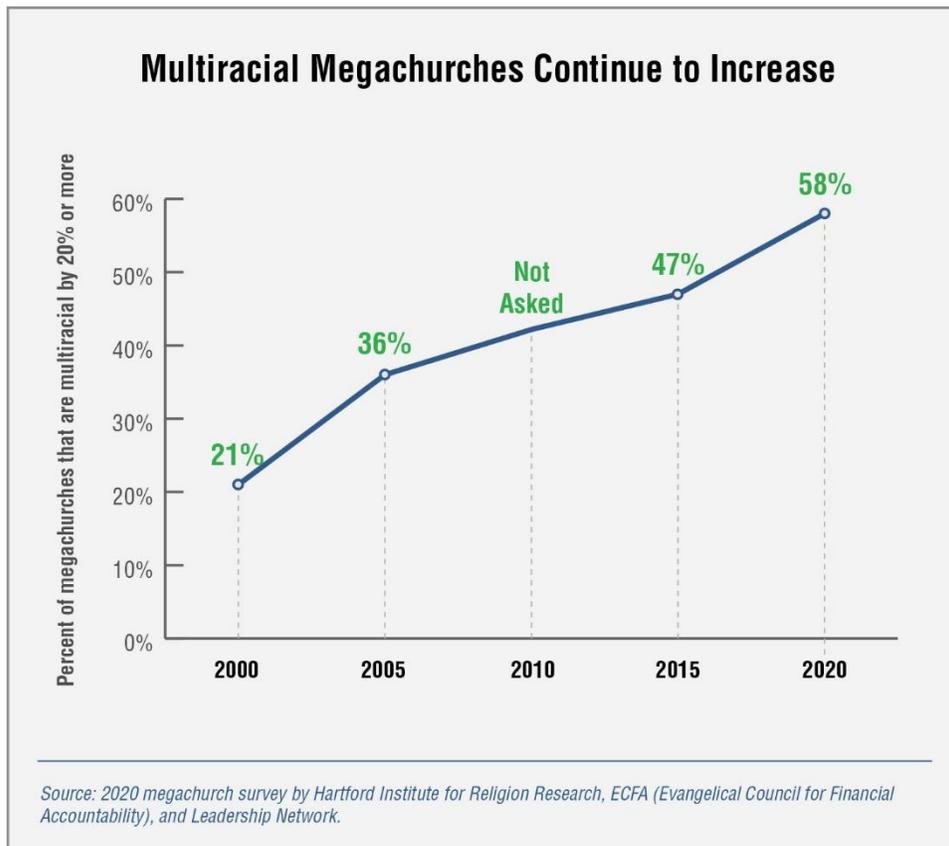
Yet fast forward to 2020, where 58 percent of megachurches describe themselves as being multiracial—i.e., having 20 percent or more minority presence in their congregation. That’s an amazing jump in two decades from 21 percent to 58 percent.

