



# Big church

# Little church

By Katherine Halberstadt Anderson '90

SIGNIFICANCE IS A GIVEN  
FOR THESE ALUMNI IN THE PASTORATE,  
NO MATTER THE SIZE  
OF THEIR CONGREGATIONS.

**G**iven our American obsession with super-sizing everything from fries to homes to SUVs—the rise of megachurches shouldn't come as a surprise. But the megachurch movement has exploded in recent years. Churches with congregations of over 2,000 members now number more than 1,200—almost four times as many as in the early 1990s—according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

And though even now these megachurches represent only 0.4 percent of the number of churches in America, they currently draw about 8 percent of the Protestant church-going attendance weekly, according to Dr. Warren Bird '78, M.A. '79, research director with the Leadership Network.



In a society where bigger is often considered better, where even pastors are sometimes judged by the spheres of their earthly influence—it is the leaders of these megachurches who are frequently quoted in news stories, speaking on behalf of all evangelicals, or interviewed on television, promoting their latest book.

As a result of our fascination with success, power, and wealth, we wind up with magazine and newspaper stories that cover the church as one would a business, such as *Business Week's* “Earthly Empires: How Evangelical Churches Are Borrowing from the Business Playbook.” Some stories even seem to take a cue from the tabloids with topics that make for enticing newsstand teasers like *Time* magazine’s recent cover story, “Does God Want You To Be Rich?”

Despite all this hype, however, about 94 percent of Americans still worship in churches with weekly attendance averaging less than 500 people, according to the Leadership Network. Given this stark contrast, we wondered, what influence has the megachurch movement had on the average American church? And perhaps more important—what are the issues on the minds and hearts of our almost 2,000 living alumni in the pastorate, at big and small churches alike?

For answers, we turned to six alumni pastors with congregations as diverse as their church settings and sizes—ranging from a 2,000-member church in Center City Philadelphia, to a 38-member church at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We talked to published pastors with well-known churches and names, as well as those whose main work is that of shepherding a small flock.

We found that the fundamental concerns of discipleship and evangelism didn’t waver. But approaches toward building community, engaging culture, and even worship, were like gazing, however briefly, through a tiny opening at the amazing kaleidoscope that is God’s diverse, colorful, and changing work in and among His people.

## A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE

Willow Creek, Saddleback, Lakewood—these churches have become household names thanks to sheer size, dynamic leadership, and highly publicized approaches to worship and ministry.

In a recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Scott Thumma of the

Hartford Institute for Religion Research stated that megachurches, “set an example for other congregations that stirs them to experiment.”

How true does this statement ring in churches led by our alumni? For some congregations, both large and small, the megachurch movement has had little or no influence on either the order of service or the life of the congregation.

David White M.A. ’93, pastor at Bishop Creek Community Church with a membership of 38, explains, “Megachurches don’t affect my church at all for a variety of reasons, but mostly because we aren’t close enough to that model for any type of comparison to be made.”

And at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, though the membership is now close to 2,000, senior minister Dr. Phillip Ryken ’88 says, “We follow an order of worship that places strong emphasis on the reading and preaching of Scripture and on forms of worship that are rooted in biblical liturgy. By and large, our service is substantially the same as it was in the 19th century. . . . As a church, we are fairly reticent to follow any contemporary fad in worship or congregational life.”

**S**till other churches have modeled programs or simply implemented ideas popularized by high-profile megachurches.

Rev. Ken Carr ’83, senior pastor at Christ the King Church in Batavia, Illinois, with a church of 120 notes that while his church’s worship service follows an historic format, he resonates with larger churches that have a passion to reach the lost for Christ. He says, “I think you learn from the megachurch—things about leadership, how to do small groups and what is effective, as well as how to encourage people to be involved in ministry.”

And in the heart of our nation, senior pastor Dr. Jim Congdon ’71, who has been at Topeka Bible Church in Kansas for the last 30 years, has implemented many changes in worship and ministry along the way. The worship service, for instance, now incorporates storytelling, praise choruses, and a band. Small groups have also become an increasingly vital part of church life.

