

**“Big Enough to Impact, Small Enough to Care”
One Mega-Church's Struggle to Create Community**

David A. Lowitzki

Blair E. Thompson

Azusa Pacific University

April, 2004

Abstract

This is a study addressing the mega church phenomenon in American churches and those churches' search for community. A sample of church members were asked to discuss their church involvement, small group involvement, and their involvement with their neighborhood. The data that was collected reveals the community, or lack thereof among the respondents. The patterns found resulted in two categories attesting to the problem of isolation and the need for institutional belonging. Respondents revealed how their small group participation contributed to their understanding of personal belief in church involvement, specifically as it relates to lack of relationships, community and outreach, personal gain, church size, church programming, and the perception of perfection. Data reveals small groups' inability to replace the more traditional forms of community.

“Big Enough to Impact, Small Enough to Care”

One Mega-Church's Struggle to Create Community

As the evangelical movement has emerged as the dominant Christian voice in America today, the evangelical church philosophy has also grown. One of the most important of that church philosophy is a growing, “relevant”, and goal oriented church. A recent Fox News report states that there are now 842 mega churches, defined as a church with at least 2,000 attendees on a weekly basis, and they cater to over three million people every week across America (Sims 2004). One of the most important parts of this church movement is the idea of the small group, a church created group of five to twenty people who meet regularly outside of the normal Sunday service to share in each other's lives. This small group model was made famous by Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, and is now seen as the major way “community” is created in these large, impersonal churches. But does this model work?

Church, as a social institution, has historically existed as a local gathering of believers, usually tied to a common denomination and a common locale. These mega churches and small groups are often non-denominational, and are more aptly described as commuter churches, not local churches (despite many of them bearing the name community). Small groups created by these churches are seen as the solution to the problem of overwhelming numbers and isolating services. They are meant to replace the small local church with intimate groups of people gathering together. We wanted to know if this was truly happening. Can people experience deep and meaningful relationships in a church and a society geared toward consumption and size? Is it possible to have community without recognizing the connection you have to the people and places around the church? And are mega church small groups really an adequate solution to the local, denomination based churches of the earlier part of the century?

This topic is of unique interest to the sociologist, especially those concerned with the changing nature of the religious and evangelical movement in America today. With the social structure radically shifting, evangelicals face a pluralistic and consumer driven society that is in conflict with many long standing Christian beliefs. Since many are doing this without adequate social ties the sociologist must wonder if the movement will be able to sustain itself. By focusing on these small groups and the attachments formed within them we hope to shed light on their ability to sustain community and spirituality. Along with the sociologist this study will also be of interest to the evangelical pastor and laity to understand how small groups succeed or fail in their stated mission. Since the evangelical movement is founded on a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, the small group is of unique importance to the movement because it is the source of personal interaction with other believers who share this doctrine. Our study focuses on one such church and small group structure in Southern California. This church is certainly representative of the typical evangelical mega church with around 10,000 regular attendees, warehouse style sanctuary, laid back dress and atmosphere, and the basic doctrines of biblical truth and personal experience of God. Hopefully this research will provide a starting point for the discussion and further research surrounding this important sociological and religious movement.

Literature Review

There exists a large amount of research on mega churches, or mega-churches, and a large amount of research regarding community. The research is lacking in the area of how being a part of a mega church effects one's sense of community and local attachment. Most of the research that exists regarding mega churches involves case studies – congregational studies focused the demographics of the church or ministry practices of the church. While the research often does not focus on the small groups structures effect on community, there is some quality research that has been done that is relevant to this study.

The key to this idea of church and community is the idea of isolation. In modern America, society has become much more mobile and in turn much more isolated (Wuthnow, 1994b; Frazee, 2001). This concept has of isolation has had a great effect on true community, isolating individuals from their neighbors, and lacking a common place with other people (Frazee, 2001).

Donald Miller has done an in-depth study on the modern evangelical movements – Calvary Chapel, Vineyard, and Hope Chapel (Miller, 1997). Miller looks at all three of these movements, where the congregations are often considered “large” (over 1,000) and looks closely at why American Protestantism has taken a direction towards large, conservative churches. Miller discusses the idea that these movements cater to the consumer mentality of Americans, where church attendees are looking to find the best “experience” (1997). Wuthnow discusses the concepts of selective adaptation and isomorphism – both are evident in the mega church movement whereby the church takes on many of the consumer based and individual driven ideas in an effort to be relevant. However, in the process these churches end up resembling a shopping mall full of options than a church full of people. (1994, a.)

Research also shows the idea that small groups are taking the place of families and neighborhood community in these mega churches (Miller, 1997; Frazee 2001; Wuthnow, 1994b). Wuthnow, in his research on small groups, found that while the small group phenomenon has become one of the vital forces in modern American religion, they are not a substitute for the local or family community where close, multi-layered ties are created over many years (Wuthnow, 1994b). In Frazee’s book, he discusses idea of small groups filling the void for community, though he goes beyond the basic idea of small groups and states that the groups need to be a local phenomenon, and include five characteristics: spontaneity, availability, frequency,

common meals, and geography. Without these five characteristics, Frazee believes that true community cannot exist (Frazee, 2001).

While these studies give theories and ideas that can be generalized to the larger religious context, case studies give a deeper look into the inner workings of community and church life. In a study from the journal "Re-generation" Jenny Staff Johnson presents a church experiencing the tensions evident when church growth begins to impinge on the surrounding neighborhood. Johnson looks closely into the Hyde Park Baptist Church and the effects of its exponential growth into the community. She quotes from the church's website saying "The success of the ministries at Hyde Park Baptist Church is totally dependent on the acquisition of land (Johnson, 2000)." This serves as a window into the mindset of this mega-church seemingly driven by the desire to have larger buildings to serve a larger population.

The neighborhood of Hyde Park is located in the city of Austin and, Johnson shows, has a tradition of keeping large, imposing structures and businesses from invading its historic homes and landmarks. The church, however, has not been stopped by community action and has even built a parking garage to accommodate its commuting congregation. At the time of the writing the tensions were at an all time high between the church and the community as members of the neighborhood had taken Hyde Park Baptist to court in order to curb its rapid growth (2000).

This example of how deep the disconnect can become between a church's human community and a church's local community is extreme, but provides insights into the mentality that is governing much of the current religious discussion surrounding the idea of "creating community". Johnson shows exactly how Hyde Park Baptist has reached so many, but in doing so paid a great price for their works; a price that seems too great to pay. "The one community that remains largely unrepresented inside the church's doors is the one the church exists alongside (2000)." While many members of the church are sympathetic to the complaints of the

residents in the area, there is no discussion about how community is being redefined by their church. This indicates that there is more than simply healthy church growth at work here, and that the idea of community is shifting from local to human, and from dwelling to seeking (Wuthnow, 1998).