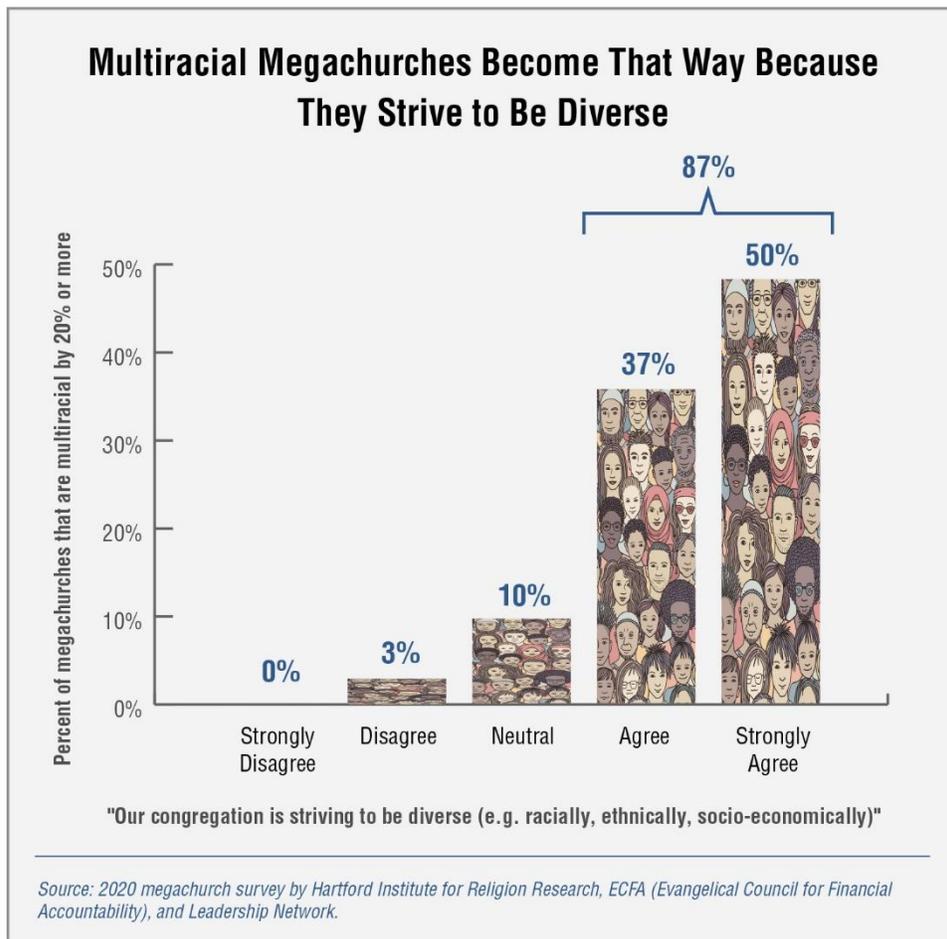
What helps churches become more multiracial? Certainly a variety of factors including a diverse community, leadership, worship styles and as this year’s survey showed, intentionality. When asked, “Is [the congregation] striving to be diverse (e.g. racially, ethnically, socio-economically)?” a whopping 78

percent agreed or strongly agreed. We found a powerful relationship between those churches who were striving to be diverse and actually are multiracial.

Having a multiracial congregation is more likely the larger the megachurch becomes. This increased racial diversity also goes hand in hand with other characteristics that imply a welcoming attitude such as being better at incorporating new people into the life of the church, having a larger percentage of recent immigrants in the church, and more new people in the previous 5 years. However, this diversity isn't always without cost as the more diverse churches are also more likely to experience conflict and to rate their financial health as less robust than other megachurches.

[INSERT RELATED GRAPHICS 1 & 2]





Megachurches Have Been Expanding in Many Ways

If the amazing increase in racial diversity is our most pronounced finding, close behind are the various ways that megachurches are broadening their expansion. Yes, the nation's largest-attendance churches have grown bigger—from 2015's median of 3,800 adults and children each weekend to 4,200 in 2020. That increase also includes growth in the number of services offered weekly across all campuses, averaging 7.6 per week for 2020 (all numbers are pre-pandemic).

But they have also expanded in other ways, most notably the commitment of megachurches to church planting has skyrocketed. Only 18 percent of megachurches claimed to have helped start or plant a new church between 2010-2015 but almost half (48%) said they did so in the previous 5 years (2016-2020).