“I trust less in the ability of my Sunday sermon by itself to change lives. . . . Small groups weren’t really on the radar in the 1970s, but that is where my ministry is primarily done now,” he says, adding that he believes in “tweaking the ministry so that it is not only fully

biblical, but also fully relevant.”

For Rev. Darren Adwarpalker '00, new to the position of senior pastor at the 225-member South Bay Church of God in Los Angeles County, there is “definitely a tension” about how this 54-year-old church can best reach out to the surrounding community, which is not far from the beach and very mixed—racially, linguistically, and economically.

“There is a temptation to pattern after the megachurch,” Rev. Adwarpalker says, applauding the audiovisual and substantive excellence of Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois.

He says, “When you go there, you realize that they are right on. They are reaching their community powerfully . . . but I also have to realize that our church will never be a megachurch, that we are a local church and we need to experience who we can be without trying to copy or imitate.”

## A LIFE IN THE CHURCH

This fall, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story about the concerns evangelicals have over youth falling away from the church—an age-old problem with a new twist, given that youth programs sometimes substitute for participation in the greater church at some megachurches.

But what are the concerns and challenges facing the average pastor across America?

When we talked with our alumni pastors, half said that one of the greatest challenges didn't involve programs or even other people. Like people in other vocations, these pastors find one of the greatest challenges to be simply finding time for personal devotions and family worship despite the ceaseless demands of ministry.

John Ortberg '79, teaching pastor at the mega-sized Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in the San Francisco Bay area of California summed up the problem. “Eugene Peterson said that ministry often reinforces inattentiveness to God. I remember going into the ministry thinking that it would automatically mean that I would be in close relationship with God, but since then I've realized that what Peterson said was true,” says Dr. Ortberg, who adds that as a check, he periodically asks himself, “Is the life that I'm inviting others to lead the life that I'm living myself?”

Other abiding concerns ran the gamut from “raising godly families in a high pressure world” to engaging the community, city, even the world, with the gospel of Christ. Says Dr. Congdon, “Wheaton's motto is ‘For Christ and His Kingdom,’ and I use that a lot. I think it's important for people to think not just parochially, but about how they can advance the cause of Christ worldwide. To think about AIDS in Africa, about poverty and hunger.”

To understand better the specific joys and challenges, as well as the variety and vibrancy of lives given to God, see our accompanying stories that highlight the unique and important work that God is enabling each of our six alumni pastors and churches to accomplish—whether the membership is 38 or 4,000.



# Called

6 PASTORS,  
6 DIFFERENT APPROACHES  
TO SERVING ONE  
UNCHANGING GOD.

## NO SMALL TASK

When David White M.A. '93 arrived in Bishop, California (pop. 3,500), it was to pastor a church of 13 people. He and his family moved from Wheaton, where David served as pastor of singles and small groups at College Church for seven years.

When the Whites' moving truck arrived in Bishop, “most everyone was there to help unload.” Four years later, Bishop Creek Community Church, located at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, now has 38 members, and between 50-75 people in regular attendance.

Pastor White's church rents the Seventh Adventist Church in town, and when you call the church office, you will most likely catch David at home. “I don't have caller I.D.,” he adds, explaining that he doesn't want to be tempted to screen his calls.

When asked about whether church growth is a concern, David's answer is probably far from what many might expect in our numbers-driven society.

He says, “The growth of the church is God's business. . . . I don't convert people. He chooses to open their eyes and ears. . . . I'm hoping that the people in the pews are there because they want to hear God's Word, or

Dr. Phillip Ryken '88 at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.



because they aren't saved and they are being drawn to God. That wouldn't change no matter if my congregation were 400 or even 4,000."

For David, the greatest challenge in ministry is the heartbreak of "facing good friends who are hard-hearted to the gospel. That's what keeps me up at night," he says. When asked whether evangelism requires making adjustments in ministry, David doesn't mince words. He says, "Romans 3 says no man seeks after God, they are drawn to Him by His good grace. So if you are asking what man wants to hear, rather than what God has told you to say in His Word, then you are asking the wrong question."

In his mind, there are no disadvantages to a small-church setting. "The obvious advantage is that you know everybody in your congregation. You share their joys and their sorrows," he says, adding that he's done several weddings and funerals. One of his favorite duties is to provide pre-marital counseling. "It's a real joy to sit down with someone who you've visited with in their home and worked with on their ranch."