The changing perception of church and community is not only altering the way churches relate the neighborhoods around them, but is also reshaping the way churches relate to each other. This is made evident in a study done by Nancy L. Eiesland of a small exurban community called Dacula. Eiesland explored how the rapid church growth of one church, Hebron Baptist, affected the surrounding smaller churches and how these churches have tried to respond the increased competition of this successful congregation. Hebron Baptist is a large congregation of nearly 3,500 worshipers on a Sunday morning. Their extensive programming, technology, and facilities are unrivaled by any of the surrounding churches and draws congregants from Dacula and many other surrounding cities. It is in the face of this kind of growth that smaller neighborhood based churches have to find their niche in order to maintain healthy and active congregations.

Eiesland examines three other congregations to see the effects of Hebron's growth and influence. While all three churches continued to maintain small congregations with different kinds of programs, they all seemed to be frustrated, or at least critical, of Hebron's style of church and community building. The church that seemed to be the best at developing its own definition of community, Trinity Christian Fellowship, did so by creating what they saw as a kind of anti-Hebron mentality in which they sought to define themselves against the "mega-church" mentality. Their mission statement included "It is our desire to be a family oriented, nurturing, loving body of believers who understand the true goal of being Christian... to minister the love of Jesus to today's families." (Eiesland, 1997) Trinity's emphasis on the "true goal"

suggests a kind of divergence from Hebron's style of rapid growth. Especially when seen in the light of the preceding sentence in which they declare their desire not to become a "mega-church".

Eiesland's research of these churches reveals how this idea of isolated humans coming together to create community is creating differences in church philosophies even among churches in a small town. While Hebron Baptist attempts to draw more and more people from the region, Trinity Fellowship, and the other churches, present themselves as congregations still in touch with the needs of the local people and who desire to see Dacula remain the focus of their church-growth.

Many would say the driving force behind this regional church phenomenon is Willow Creek Community Church. Willow Creek has been at the forefront of developing a strategy of church and community development that focuses not on any specific location, but on people as a market sector that can be advertised into the church and into the church community.

Gregory A. Pritchard's study of the socialization process of Willow Creek gives an in depth examination of how Willow Creek has become the American Evangelical example for how church should be marketed to the "unchurched Harry's" of the suburban American world. Pritchard goes to great lengths to explain exactly how marketing has become the driving idea behind Willow Creek's influence in the community and how it has set itself up not as a local church based on the needs of its geographic community, but as a kind of ideal which meets the needs of a target demographic in the American middle class society.

Willow Creek's church mentality, Pritchard shows, is based around the idea of seeing your congregation as customers. The church's heavy reliance on this strategy has created an enormous congregation that is almost entirely homogeneous. 60% are married, 60 percent are between the ages of 25-45, 50-66% have a college degree or better, the majority have white

collar jobs, and 59% describe themselves as conservative (and only 12% describe themselves as liberal). (Pritchard, 1994) While some of this may be chalked up to the local suburban community Willow Creek draws from, Willow Creeks market mentality has obviously created a community that is not comprised of local people, but of a certain kind of suburban person.

These three church studies all seem to point to the same kind of restructuring of community Wuthnow and Miller point to. The research surrounding Evangelical Christian Church and the communities it is a part of seem to suggest that there is a large disconnect between the perception of community, and what is truly occurring. This is only more pronounced if community is defined not only as a connection between humans, but as a connection between humans, businesses, schools, and the land that all of these people share. The old idea of a local church has given way to regional churches that draw large amounts of homogenous and market accessible people to their doors (Pritchard, 1994). This kind of community certainly needs to be further explored and scrutinized to see exactly what kind of effect it is having on the religious environment of American Evangelicalism and the people who make up this social group.

Wendell Berry, a professor at the University of Kentucky, a respected environmentalist, and farmer with a long family history in the Kentucky fields has written extensively on the subject of community and place. He also speaks of the need for a connection between not just humans, but humans and the land and all the things that come with that.

If we speak of a *healthy* community, we cannot be speaking of a community that is merely human. We are talking about a neighborhood of humans in a place, plus the place itself: its soil, its water, its air, and all the families and tribes of the nonhuman creatures that belong to it (Berry, 1993).

He concludes that the economic way of life foisted on the American people by large and invasive government and corporations leads to the disintegration of the land, the people, and in the end the community. His critique of the American “community” extends to the church as he notes the

church has usually been at the forefront of this land and community destruction by emphasizing an individual and thus universal idea about humans and human relation to the land. This being true Berry argues that Christian holiness has been perverted.

The holiness of life is obscured to modern Christians also by the idea that the only holy place is the built church. This idea may be more taken for granted than taught; nevertheless, Christians are encouraged from childhood to think of the church building as “God’s house,” and most of them could think of their houses or farms or shops or factories as holy places only with great effort and embarrassment. It is understandably difficult for modern Americans to think of their dwellings and workplaces as holy, because most of these are, in fact, places of desecration, deeply involved in the ruin of Creation (1993).

Of course Berry’s line of thinking has implications for the mega church movement that, though may include many positive aspects, is certainly not a political force in the remaking of the earth. It seems quite likely that many of these churches are, in fact, quite wrapped up in the “desecration” Berry speaks of. If Berry’s definition of a healthy community seems to have deep implications for those Christians seeking “community” in places that he seems to find advancing ideals that are the exact antithesis of community.

Method

This study will look into the experience of church members participating in small groups, in this particular church's case, cell groups. While their viewpoints range in doctrine and politics it is safe to say that they would all fit into the category of conservative evangelical, some falling more towards the fundamentalist camp than others. We relied on their recounting of small group, church, and neighborhood experiences to obtain our data. Specifically we wanted to understand how these small group members defined the term community, and how that impacted their daily interactions. In retrospect our assumption that community would be a well understood and definable term was too large of a step to take, however, their stories reveal their understanding of what community is even if they were unable to define it in systematic terms.

Their stories of the relationships forged in their experiences should communicate how they view church, their role in it, and why small groups are a necessary part of the mega-church experience.

Sample

We used snowball, selecting informants, and availability techniques to obtain our sample for this study. The sample consisted of two sets of couples and six individuals who attended a mega-church in Southern California and were actively involved in the small groups' structure of that church. Initial contact was made with the Associate Pastor of Cell Group Ministries at the church who gave us names of cell group leaders. After contacting these leaders we attended small group meetings in order to observe how a meeting worked and to gain access to other members of the small groups for our sample. Our final sample consisted of interviews with the Associate Pastor, three sets of small group leaders (one couple, and two individuals), and three sets of small group participants (one couple, and two individuals).

The sample consisted mainly of white, middle class church members. One member of our sample was African American. Four females were interviewed and six males. The ages ranged from early twenties to late sixties although most were middle aged with adult children. All had extensive experience in evangelical churches with only one coming from a non-evangelical tradition in Scientology.