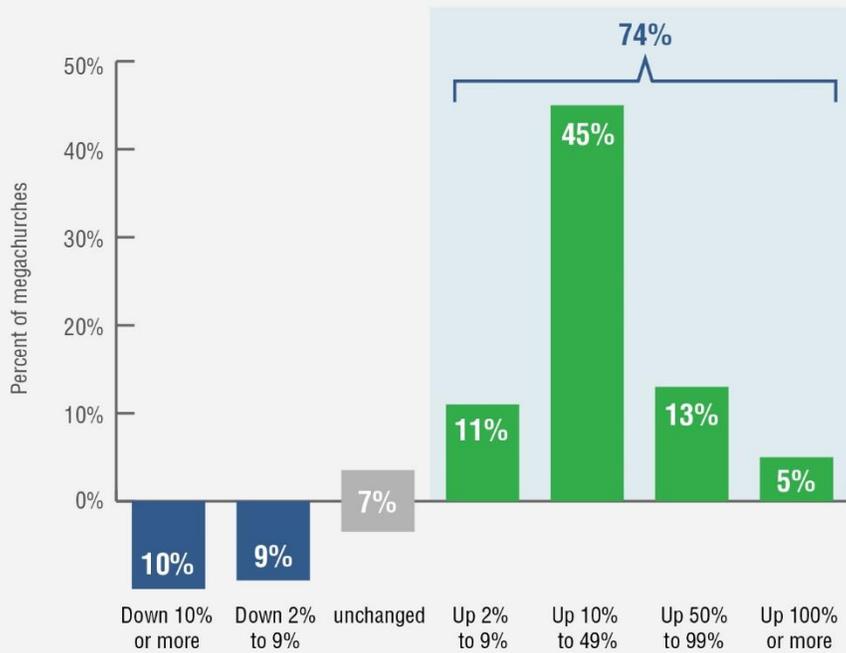
Likewise, the idea of small and medium-size churches merging with a megachurch has taken off. Only 6 percent of megachurches said they had been part of a merger between 2010 and 2015 while 16 percent claimed merging with other churches between 2016 and 2020.

Finally, the 20-year trend to become multisite—one church in two or more locations— has continued to explode. Back in 2000, 23 percent of megachurches were multisite. Now 70 percent have adopted this strategy. In the last 5 years, almost half (47%) of megachurches opened one or more satellites or branch locations. Not surprisingly, the larger the church, the more likely it is to be multisite.

Comparisons between single and multisite churches show a host of benefits to this approach. Multisite churches are not only larger than single-site churches, but they are also more likely to have larger budgets and to have grown more rapidly in last 5 years. Multisites plant more new churches than single-site churches, especially in the 2016-2020 period, and merge more often with other churches. Multisite congregations claim that a greater percentage of their people “talk about faith to those outside the church,” are active in recruiting new people and have a larger percentage of the congregation in small groups. Finally, multisite churches indicate a greater willingness to change, are more likely to say they have a clear mission and purpose, and are more likely to view themselves as innovative, informal, and contemporary than do single-site megachurches.

[INSERT RELATED GRAPHICS 3 & 4]

74% of Megachurches Are Growing, Often at Fast Rates

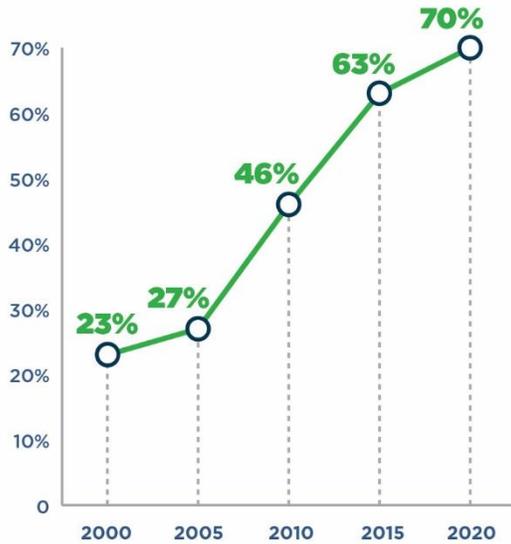


Percent of megachurches that declined or grew over 5 years (2014-2019)

Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Megachurches Are Expanding Their Impact by Attendance and More

Multisite megachurches



Opened a satellite or branch location in the last 5 years

2015
22%

2020
47%



Helped start or plant a new congregation in the last 5 years

2015
18%

2020
48%



Merged with another congregation in the last 5 years

2015
6%

2020
16%



Worship attendance each weekend, adults and children (median)

2015
3,800

2020
4,200

Number of worship services offered each weekend across all campuses (average)



Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Small Groups are Central to Megachurches' Spiritual Formation of Members

The use of small groups has long been a hallmark of megachurches. Our latest survey shows that this practice continues to increase dramatically, but also that the spiritual-health impact of the use of small groups is profound. When asked if small groups are central to their strategy of Christian nurture and spiritual formation, an amazing 90 percent of megachurches said yes.

