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Executive Summary

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Megachurches and Their Implications for Christian Mission

J Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu

Megachurches are extraordinarily or abnormally large congregations, mainly belonging to the conservative evangelical or Pentecostal/charismatic streams of Christianity. Historically associated with North America, there are now megachurches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The new megachurch communities are led by charismatic preachers whose ministries by extension also touch hundreds of thousands, even millions, through an array of media programs and resources.

Those belonging to these streams of Christianity look on megachurches as symbolic illustrations of successful ministry and expansions of God's kingdom. Christians disenchanted with denominationalism and theological liberalism and looking for contemporary and more exciting and spiritually stimulating forms of worship find megachurches attractive options.

These churches often showcase their impressive auditoriums and sophisticated technology-aided forms of worship during religious broadcasts as signs of growth, success, and prosperity. They covet numerical growth and proudly cite their numbers as testimonies to spiritual relevance and success in evangelism, and advertise worship styles that cater to contemporary expectations and needs.

Mega-sized congregations can develop because of the spiritual gifts of a current leader. In Africa, healing, deliverance, and prophetic gifts tend to be very appealing in this regard. In the modern West with its public affirmation of moral relativism and privatization of religion, evangelicals gravitate towards such communities because of an emphasis on the fundamentals of Scripture. The megachurch idea is therefore inspired by particular understandings of discipleship and interpretations of what it means to be a community of God.

The contemporary type of Pentecostal Christianity that promotes the megachurch idea is inherently evangelistic because of the relationship between the promise of the Holy Spirit and empowerment for witness on one side and church growth on the other. Those who argue against it refer to the fact that large congregations make it difficult to operate the four pillars that kept the early church as a dynamic fellowship of believers: study of the Word, fellowship, prayer, and breaking of bread (Acts 2:42-47).

The implications of the megachurch idea for Christian communities around the world are profound. The size of the organizations has often made administration and accountability difficult. A number of leaders of mega-size churches have been victims of their own success with some falling into difficult emotional and moral problems.

Examples of successful mega-sized churches abound and there is no reason to believe that every megachurch has been improperly managed. The growth of megachurches could be a genuine sign of God's activity in various parts of the world. That many of these churches may be found in the modern West in the midst of Christian recession offers real reasons for hope in the influence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

However, care must be taken not to build a new mega-size church theology that suggests that such endeavours are necessarily signs of success in mission. The management of the organization for maximum influence is what must count.

Our response must be to thank God when a mega-size church is using its resources to spread the gospel but also to be sensitive to the fact that, in certain contexts, smaller community-based churches may be the ideal.

The biblical example of growth in the Acts of the Apostles is that it is the Lord who provides the increase. What is important, whether a congregation is big or small, is to avoid the spirit of competition in mission and provide the appropriate nurture that leads to Christian maturity in incarnational self-giving (Phil 2:1-11).

Western Buddhism: A new-ish frontier for Christian mission

Hugh Kemp

Estimates of the number of Buddhists in the world vary from 330 million to 1 billion. Most enumerations agree that Buddhists make up around six percent of the world's population. Although much smaller than Christianity, Buddhism has become a global religion.

The terms 'Western Buddhism' and 'global Buddhism' signify Buddhism's spread from its Asian homeland. It was in the 1960s that Buddhism rapidly expanded into the West. This was due in part to the Dalai Lama's exit from Tibet in 1959, and subsequent launch onto the world stage. Concurrently, many Tibetan lamas and refugees took up residence in Western countries and set up teaching centres. Westerners also found Zen Buddhism to have commonalities with the 1960s hippie movement and the ideals of the Beatniks.

Today, Buddhist entities in the West include teaching/retreat centres, publishing houses, study groups, meditation groups, hospices, bookshops, and training centres representing a plethora of traditions and lineages. Asian Buddhism and Western Buddhism now look different: there is talk of 'immigrant Buddhism' and 'convert Buddhism'. Eclecticism and ambivalence are common in the latter. Self-defined Buddhists in the West often align themselves with more than one tradition (within Buddhism), and sometimes with more than one religion.

The speed of embrace is unprecedented. Where it took hundreds, perhaps a thousand, years for Buddhism to be established in Asia, Buddhism has bedded down in less than a decade in some Western countries.

Buddhism continues to morph into variable expressions, including Engaged Buddhism, Feminist Buddhism, Black Buddhism, and Gay Buddhism. Since Buddhism is now uncoupled from its home of Asia, it is now open to local cultural forces. Buddhism is becoming truly global in presence, but at the local level, if its history teaches anything, it will adapt and contextualize.

Because of its growing profile, it is time for evangelical Christians to take note of Buddhism in the West, both in its immigrant context and its 'convert' expressions. Many of these are converts out of original Christian contexts: many are disillusioned ex-Christians, who have either been abused in the church or found little succor in the church, or claim Buddhism to be of greater intellectual stimulus or to have greater ritual significance.

Evangelicals can name Western Buddhism as a new frontier for mission, but it will have intellectual and pastoral challenges that will have to be thought through carefully. This can best be informed by conversations, not primarily in the field of Buddhism or world religions, but with missional practitioners working among adherents of the New Age, New Religious Movements, and neo-Paganism in the West. Western Buddhists' sociological and cultural characteristics are in common with such adherents: all tend to embrace eclectic beliefs, practice, and identity formation.

Western Buddhists are less concerned with doctrine and belief, and more interested in 'practice'. Christians therefore need a 'practice' to talk about: disciplines of daily Scripture reading, meditation and prayer, participating in the Eucharist/Lord's supper. While many evangelicals are wary of ritual, it is precisely ritual that often attracts Western Buddhists. Belonging in a community of ritual may well lead then to believing.