Data Collection and Analysis

Observation of church services, small group meetings, and the church's television broadcast were used to obtain data, however, interviews were the main source of information. We conducted eight different interviews ranging from forty five minutes to an hour and a half during the late winter and early spring of 2004. Questioning was based on interview guides focused on three major areas. Respondents were asked to tell stories about their small group

experience, their church experience (including past church involvement), and their neighborhood relationships. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

As the interviews were being conducted and once they were completed a process of analysis was engaged. Interviews were read and attention was given to specific areas of interest in a coding process. The categories that emerged from this coding were broken into groups and have become the categories used in the presentation of our results.

Results

The Problem of Isolation

A desire to have Christian relationships that are different from those found in “the world” is one of the main points of focus for the interviews in this research. The respondents notice that in a society geared to individuals a gap exists between people, that is only made deeper by their faith that they all seem to feel sets them even further outside the norm. This leads them to rethink how they relay their faith to non-believers and is reflected in their desire to make their faith, their church, and their lives as comfortable as possible. A direct result of this thought is the compartmentalization of respondent’s lives in order to alleviate dissonance between interactions with members of their small groups and members of “the world”. Although this way of relating to others may be a source of conflict with their desire to be “authentic” and “honest”, it certainly allows them and those they relate to a measure of comfort that would not be afforded if they did not keep parts of their interactions in different spheres. These kinds of comfortable relationships are directly related to the way respondents thought about the small group and the relationships located within those groups. These relationships were seen to be of great personal benefit and very little attention was paid to how these groups serve the greater whole or contribute to a different kind of faith. While this kind of relationship may be in conflict with a desire to be less isolated it “meets a need” and once that need is met the relationships are no

longer of use. Finally, because the interviews all come from members of a very large church that could seemingly lead to even further isolation there is a great deal of attention paid to the small groups ability to serve as a smaller, more manageable church within a larger church.

Comfort: How to Evangelize. The main focus of interaction with non-believers for the respondents was one geared towards an idea of evangelism and outreach. This created a great deal of dissonance for them as they operated with the assumption that Christian interaction with non-believers is “normally” disingenuous. One cell group leader spoke often and at length about how he sees “fanatical” Christians as being a turn off.

I think one of the things God has taught me the most is not to be a religious person. Religious people turn away nonbelievers so I like to be one that reaches out. I'm an introverted person so reaching out for me is not a whole lot but just being friendly, being open, and not being judgmental. I think that is an important thing and it really turns me off when Christians approach people kind of in a fanatic way it really turns them off towards Christianity. I don't think that's the way Jesus went around doing his business. Jesus had a mission, had a plan, and I don't think it was very confrontational. Sometimes it was, but I think it was just very loving, very accepting and kind. There's a scripture that says God's kindness leads us to repentance and I like to do it that way.

He went on to talk about “radical types” saying that “they have a good heart but their methods are really poor”. This seems to be a point of frustration for many of the respondents where they want to evangelize and share their faith, but those who take it too far step beyond the bounds of the status quo and this creates a problem in their minds.

Another gentleman who was a leader in the cell group structure also dealt with this problem as he tried to discern how the church's “outreach” ministry spread the faith.

We like to do random acts of kindness where we'll go clean up a place or we'll go pick up trash in the foothills or we'll partner with some other agency to do some sort of a beautification project things like that. I'm very satisfied with that style of evangelism that doesn't just seek to give somebody the religious intangible, although that's principally what we're all about is Christ, but they also need to see Christ reflected in your actions and they need to see that many times first before they'll ever even consider listening to what you have to say about Jesus.

The idea that the church is “all about the religious intangible” is upsetting to him on one level, but at the same time he recognizes that the church is really “all about” it. This idea of evangelism is present in all of the respondents’ minds but it is apparent that the friendship is not what matters as much as the friend’s willingness to convert at some point. Of course this creates problems of authenticity, which is so important to their liking of the church, but it is better than “pushing” your faith on another.

This sentiment is perhaps made most apparent in a male small group leader’s interview. His responses were littered with his desire to keep his faith and the rest of his social life in separate spheres. Being the president of his neighborhood council puts him in a unique position of influence so even as he interacts with his neighbors he says: “I don’t want them to think when I have a political business agenda that I am overlapping it with a spiritual emphasis.” This keeps him from sharing his faith verbally with nearly anyone he comes in contact with because it might seem as though he had a different agenda. Because of the idea that his spirituality is tainting his other interactions he tries to emphasize “secular compassion”. His belief that one’s faith often impinges on genuine social interaction is expressed in his discomfort with being confronted about his faith by a non-Christian neighbor.

I had somebody come up to me when I was out in the garage the other day and say, “You’re a Christian aren’t you?” I really did not advocate it and did not go out proselytizing but this lady came up to me and asked me, and I just said OK.

It is not fair or correct to suggest that he was ashamed by this interaction. He is not trying to hide his faith, just keep it independent from any of his interactions that may be perceived as having two agendas.

Closely related to this idea of evangelism and religion being uncomfortable and confrontational is the sentiment that the church exists as a place of comfort. This is best seen in

the responses of a young college aged woman. She began her interview talking about a woman in her small group who she perceived as being “extreme”.

She is the kind of person who is really extreme anyway. The kind of person who when she became a Christian was really into it [she'd say stuff like] “You guys are all going to hell”, things like that. I had a friend in high school like that; it kind of pushes everyone away. She was just so extreme, which was good because she was really excited. But then she met this guy, and he said that he had some new take on the Bible. She slowly started to help him, but then it was kinda' like a cult, or that's what it sounded like, it was really extreme, like a new version of the Bible.

Even while noting this group member's extreme nature she was trying to satisfy the dissonance that she was experiencing. On one hand this person was extreme and outside the norm, yet on the other she places her own faith outside the norm and thus must put this member in a pseudo fanatic category where her radical commitment and uncomfortable approach led her to join a cult. So to counteract this extremism she turned to the church as a place of refuge and normalcy. When she spoke of her relationship with her small group leaders their normalcy was possibly her favorite part about them.

I think they are just the kind of people that make you feel like family right away, which is really nice. I used to be more shy in high school. Sometimes I can still be really shy. They instantly make you feel really comfortable and stuff. They are just like the best, the funniest people, and the nicest people. I think it is just that instant welcome that you get when you get to know them and stuff. They are just normal people. Because I know that I have met people through bible study that are just really weird. You know, what other people think Christians are. You just can't get to know them on a normal level. But with Gaye and Craig it's not like they are hiding things from you.

Here it is obvious that her perception of “what other people think Christians are” is weird and consequently she is pleased with how normal her leaders appear to be. This plays directly into the idea that she, and other respondents advanced that the purpose of the “church and the people [is to] make you feel comfortable.” All of these serve to show that the small group members' perception of the church and the small group is that they should maintain the status quo, support and uphold their lifestyles, and generally not be “extreme”, “radical”, or “pushy” in any way that would upset the norm.