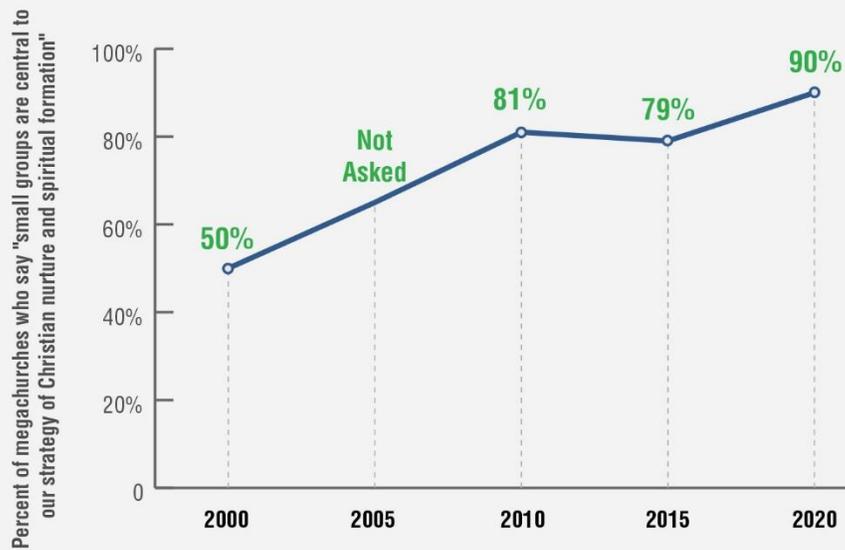
Those churches with the highest percentage of their congregation active in their small groups were more likely to say they had larger percentages of their members volunteering regularly at church, recruiting new people, sharing their faith with those not a part of the congregation, and new to the congregation in the last 5 years.

Megachurch congregations with the highest percent of their people in small groups tended to grow more rapidly over the last 5 years, were better at encouraging frequent worship attendance, were more likely to do service projects in the local community, and described themselves as better able to incorporate newcomers into the congregation, to change to meet new challenges, and to emphasize living out one's faith in all aspects of daily life (e.g., work, family, civic engagement).

In short, having greater percentages of one's congregation participating in small groups offered more benefits than just growth of the church; it created a climate of improved spiritual development for the congregation on many levels.

[INSERT RELATED GRAPHICS 5 & 6]