## 2 WINDOWS IN THE CITY

Dr. Philip Ryken '88, senior minister at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Center City, Philadelphia, and his wife, Lisa Maxwell Ryken '88, have come to see the family's theme passage, Jeremiah 29:11, as an urban promise to the people of God. For this 175-year-old church of about 2,000 members with a strategic plan of "re-evangelizing the city with gospel-spreading churches," the challenge is not only faithful discipleship, but church planting in partnership with other Christians.

In addition to giving a full Bible exposition during the morning worship services, Dr. Ryken began a Sunday evening worship segment titled, "Window on the World" ten years ago that reflects his Wheaton

liberal arts background. Now published in two volumes, and posted on the church's website, these seven-minute musings on culture and Christianity cover topics ranging from the sanctity of life and stem cell research, to the exclusion of God from public discourse and personal reflections on topics such as dying well.

"What I want to do over time is to teach our congregation to think from a Christian framework about all the things they are encountering in life," says Dr. Ryken.

The church is organized into six geographical parishes so that people have pastoral and diaconal care and opportunities for small group Bible study fellowship within their own neighborhoods in the city. For Dr. Ryken, the most outstanding examples of community illustrate "a proper understanding of what it means to be part of the family of God."

He remembers one woman who died of cancer and went through dark experiences of spiritual attack. "Not a day went by in the last months of her life when she did not have members of her Bible study at her bedside praying, singing with her, reading Scripture, ministering to her in a way that was life transforming, not just for her but for all the people who cared for her."

## 3 KNOWING THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

Rev. Ken Carr '83, senior pastor at Christ the King Church in Batavia, Illinois, drives what he calls the "taxicab" on Sunday evenings—taking children to and from practices for the Christmas musical during the months of October through December.

With a congregation of about 120 members, Rev. Carr says the Christmas drama gives the children a reason to invite their friends and neighbors to church, and for this reason, "it is a picture of what



Rev. Darren Adwalpalker '00 and his wife, Amy Nezda Adwalpalker '00, at son Josiah's dedication service at South Bay Church of God in Torrance, California.



Rev. Ken Carr '83 drops in on his daughter, Kristina, 12, at a practice for the Christmas musical, "It all Happened in the Country," at Christ the King Church in Batavia, Illinois.

PHOTO: WILLIAM KOECHLING PHOTOGRAPHY

we should be doing.”

Finding the balance between edification and evangelism is one of the 5-year-old church’s greatest challenges. “We have a theological conviction that Sunday morning is primarily for the believer,” Rev. Carr says, adding “the question is—how do you shape your ministries to reach out with the gospel.” Currently, evangelism takes place primarily during special events like the drama, vacation Bible school, sports ministries, or community breakfasts and golf outings.

Outside of Bible studies and small groups, Rev. Carr says the church often builds community through service opportunities—at a local nursing home, or at Wayside Cross Mission in Aurora.

A business/economics major at Wheaton before he felt called to the ministry, Rev. Carr tries to resist getting caught up in numbers. He says, “Most pastors think about both spiritual and numerical growth, but what’s been helpful to me is to just try to be faithful in sharing the gospel. I try to leave the conversions and numbers up to God.”

Meanwhile, he enjoys all the benefits of a smaller church setting, including being accessible to people and building relationships with ease. “I tend to know most of the members well, and there is something healthy about that. Jesus talked about the sheep knowing the shepherd’s voice, and here we have the opportunity to live that out.”

## 4 BRIDGING THE GAPS

On a Sunday last spring, Menlo Park Presbyterian had no morning services for one of the first times in the church’s 130-year history. Instead, as part of the first “Compassion Weekend,” the 4,000-plus members were invited to fan out over the San Francisco Bay area to work with senior citizens, to build homes with Habitat for

Humanity, and to do AIDS education, among other things, notes teaching pastor, Dr. John Ortberg ’79. Services were held Saturday evening and Sunday night. Says Dr. Ortberg, “The weekend gave us the opportunity to have several thousand people making an impact all around the Bay area, but it also brought many people together, bridging ethnic, economic, and generation gaps.”