Relationship and Compartmentalization. Of course one of the main reasons people have turned to small groups in their large church is so that they can maintain some sort of social structure. The intersection of the relationships forged between group members and between people outside of the group was a focus of our interviews. As noted earlier the relationships with people outside of the Christian faith revolve primarily around evangelism, but there is also an understanding that interaction outside of the faith always yields unfulfilling results. The wife of one of the small group leaders stressed often how hard it was to have relationships with people in “the world”.

You can't share your life the way you'd like to with the people in the world; you'd end up feeling kind of isolated or something. Not that you don't want to be in the world but you need that home base. Our church encourages people to join cell groups - we've got almost 20,000 people and so that's why our pastor likes to say that they are how we do church.

Here she touches on many of the issues we confronted in our interviews, but certainly she stresses the inability to share her life with “people in the world”. This creates a small problem that she addresses in the next sentence. She wants to evangelize people and be authentic, but she also feels that if they don't share her faith she is unable to truly engage them.

Within the group, however, there is an understanding that the relationships are meant to be close, uplifting, and intimate and even if respondents did not appear to have much connection with one another, they certainly understood that there should be. An older gentleman who seemed fond of his small group certainly knew the structure and what was supposed to happen.

With the cell group you've got a core of four or five couples you know and that you share things with more than some kind of acquaintance. They have the same faith so you can share things with them. It's hard to get that feeling from your neighbors because they don't share your faith. It's like a camaraderie.

Again he states that by nature of sharing the same faith there should be a deeper connection that doesn't exist with “your neighbors”, whom we understand are non-believers. The relationships should exist, and certainly do on some level, but it's hard to say how much deeper it is than with

one's neighbors. When we went on to ask him about how the relationships were more important he simply replied: "We haven't gone so far as to go on vacation with couples or anything like that. It's just been fellowship; we haven't really gone past the fellowship." Of course going on vacation is not the standard for deeper relationships but he made it clear that their relationships did not extend far beyond their meeting times and times of extreme crisis.

Even in the small group relationships, however, there are problems with understanding how to bring the relationships into meaningful contact with the rest of the respondents' lives. This is most clear in the young college woman who seems to have trouble justifying some of her choice before the more conservative members of her group

Sometimes with church people, you have to be careful, with people you don't know well. You have to, you know, not everyone agrees with movies and TV. If you don't know them, you have to watch what you bring up. I know a lot of people who don't like Buffy (a TV show) always say things. My brother and I would watch it all the time. Or Family Guy, (also a TV show) which a lot of people have a problem with it. You just don't know how people are going to take certain things. So when you have your friends who aren't part of your church group, you are a little more free to talk about those kinds of things. And you may be more guarded around those kinds of people with talking about religious kind of things, which you wouldn't be at church. But I think I have a pretty good group of friends on both sides, so I don't have to really worry about it either way.

It is obvious that she is uncomfortable discussing the TV shows she watches with members of her religious circle of friends and that she feels as though they would not approve of them.

However, because she is able to keep this part of her life open to her non-believing friends she doesn't "have to really worry about it either way." This is in conflict with the desire to make the church authentic and normal, but by keeping those relationships separate she doesn't have to experience the discomfort brought on by bringing all parts of her life to bear with each other. It is not just with areas of disapproval that she finds she cannot communicate with her small group but also in her normal life where she works with sick and dying farm animals every day:

I can't really talk about what's happening with the animals and stuff because they get grossed out. But with my friends they understand and you can talk about anything and they understand. Especially with animals, because the stories can get really gross, and I

don't have to worry about it with them. Whereas with other people I do. I don't get grossed out and I forget that other people do.

Of course this is a more complex set of circumstances, but again demonstrates how she feels the need to keep parts of her life distinct from the interactions of her small group, thus putting more barriers in the relationships, even if it is to keep people from being "grossed out".

Personal Gain. The relationships formed around the idea of community are geared mainly toward the principle of personal gain. This takes many forms, and it would be a mistake to call it selfishness. It is a more nuanced and legitimized way of looking at the group than simple self gratification. One of the couples interviewed provides a very unique insight into how this dynamic takes shape. When they were asked what led them to start a small group the husband said, "One of the best things was providing a service to the church." This is the only time in all of our interviews that someone talked about the small group being of some kind of service to a greater movement outside of themselves. However, after the husband had said this the wife was quick to interject:

Well, there was another reason, that was truly a reason, but another reason was when we first started. After having raised two teenagers we just kind of needed more social interaction with other Christians and fellowship. We had some things going on and we really needed prayer and friendship and we didn't have that. So the opportunity came up for us to lead a small group and so the purpose of our small group is to fellowship with other Christians.

Although affirming of her husband's statement, she takes a very different outlook on the true reason and purpose of the small group: meeting their personal need of Christian fellowship. This demonstrates the idea that drives most all of our respondents to join and continue to participate in small groups, church, and even spirituality. This particular woman went on to discuss a time when she was able to pray for a small group member who had cancer:

When a woman in our group last year had cancer, what I did among the women is I made phone calls on a regular basis. We had a prayer chain every week, and I think that really developed their faith, and it sure was good for [a woman in the small group]. She's a

strong woman of God and it helped us and them more than her but she was certainly appreciative of it.

It is obvious that the initial purpose of the prayer chain was for the benefit of the woman with cancer, but as the prayer chain progressed, her comment is very telling; “it helped us and them more than her.” This kind of sentiment whereby prayer, or any spiritual or church related act, becomes not an act that would benefit others, but an act that uplifts one’s own self is the dominating force in all of the small group interactions.

While many respondents spoke about their need for Christian interaction and how the small group met that need, another way the concept of personal gain was seen is in people's understanding of what the church, and by association God, did for their lives. One respondent recounted what she saw as good and important about the church by saying:

I think it just makes it easier because you are getting more involved in the Bible, and more involved with God, and your relationship with God gets close, and every thing in general gets better and becomes better. You make better choices in life.

This was a very typical feeling among respondents that life “gets better” if you are connected with the group, the church, and God. One older female respondent was especially attuned to this concept as concerns her finances.

We probably started tithing real regularly 6 or 7 years ago. It was difficult at first. I would say I was a little doubtful. At least I was. My husband was always a little better at being faithful and just doing it. But I was always more reluctant to have faith in having enough. We did that for probably two years and we didn’t really see anything. But we continued on and on, as the pastor always said. And we really did start to see a really significant growth in our jobs, my raises, and different things like that. Things I didn’t expect. And just saw things happen that didn’t happen before.

Being “faithful” begets blessing in her mind, and while this is certainly an example of how ideology is manifested financially, it extends to all areas of one's life. Later in her interview she extended this line of thinking into the benefit of the relationships in the small group. When we asked her if it was hard to go to such a large church she responded:

We had been there 18, 19 years and we knew a handful, not even a lot of people.