Small Groups as a Central Strategy in Megachurches Continues to Increase

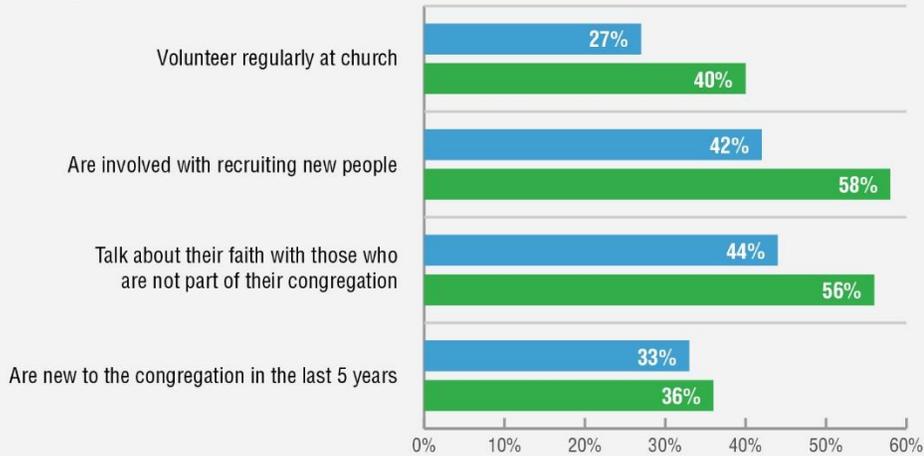


Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

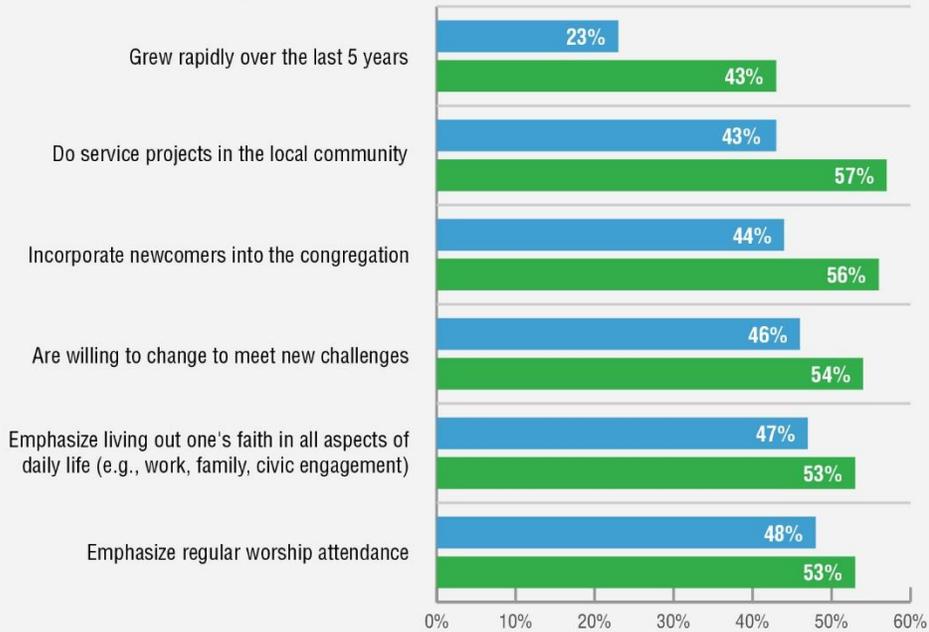
Increased Involvement in Small Groups Makes a Huge Difference

■ **Less** of the church is involved in small groups (40% or less)
■ **More** of the church is involved in small groups (41% or more)

Megachurch Participants



Megachurch Congregations



Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Megachurches Are Increasingly Involved in Community Service

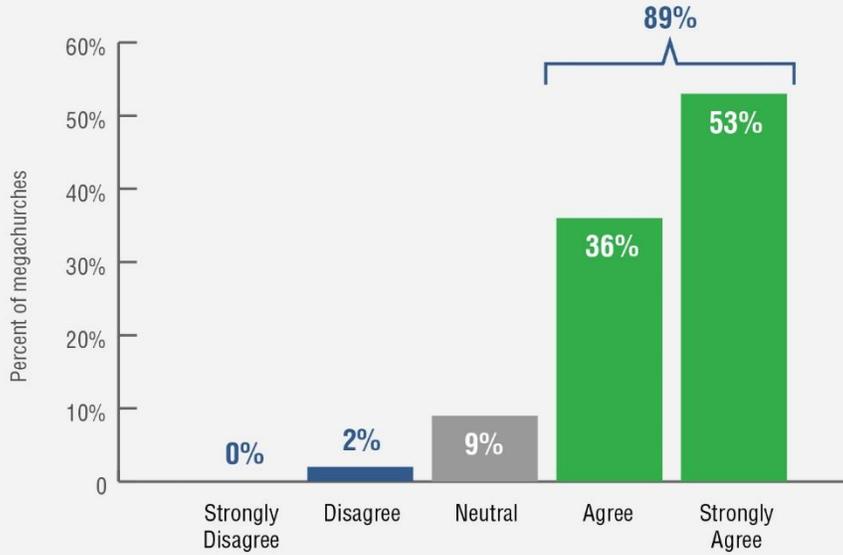
In recent years, many megachurches have exited from their buildings—and long before the pandemic! An astounding 89 percent agree or strongly agree with the statement, “Our congregation is actively involved in our local community.” In a different question, 60 percent of megachurches said they put a lot of emphasis into community service programs or activities.

In this community involvement, megachurches are not going it alone, as they have been accused of in the past. They’re participating in these efforts both with other Christian groups and also with other faith traditions. The survey shows a sizable increase between 2015 and 2020 in engaging with other Christians and other faith traditions through educational or fellowship activities as well as community service activities.