Reflection on missional engagement with Western Buddhists continues within Issue Group 16 of the Pattaya 2004 Lausanne forum. This has found expression in the Lausanne Occasional Paper 45 'Religious and Non-Religious Spirituality in the Western World ("New Age")', which is a good place to start one's journey toward a missional engagement with Western Buddhists.

Mission Studies in a Postmodern World: A peculiar paradox

Thomas Harvey

When it comes to ‘mission studies’, evangelicals are confronted with a peculiar paradox. Despite growing biblical, theological, and pragmatic appreciation of the centrality of ‘mission’ for a true evangelical Christianity, many flagship ‘mission studies’ programmes in Bible colleges and seminaries have removed ‘mission’ from their title.

Schools of mission in the US and elsewhere have become magnets for evangelical church leaders and mission scholars from the Global South and East. These leaders and scholars recognise that their churches, once the object of mission, are now at the leading edge of missions and church growth worldwide. In turn, these global leaders have brought fresh insight, perspective, and innovation to mission studies and theological reflection. A key emphasis has been ‘holistic transformation’.

Nonetheless, this rise in global Christianity and engagement with a wider public sphere have come with recognition that the term ‘mission’ is tainted in lands subjected to imperial and colonial Western domination, manipulation, and coercion. Thus a significant rebranding of mission is not that surprising and has led to former ‘schools of mission’ changing their autograph to ‘schools of intercultural studies’.

Mission now graces prominent biblical and theological tomes, drawing mission from the periphery of biblical and theological reflection to the centre and adding weight to emphases on holistic mission. Theologically, this has led to emphasis upon the ‘kingdom’ or ‘reign’ of God.

There is also now keen interest in mission as action. Christian leaders and missionaries in the Global South and East have grown impatient with traditional modes of inquiry as they grapple with issues from effective evangelism to economic injustice. As agents of transformation, they are embracing new modes of research that transform their work and worlds into laboratories of holistic mission. Mission study is beginning to incorporate ‘Action Research’ and ‘Practitioner Research’. The growing significance of action and practitioner research in mission is timely, given the attention to ‘impact’ by higher education authorities when it comes to determining research funding.

The changing understanding of mission, mission engagement, and mission education will significantly change curricula at evangelical bible colleges and seminaries. Mission education, especially beyond the West, will emphasise holistic transformation, the biblical and theological centrality of mission, and modes of research that incorporate transformative action.

Increased interest in local and global mission will have social, political, developmental, national, and international implications. As a key agent in this unfolding reality, the church will strive not only to understand its changing identity, message, and mission, but also to use that knowledge for more effective action to work for the reign of God.

Emphasis upon mission and holistic transformation will also demand rethinking traditional approaches to education. The modern university has in large measure developed in light of the need to specialise in order to grapple with the ever-increasing complexity of knowledge, but emphasis upon holistic transformation represents a countervailing pressure to develop interdisciplinary research and collaboration.

In this time of significant change in mission education, the contribution of Christian scholars from Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as from Eastern Europe will provide an invaluable source of knowledge, wisdom, and effective practice. Research centres that wish to tap this well of expertise must move now to ensure their contribution. Pursuit of this global diversity, however, must go beyond the merely cosmetic, multi-cultural, politically correct inclusion rampant in Western universities to ensure a global diversity that is part of the deep structure of the whole research institution from its governance, to its faculty, and to its students.

The Death of Faith and Work: A personal reflection on the beginning and end of a movement

Eric Quan

Whatever term is used, God is doing something around the world to set off a Faith and Work movement. Some call it Faith and Work, others Business as Mission, or Kingdom Entrepreneurship, or Missional Business, or Gospel-centered Ventures.

It is not that Faith and Work has not happened before or that there are no examples of success, but it feels like the beginning stages of a global movement, not just isolated pockets of activity.

This is more of an anecdotal guess on my part than a well-supported conclusion, but it seems that this Faith and Work movement parallels the broader missional community movement's reaction to several decades of more 'accessible' and 'seeker-friendly' Christianity, at least in the West.

Because God is ultimately glorified through our given core purpose of discipleship and sharing his love with others, faith and work is really about fulfilling the Great Commission. That is why it is so important.

In Silicon Valley, it took over a decade of varying degrees of failure in handhelds and tablets before Apple hit lasting success with the iPad. There is no reason to think that the Faith and Work movement will avoid this type of failure. God does not promise that we will not fail; his promise is that we can endure it (1 Cor 10:13).

We will see startups collapse, companies close their doors, and investors lose money. Through each of these experiences, we will learn to trust God more; grow; and eventually start seeing more and more successes because we will increasingly learn to allow God to lead.

At present there are many fragmented efforts in Faith and Work. As has happened in the Silicon Valley, we need to build an ecosystem through bringing everyone (tongue, tribe, and nation) together.

However, movements that ultimately succeed at some point have to cease being movements. Jesus sent the apostles to start a movement towards what became the global church. In the longer term, I hope to see things like Gospel-centered Ventures, BAM, and Faith and Work disappear because the integration of our work into our faith becomes a natural part of what we do and who we are.

The Faith and Work movement should change how we minister and disciple. Congregants in the pews will want to serve in a different way. Missionaries will want to go into the field in a different way. However, perhaps the most important change is that our organizations have to develop more of a Kingdom mindset. To build an ecosystem, we have to work together. For the movement ultimately to succeed, we need to break down barriers and start communicating and cooperating among all of us.

We need to practise obedience. We spend over half of our waking hours at work. This begs the question that if we are not making disciples there, where are we doing it? There will also need to be professional, financial, and personal sacrifice in order for us to move towards putting the Kingdom first. In addition, true Faith and Work cannot exist without love. So we must understand and embrace how much God loves us, not just in order to do something, but more importantly to be someone, in him.

So in conclusion, let us start this movement together . . . and then kill it.

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