Was that difficult for you?

Well, pastor's teaching kept us there. And the programs for the kids.

But you wouldn't say that there were people that kept you there?

No, not really. And you know, that might be different for other people. But we had real strong family ties and other friends too, so we had other avenues to socialize. I think it would have benefited us if we had gotten more involved sooner, because I can see how we have been blessed, so I wish we would have done that earlier.

What appears here is two fold, first and most obviously is the lack of relationships she had been able to create in her long tenure at the church, of course leading to feelings of isolation from participation in the church community. However, what is perhaps more subtle is her explanation of why she needs the small group relationships now, because they have "benefited" and "blessed" her. Her desire to be involved in those relationships sooner and continue them is clearly for her own personal gain. While it may certainly be of benefit and service to the larger whole, that is not why she sees the relationships as important.

The idea that the church structure is of personal benefit without even being engaged in relationships may seem somewhat cynical, but certainly can be called a pattern in our research.

A young male respondent said:

You know, back to the whole [college] thing, it was about getting away from campus and getting away from people and that environment. I wanted to be at a place where not everyone knew me and be at a place where I felt that I could really be myself. Just kind of be me and God and focused on that. But now that I have been getting out of that environment a little, I would say that I still kind of treat it the same way – I still want to use it as a way to just go and meet with God and not necessarily interact with a ton of people. There are a few, I would like to meet more people, I think that it would be a good experience. But I don't necessarily want, my goal in going there is not to just meet a ton of new people and to have a family like atmosphere.

There is a sense that God cannot be met in the presence of others, or at least that having other relationships may actually impinge on his ability to stay God "focused". His understanding of church is nearly entirely focused on what he as an individual can take out of that experience, and

certainly not to become part of a “family like atmosphere” that imposes itself on his own individual experience.

Size. Nearly all of our respondents dealt with the problem of the church's size, and how to navigate relationships within such an overwhelmingly large group of people. This is obviously something that the church pastoral leadership has also thought about as many of our respondents talked about how the pastor says small groups is “how we do church.” Although the small groups are said to be the place where church is done, there seems to be two ideologies at work within the church; one being that there is a recognition that church must be small in order to have true and meaningful relationships, and the other is that church must be large because if it is not it will have no “impact”. These two sets of ideas compete against each other and small groups are the given answer at this particular church.

I mean, you'll hear this if you ever visit. Our pastor, senior pastor, says cell groups is how we do church, and our motto is that we want to be large enough to impact, small enough to care and there's no way you can get that without getting smaller.

“Getting smaller” does not mean the church should seek to be a smaller church, but instead should continue to spawn small groups in order to deal with its growth. By using the understanding that a church must be large in order to have an impact, church attendance and numbers become a very important part of the mindset, however, focusing purely on numbers is seen as disingenuous so it is legitimized in other ways. When we asked one of the pastors how much of their church population they would like to have involved in small groups he replied:

We're trying to get to fifty percent. That's probably the most aggressive and even then if it were up to me I'd like to see eighty percent or ninety percent. I've been telling you about my Monday night group, its such a blessing to me, and I've been a Christian for a long time. So I vouch for it any day of the week. Everybody needs that kind of support system. So right now the immediate goal is 5,000 and with Forty Days of Purpose our goal with that is to have 1,000 of those Forty Days Groups. We have five hundred people signed up right now to lead roughly five hundred so we've got to get five hundred more. But it's not about numbers its just about trying to reach as many people as you can.

Despite his protestation that it is “not about numbers” his emphasis on getting a certain amount of people to participate reveal the numbers is certainly very important. This emphasis is legitimized by noting that it is just about reaching “as many people as you can”, but it remains clear that the belief that a church must have large numbers to be impactful operates from the highest levels all the way to the laity in the small groups.

The pastor is certainly cognizant of what the church's philosophy is as relates to church size and numbers, but it is surprising how much the congregants have adopted a similar mentality, seemingly separate from, although influenced by, the church. When we asked an older woman who is a member of a small group if she preferred a big church or a small church she seemed unable to come up with anything really wrong with a big church that cannot be solved by small groups

They have almost equally weighed out pros and cons. The things that are for it is that a big church can afford to put on productions, they can afford to make a nice presentation of whatever, but you don't get to know the people on a one on one basis. Up at [their previous smaller church] especially because he (her husband) was kinda born into it everybody knew everybody, you didn't dare talk about anybody negatively because they were related somewhere. So with a smaller church you have the camaraderie, but not the finances, and it balances off. We like a lot of good teaching good music and the rest kind of comes along with the package.

While she makes it clear that there is more camaraderie at a small church even that has a kind of negative overtone with everyone talking about everyone else. So with a mega church you can have a good service, which most of our respondents emphasized, and the relationships will come in the small groups, or not at all, which is not always a bad thing. Her husband also ascribed to the big church mentality despite his fifty year connection with their previous church. “We could tell that there was some kind of anointing on the church because the church was just growing by leaps and bounds and it was fun to be a part of something that was kind of like an avalanche.” Not only does he prefer the mega church, he interprets its size as being the “anointing” of God, and enjoys being associated with that experience. Even though the wife interprets the small

groups as “getting back to a foundational situation, first century church” that does not mean that her desire is that the whole church would move to that model. The church's size has become far more than simply the product of a certain church philosophy in the minds of the laity; it is proof of the church's impact and God's blessing on the work it does.

Institutional Belonging

A clear pattern that emerged from the research was a desire for institutional belonging. This concept of belonging to an institution often replaced belonging to people (or having genuine relationships with people). In an age where many do not feel that they belong to anything, many look to the church to find belonging. The respondents showed an appreciation for belonging to the church. But this belonging did not come from deep relationships and feelings with people, but instead it was a belonging to church structures and programs. When asked about community, they would describe the church's programs and outreach instead of the relationships they had within the church.

This belonging to programs also came through in the respondents definitions of community. When they were able to come up with a definition (which often was not the case – we encountered many problems trying to get them to verbalize a definition of community), it often was expressed as including, if not completely comprised, of fun programs and outreach events. Relationships to one another through were forged through programs and tasks instead of intimate interactions.

In our current social order the concept of consumerism emerges in the ways people choose churches. These church consumers are looking for the “perfect” church (which many respondents claim to have found). What becomes clear is that the idea of “perfect” does include different things for different people. For some it may be the people and the relationships that you can have with those people. For others it becomes programs and what those programs can

offer them. Many of our respondents operate under the assumption that the church is a place that offers events, programs, and outreaches while any kind of relationships that exist are merely “icing on the cake”. Our research showed a clear pattern of attending the church for these programs. But it went beyond these programs. It became a belonging to the “perfect” church. As a result interviewees could come up with very little that could or should be different about the current state of their church.