According to Dr. Ortberg, who spent nine years at Willow Creek Community Church, the “niching” of American church life has created a growing need for building such bridges. And in fact, one of the greatest challenges for a megachurch like Menlo Park involves “continually helping people find their way into small groups.”

“My wife and I lead a small group, and as we desire deeper friendships, those are the people we start with,” he says.

Other challenges involve continually learning how authentic spiritual transformation takes place, as well as reaching out to the surrounding community, which is 90 percent un-churched.

For Dr. Ortberg, author of *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*, it was the Christian community at Wheaton that first sparked his interest in full-time ministry. “Wheaton helped me love the church,” he says, adding, “I remember sitting around the Stupe with Dr. [Gerald] Hawthorne ’51, MA ’54 and a group of guys when he told us, ‘A lot of you could go into any number of professions, but some of you ought to become pastors and give your life to the church.’ That was very formative for me.”

When asked about what draws people to Menlo Park, John says that in addition to the strong sense of grace, “It has always been a Jesus church, meaning that Jesus is the head of this church. That in itself has drawn a lot of people.”



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David White M.A. ’93, Bishop, California



(above) Dr. John Ortberg ’79 at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California. (right) Dr. Ortberg volunteers with Habitat for Humanity during “Compassion Weekend.”

## 5 BUILDING CONTINUITY

At the same church for 30 years, senior pastor Dr. Jim Congdon '71, has watched Topeka Bible Church grow from 300 to 1,300 members.

In that time, small groups have become vital to church life. Involved in three men's Bible studies himself, Dr. Congdon finds his greatest challenge in "inspiring men to become great for God. . . . Guys get so caught up in business that they fail to see that they really can make an eternal difference if they are sold out to God and willing to do whatever He wants them to do."

In response to the dissolution of so many American families, the church devoted the entire last year to sermons, seminars, and classes delving into the issues of home and family, including everything from raising godly children to covenantal marriages.

Community for this church often means rallying around a cause. When Hurricane Katrina hit last year, for instance, the church didn't just send trucks filled with food and supplies, it also moved three families to their area, helping them relocate, and find and furnish homes.

Located in downtown Topeka, the church is also committed to the city, ministering in prisons and crisis pregnancy outreach centers.

A math major at Wheaton, Dr. Congdon says he always expected to become a professor. A descendant of Wheaton founders Jonathan and Charles Blanchard, he says Bible courses taught by Dr. Gerald Hawthorne and Dr. Gordon Fee changed his "passion and path." Though now firmly rooted in Kansas, he retains a missions-minded outlook, and sits on the board of Jews for Jesus, in addition to traveling overseas to speak at conferences for the Evangelical Free Churches of India.

"What I didn't know when I started out was how fulfilling life as a pastor would be," he says.

## 6 LANGUAGE LINKS

When Darren Adwalpalker '00 graduated from Biola University with his master's degree in intercultural studies, he planned on returning to the mission field with his wife, Amy Nezda Adwalpalker '00. (He had been to Guatemala on a HNGR internship while attending Wheaton.)

Instead, he has planted two Spanish ministries, and is now senior pastor at the South Bay Church of God, now a bilingual church thanks to his work planting the second Spanish ministry. About this turn of events, he says, "I attribute it to God and His ability to use the imperfect and the unlikely to accomplish his purposes."

Rev. Adwalpalker credits his liberal arts education with teaching him to think broadly, enabling him to develop strategy and vision for the ministries. He adds, "Wheaton also gave me a paradigm for Christian community, and a broader view of evangelicalism."

Today the 225-member church located in Torrance, California, is celebrating 54 years, and is in the midst of vision casting for the future. "I don't think about church growth per se; church health is really where we are focusing. Our belief is that healthy things grow."

For Rev. Adwalpalker, the greatest challenge has been "counseling and relating to people from their frame of reference." But as is often the case, through meeting this challenge, he has gained rich depth of experience. For example, when the couple started the Spanish ministries, they often met with groups of 10-12 people in their apartments. "It was hot and there was no hip band," notes Amy. This experience helped them, "boil Christianity down to its essential form," building foundations for the future.



Dr. Jim Congdon '71, senior pastor at Topeka Bible Church, leads a tour of Israel.