Those megachurches most highly involved in their local community tend to rate themselves as having more people who volunteer regularly at the congregation and of having more adults involved in a small group. They also see themselves as being more innovative, as having a clearer sense of mission and purpose, as being more spiritually vital and alive, more willing to change to meet new challenges, and as striving more to be diverse. These congregations who are most engaged with the community claim to place a greater emphasis on talking about one’s faith with those who are not a part of their congregation, on living out one’s faith in all aspects of daily life, and on being good at incorporating new people into the congregation. From these findings, it’s clear that a strong correlation exists between involvement in one’s local community and evangelism which also enriches the vitality of the congregation itself.

[INSERT RELATED GRAPHICS 7 & 8]

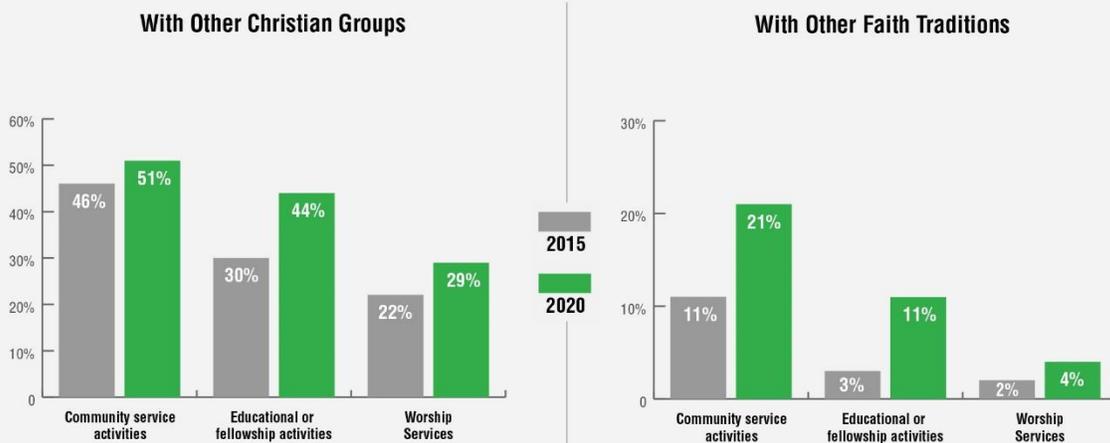
Megachurches Are Strongly Involved in Their Local Community



"Our congregation is actively involved in our local community"

Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Megachurches Have Increased Their Involvement...



Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Megachurches Overwhelmingly Avoid Political Action

As the national election approaches, much is being said about the role of megachurches in the race for the presidency. A few of the nation's roughly 1,750 megachurches have garnered much of this attention. However, our research finds that megachurches as a whole claim to be involved in very little overt political action.

Megachurch key informants, often the senior pastor or key leader, were asked, "Thinking about the past 12 months, has your congregation organized any groups, meetings, classes, or events specifically focused on 6 political purposes or activities?" Less than 20 percent of megachurches did any of the 6 political activities we named (and only 4 churches in the survey—representing less than 1 percent of all survey participants—were engaged in all 6). Of these 6 activities, the highest-scoring choices "distribute voter guides" and make "an effort to get people registered to vote" received affirmative responses from just 14 percent of the megachurches. Efforts to get out the vote garnered just 11 percent affirmation from the responding megachurches. Therefore, it is not surprising that when asked, only 18 percent of respondents agree, plus 2 percent more strongly agree, that their congregation is politically active.