Programs and Outreach. The idea of belonging to an institution comprised mainly of programs instead of relationships came through clearly in our research. When asked to define community, the interviewees often struggled in verbalizing a definition, not only in their own definition but also in what the church’s definition would be. They were all very clear about having community. When asked to define community one person responded, “Oh, we’ve got community!” When a college aged girl was asked to recount a story about community at the church, she responded by saying that there were plenty of times when they “had fun and everything”. Unfortunately even this had not occurred since she had been in youth group. A few of the interviewees could not even come up with a definition. They could only respond by saying, “I don’t know”.

When it was possible to come up with a definition, we found a range of different definitions. One of the clearest definitions of community showed this emphasis on programs.

We basically define community as believers tied to one another through either task and or relationship that were co-laboring together - you know to do something basically with the same objective, because the people who don’t stay at the church are people who either don’t have relationship or they’re not serving in any capacity.

While this includes the possibility of community involving relationships, it also clearly says that this community can also come from people involved in tasks (or programs) together. By placing all of the community emphasis on being involved and serving, community becomes something that can exist without relationships as long people are “doing” things. Another similar definition

given by one of the cell group leaders talks about intimacy, and then uses that intimacy to offer friends the opportunity to watch church on the television.

My definition of community is about closeness and about intimacy. At [the church] it provides a lot of different environments for that, so I'm just proud to be part of it. I'm proud to tell people where I go. I'm proud to tell them, "Hey, if you feel like you live too far away, just turn on channel nine at nine o'clock on Saturday mornings and you can see and experience the same thing I see and experience and so I like that.

While he defines community as being about closeness and intimacy, he then goes on to describe an example of the opposite. Clearly closeness and intimacy with people would not be possible if one was sitting at home watching church on television

What is interesting about these programs is that there was little commitment and seemed to be an aversion to "forcing" people to commit. One of the cell group leaders very clearly stated, "I don't hold anybody to a commitment I try to make it as comfortable of an environment as possible". They feel that holding people to a commitment would lead to scaring people away, so they do not expect people to commit to these programs or groups. In one of the cell groups we attended, about fifteen people that belonged to the group, yet only a few would show up at meeting. This inconsistency in the group led to a clear lack of relationships in the group. Very few people knew other beyond common small talk interactions, and they felt that because they belonged to the group, that was all they needed. Whether or not they attended was of little consequence. This also came through in other programs. In talking about the college group, a college aged girl said:

They had one, but with my work schedule I had to get up really early on Saturday mornings, so I could not stay out really late on Fridays. So I could never stay there (so she stopped going). Then they stopped having it, so it was like, "What am I supposed to do?"

She felt that she belonged to this college program, even though she did not attend it. And then when it was discontinued, she did not know what to do. The existence of these programs offer a

comfort factor as they have an “institution” that they can feel that they belong to, even if they do not have any connection to this institution, other than tacit program participation.

Another concept of community that came through in the research was one of outreach. To many of the respondents community was equated with outreach, especially to all races. It appears the church has put a good deal of emphasis on being diverse racially, and the laity has internalized this concept of community. One older male said:

Well the community in the church - they stress that its for all races. They've got people who are black, Mexicans, Orientals....They've tried to open it up to where everyone is more comfortable. Most churches are that way but at the white churches, usually they don't reach out to people from other ethnic groups. [The pastor] makes a point of bringing in all of them and I commend him for that.

This idea of community being comprised of racial diversity was seen often, though not all respondents were able to make this change from their status quo prior to small group involvement. After the man above commented on race his wife interjected with “a few whites (laughter), we're becoming the minority”. But whether or not it was positive, it was always first in people's mind when they think about community. One male said that his first response when defining community would be that the church “makes every attempt to know the community in [the town] – they reach out they reach out to every color creed and sex.” One of the cell group leaders described the church's community:

It really appeals to all different races, all different groups, and I think that's important. And I'm proud to be part of faith because it appeals to many different ethnic groups. When I go to faith I kind of see it as I think this is what heaven is going to look like – we have Asians and we have whites and blacks and Hispanics all worshipping God together and fellowshiping with one another in perfect harmony.

It appears that the church itself has identified racial diversity as a top goal for their community.

The church laity has accepted this diversity and for the most part appears to have welcomed it.

With such a large church, one would expect a high emphasis on outreach. This church was no exception as outreach was a huge part of the respondents' definition of community. One of the small group leaders spoke about the different outreach programs.

I think [the church] cares about the community. They want everybody to know or at least have an opportunity to find Jesus and that's why [the church] has so many different ministries. It could be an addictive type of ministry; it could be an evangelistic type of ministry or convalescent home visiting. And now with the radio and television it's really drawn in a whole bunch of people even outside our local community.

Outreach here becomes the practical definition of community. In almost every interview, when asked about the community at the church, outreach was a focus. The respondents talked about what the church does to "reach out" to the community.

Oh we've got community - well they've always tried to involve the community. They've had outreaches going out to the mall or whatever. And the things that they do, like for Easter and the things that they do for the winter festival. You know, they'd open it up to the whole city and we'd have about 5,000 people come on some Saturday.

In their mind community could not exist without outreach. In a seeker sensitive church, especially a large one, the emphasis in the church is about growing. In order to do this they need to place a high priority on outreach being their community.

Perfection. According to most of our respondents, they viewed their church as truly a perfect church. The church's definition of community is seen as perfect, the community that exists is seen as perfect, and the pastor is seen as perfect. Most respondents were even unable to come up with anything that they would change. A majority of respondents have never even thought about leaving, and those that have, haven't had a reason to. As one older male said:

Every once and a while we think maybe we should leave and find another church because we've been in one place a long time but we're pleased with our church... The thought and temptation to go to a small cutesy - you know everybody knows everybody in the church - does creep in every now and again, but then we think "Is that the best?" and probably not.

This man could find no reason to leave. He has thought about going to a small church where "everybody knows everybody", but he feels that this would not be the "best." This statement

indicates that he believes that a large church is somehow on a morally superior ground and churches that are small just can't have the impact and outreach that the large church he attends is able to facilitate. He doesn't feel that another church would have anything to offer that this church does not already have. The one issue that came up a few times would be the church's overwhelming size, but even with this they would follow up with a response to the size that "solved" the problem.

A lot of the things that our church does to overcome that largeness is to have a lot of greeters, they have big name tags that say if you need help or info, and the area where you walk out they have a lot of tables and people advertising for different things.

The prevailing sentiment seems to be that even though the church is large, that is overcome with smiling greeters and information tables. When we attended the church, we were met by greeters smiling and welcoming us to the church. While this is certainly welcoming, we were never asked what our names were nor were we engaged beyond the initial welcome.

Overall, respondents equated their experience with the perfect, or ideal, church and community.

I really haven't come across too many problems or anything. I see things happening really quickly, as far as good things happening, and I don't really see anything. The only thing I would want to change would be if there was a problem with something, and I can't really see anything that needs to be changed, from my perspective.

The concept of the perfect church was also seen in their definition of community. When asked what the ideal community would look like, one female responded by saying, "[The church] is pretty close to anything that I can imagine". One of the cell group leaders, when asked if the church was the perfect community, responded by saying, "Almost!" Even after we followed up on this response, she could not come up with anything that would have shifted the church from an "almost" to a "yes".

Another concept that came up was the neighborhood's, and other church's, view of the church. As the case of the Hyde Park Church study showed mega churches often have strained

relationships with the surrounding community. When asked about how the neighborhood viewed the church, it was unanimously positive. Outside of Sunday morning parking issues, the respondents were unable to come up with any reason why the church would be viewed negatively. One of the cell group leaders commented on the local neighborhood.

I would say that they view it (the church) pretty favorably. Especially the city government. The community area seems to have a good relationship with the church. And the people around seem to be pretty favorable.

His wife responded in a similar fashion, saying:

I would have to say that they really like that the church is there. Because, other than that, besides the parking thing on Sundays, I can't imagine how the church could be viewed negatively.

No one could see why the neighborhood would feel negatively about the church. And while this is certainly possible, the respondents viewed the church in such a positive light that there was no space for anyone to view the church negatively.

This overwhelmingly positive attitude toward the church contributed to a strong sense that the church was superior to the other churches in the neighborhood. One woman talked about how other churches needed to join up with the church, saying, "I know that during the holidays a lot of the churches in the community like to combine with us and do things with us". While there was a sense that the church was connected to other mega churches around the nation, comments such as this show that the respondents obviously view their church as the superior church as relates to others in the neighborhood. This allowed for a certain amount of pride because of the smaller churches' "need" for the productions and programs of their large and more financially independent church. The small churches would not be able to put on an effective holiday service without the help of the larger church and this is why so many of the respondents favored the size and scope of their church.

Another reason that the respondents took so much pride in belonging to the church is the structure. One cell group leader talked about why she preferred the large church over the small church. “I kind of compare it to working at a large corporation. There is a lot more structure. There is more accountability”. She felt that because it was more like a corporation, it was able to sustain the bureaucracy needed to run a large and impactful ministry. However, this respondent was lost on the irony that the corporate structure may be the very reason she struggled so much cultivating connections with people in the church.

Since the church is often viewed as a large corporation, the pastor has become the CEO and has lost many of the ideas traditionally associated with pastoral qualities. In many churches the pastor has a similar role as that of a shepherd, taking care of its flock. One cell group leader said that their pastor’s philosophy was:

That pastors shouldn’t have to see people or go visit them. There should be people in the congregation going and doing all of this stuff. He can’t be involving all his time trying to meet the needs of 10,000 people - he should have 2,000 people trying to meet the needs of 10,000 people.

Instead of playing the traditional role of a pastor trying to meet the needs of the church, the pastor is instead playing the role of a CEO of a large corporation, where he lays out the leadership and the organization follows.

The pastor was also viewed very positively, possibly because he is so far removed and exalted from the normal church interactions, especially his teaching. The teaching was often the reason that they were at the church. One of the cell group leaders liked to pastor so much that he was the main reason they stayed there for so many years.

I really like the way that our pastor teaches. He is really down to earth, he is comical, and he doesn’t talk down to people. He just talks to their level. And he brings Bible stories to modern day. He will break it down and make you think about it modern terms. So that is just a lot easier to understand.

Many of the interviewees talked about how much they liked him and how much they felt like they knew him. Only two of the interviewees had an actual relationship with the pastor, and one of them was a staff member at the church. While few of the people had a relationship with him, they all felt that they knew him well. One girl talked about him as being so open. “He is just an open kind of person where you feel like you know him just from his preaching.”

This concept of perfection was seen in combination with the churches programs. One cell group leader summed it up when asked why we should want to go to this church:

I will tell people when I am trying to get them to go to the church; there is a ministry for everything. Every person, every age, every color, every everything. And it is really, really good. Because there are all kinds of things to do.

There is a ministry (or program) for everyone, and they are all “really, really good”. The belief is that the church has so many features to offer each of us individually, no matter who or what we are. Yet the one thing that was not mentioned was relationships. The church uses “perfect” programs and ministries to bring people inside the building, but seems to fall short when it comes to using those programs to cultivate relationships in people’s lives.

Discussion

The data collected in this research suggests that mega churches are redefining how the evangelical movement deals with the concept of community. Community, once a collection of local people, places and institutions gathered around their deeply entwined interactions is becoming another goal, albeit an important goal, that is to be programmed. As Wuthnow says:

The small group movement is beginning to alter American society, both by changing our understandings of community and by redefining spirituality....these communities can be manipulated for personal ends, and the sacred can be reduced to a magical formula for alleviating anxiety (1996).

These respondents all show that they have taken on this idea of community that is not located in any particular set of relationships, but is a program or a bureaucratic structure. This is not to say that relationships, and even intimacy, do not occur in these small groups, nor is it to say that our

respondents are merely cogs in a kind of corporate wheel, more correctly it reflects the nature of all relationships in a consumer driven economy and shows that the mega church has simply internalized and exploited that societal happening. The relationships the respondents have formed may very well be meaningful in their lives; however, the sociologist must look with a more critical eye at what is truly happening with these relationships. In the introduction to this paper, we offered up several questions about the impact that the mega-church phenomenon was having on American Christianity. Can people experience deep and meaningful relationships in a church and a society geared toward consumption and size? Is it possible to have community without recognizing the connection you have to the people and places around the church? And are mega church small groups really an adequate solution to the local, denomination based churches of the earlier part of the century? The answers to these questions provide insight into how and why we find small groups to be an inadequate response to a problem that may have no answer.

Without much protestation we can say that America's social climate is one driven by consumption and the fulfillment of personal needs. That the evangelical movement fits into this social model is simply reflective of its place in the larger social order as one movement and one institution of many that is influenced by this current social and economic trend. Especially with the rise of the “seeker sensitive” church we see the evangelical church in America doing its best to cater to the needs, comforts, and goals of the “unchurched Harry” Willow Creek refers to. In his book After Christendom Stanley Hauerwas notes:

The church exists in a buyer's or consumer's market, so any suggestion that in order to be a member of a church you must be transformed by opening your life to certain kinds of discipline is almost impossible to maintain. (1999)

By extension, being the member of a church that asks you to be a part of a community that runs in direct conflict with the current emphasis on individual gain and self actualization seems to be

very unappealing to the maintenance of the status quo. Certainly a community that is made of deep rooted relationships, enduring ties to a place, and calls people to deeper discipline is an affront to the status quo of our time. So it should come as no surprise that our respondents are all very concerned that their faith does not offend non-believers, that they do not impinge on their neighbors, and that Christians are not seen as “weird” or “extreme” so as to be placed outside the bounds of relevancy.