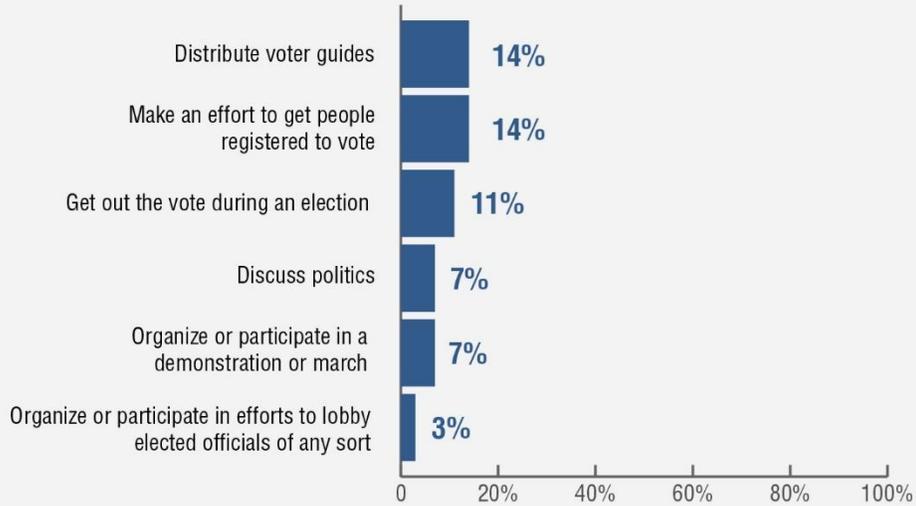
Also contrary to popular stereotypes, our survey indicated that megachurches are not monolithic voting blocks of political action. On the one hand, megachurch respondents predominantly (63%) agree, with 23 percent of these strongly agreeing, that "this congregation avoids discussing political issues when it gathers." On the other hand, most of those responding (66%) disagree, with 30 percent of these in strong disagreement, that "almost everyone in this congregation has the same political position."

What factors correlate with increased political action? The less the racial diversity in the congregation, the more likely a church is politically active. Geography also plays a role, with political engagement highest for megachurches in the Northeast and West. Likewise the older the lead pastor and the longer that pastor's tenure, the more likely for the church to be politically active. A higher percentage of immigrants in the congregation also increases the church's political involvement. Finally, an emphasis on social justice in the congregation slightly increases political involvement.

[INSERT RELATED GRAPHICS 9 & 10]

Megachurches Take Little Political Action

In the past 12 months, has the congregation organized any groups, meetings, classes, or events specifically focused on the following purposes or activities?



Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

Megchurches Avoid Discussing Politics, in Part Because They Are Politically Diverse

This congregation avoids discussing political issues when it gathers



Almost everyone in this congregation has the same political position



Source: 2020 megachurch survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), and Leadership Network.

What to Do with These Trends

Reports like this not only identify important trends and potential benchmarks. They also raise questions and prompt discussion. Churches of all sizes can ask, “What can we learn—both positively and negatively—from these developments in America’s largest churches?”

For those who want to take action, here is what we see as the biggest implications:

- To enhance your church’s spiritual vitality, make small groups more central and also work to get a greater percentage of your people involved in them.
- One component of creating greater diversity, and especially racial diversity in your church, is to be more intentional about how you value diversity, along with other strategies.
- Realize that successful outreach to and engagement with one’s surrounding local community requires a fundamental reorientation of attitude within your congregation itself. Outreach beyond the walls also requires a welcoming spirit and embrace of diversity within the church.
- Understand that political activity and discussions within the context of the congregation might come with increased levels of conflict.
- Most importantly, congregation growth happens in many ways. It is not just about getting larger attendance but also broadening your scope of ministry through additional service times, multiple locations, planting other congregations, seeking mergers with other churches, and having an attitude of expansion that extends beyond your own ministry.

Finally, if you want to dig deeper into more findings from our most recent megachurch research or our earlier studies, a more substantial report is available both at ECFA.church/surveys and at hartfordinstitute.org. Contact the authors for further details.

Methodology note: The survey was conducted from late January until May 2020. Our survey across time (2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and now 2020) has repeated many of the same questions, enabling us compare changes over time. The 582 key informant responses from these megachurches (we included several churches with attendances of 1,800-1,999 in this analysis since attendance variations of a few hundred happen frequently for such large churches) represent a 33 percent response rate from the roughly 1,750 U.S. megachurches, with about 95 percent of the responses received prior to the pandemic shutdown of in-person worship services. The results from these 582 megachurches have been weighted to represent the total 1,750 megachurch population with a 3 percent +/- margin of error. All the findings we report have a .05 or greater statistical significance.

AUTHOR BIO

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