Relevancy for our respondents is not a need to engage the culture, but in fact, is a need for the culture to engage the church. This is a very important distinction for a church that engages the culture may very well be seen as weird and even offensive, however, a church that allows the culture to engage it becomes a church concerned with making people feel comfortable. Certainly this was the case with many of our respondents view of the church, and how they expect their church to behave. We already see the problem of individual compartmentalization among the respondents, but with the church creating specific programs for specific people we see that compartmentalization being exacerbated by the church. While having a large church gives the appearance of having many different people with different interests, ethnicities, and backgrounds, its emphasis on programs for like minded people ends up creating a church culture that is more focused on “similar interests” than it is on a common belief (Wuthnow, 1998).

The data suggests that it may not be possible for people to experience “deep and meaningful” relationships in churches that focus on growth in numbers. In a church that has a mission statement stating that they desire “To develop people into successful Christians” (<http://main.aperfectweb.com/fccwc/sub.aspx?id=5370>), it then is not a surprise that the focus has been placed on the development, rather than on the Christians. In their mission to “develop people”, the church develops a community that relies on programming, pulpit teaching, and

small groups to improve the individual. Relationships and community may certainly emerge in this process, but always second to the sacred status placed on the autonomous individual. This i creates a group of people with a tendency to be disconnected from one another, which in turn makes it nearly impossible to cultivate community.

Until recently, church has always been the religious out workings of local communities. People attended church with others that they worked with, shopped with, ate with, and lived with. In this kind of daily and intentional interaction deep and lengthy relationships were unavoidable. While members of mega-churches often see other church attendees once a week, in the former church community people interacted on a near daily basis. This daily interaction helped create authentic relationships, which inevitably fostered authentic community.

Mega churches, which are by definition driven by programs and bureaucratic structure, have tried to respond to a loss of community by creating small groups. Unfortunately the data supports Wuthnow's findings in suggesting that these groups are not an adequate solution to the problem. Wuthnow discovered that small groups have become a replacement for family and close community. These family and close community ties come through years of development, while small groups attempt to produce this kind of community in a few weeks or months (1994b). Our data agrees with Wuthnow's assertions that these small groups are failing to replace what has been traditionally seen as community. What we see in these small groups is similar to what we see in the large church setting. Members of the small group are still not able to build authentic relationships. Often these small groups gather once a week, or even every other week, and rarely see each other outside of the meetings. With these limited interactions, it is practically impossible to create true relationships. In turn, with relationships focused on little more than "fellowship", small groups cannot help but fail to replace the community that is increasingly finding itself lost in the crowd of large churches.

Is there then an answer to the lost community in these mega churches? The data seems to suggest that there is not. It is unfair to blame this problem on any one person, any one church, possibly any one religious movement, but the problem is located in the structure of the churches themselves, as well as in the philosophy that drives them forward. By placing a huge emphasis on growth, programs, and entertaining Sunday morning services the churches must become as large, financially stable and autonomous as possible. This size is certainly an unreasonable, and possibly unwanted, goal of a smaller more locally focused church. Once these churches become so large it is nearly impossible to create a community bound together through generations and geographic location. They realize that their congregation has very little relational, let alone communal, interaction. In response to this they create small groups, and while they may be a noble attempt at fixing a real problem, they do not address the structural changes that have occurred in the church. These changes cannot help but create an environment where community occurs only through invasive programming on the part of the church. It is unfortunate that this is the outcome of these kinds of structural changes, but since it seems to be the reality if the evangelical movement hopes to sustain itself it seems the only solution will be for it to fundamentally rethink the way it does “church”.

In our research and data collection, we did come across some expected and unexpected problems. Our most problematic area was founded on our assumption that the concept of community would be a well understood and definable term, never mind that we had thought some people may have an existing community to begin with. In the conducting of our interviews we found that the respondents had very little notion of community. They were unable to come up with a definition or concept of community that had any practical relationship to their own lives. This forced us to adjust our methods so that we could extrapolate an understood and implied definition of community even when they were unable to verbalize it. Another problem

area of less significance, but still of note, is the issues that arose in creating a sample by working through the church's pastor. While we would not suggest that he sought to manipulate our sample, it seems to make sense that he supplied us with the proverbial "best and brightest" and thus left us with possibly a less than representative group of informants. While in the end we feel that our research is still valid and holds true for general trends in the church, it may be slightly tainted by this method of sample gathering.

This limited study suggests a need for more lengthy and in depth research. This is first needed on other mega churches to see if patterns similar to the ones we discovered can be generalized to other churches of similar size and demographics. Once patterns emerge, a clearer solution can be formed on what can be done about the dependency on programming that leads to isolation. Research is also needed in small churches to determine how community is understood. How do large churches and small churches differ? Is this problem of isolation a problem of large churches or is it more of a problem of American society? Community appears to be misunderstood, or not understood at all in our research; can this be generalized to the rest of the culture? Finally historical and longitudinal research is needed to observe the formation small group philosophy. What contributed to its rise? How has it altered the way evangelicals view church life and involvement? And do the small groups create relationships that endure through more than simply the set period of programmed interaction? This kind of research will enable us to have a greater understanding on what forms community can take and how this particular movement embraces those different ideas.

References

- Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. 1997. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Berry, Wendell. 1993. *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*. New York and San Francisco: Pantheon Books.
- Bellah, Robert, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Stephen Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eiesland, Nancy, L. 1997. Contending With a Giant: The impact of a megachurch on exurban religious institutions. *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Publishers 191-220.
- Gregory, Joel. 1994. *Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church*. Fort Worth: Summit Group.
- Guinness, Os. 1993. *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.
- Hammond, Phillip, ed., 1985. *The Sacred in a Secular Age: toward revision in the scientific study of religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hauerwas, Stanley, 1991. *After Christendom? How the church is to behave if freedom, justice, and a christian nation are bad ideas*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Johnson, Jenny Staff. 2000. One Megachurch's Manifest Destiny. *Re:generation Quarterly*. 6 no. 1 Spring: 16-19.
- Pritchard, Gregory Allen. *The Strategy of Willow Creek Community Church: A Study in the Sociology of Religion*. Doctoral Dissertation, Northwestern University. 1994.
- Miller, Donald. 1997. *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, Christian. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sims, Amy. *Religion Gets Supersized at Megachurches* [article on-line]. Fox News, 03 February 2004, accessed 7 February 2004; available from www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,110240,00.html; Internet.
- Thumma, Scott. *Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: their characteristics and cultural context*. Doctoral Dissertation, Hartford Seminary. 1993.

- Wuthnow, Robert, 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wuthnow, Robert, 1994. *Producing the Sacred: An essay on public Religion*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Wuthnow, Robert, 1994. *Sharing the Journey: support groups and America's new quest for community*. New York: Free Press.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1998. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's*. London: University of California Press, Ltd.