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# The Rise of Mega-Church Efforts in International Development

## A Brief Analysis and Areas for Further Research

**Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe and Tim Hoiland**

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### **Abstract**

Evangelical 'mega-churches' are awakening to the importance of tackling poverty and social issues even as they continue their focus on evangelism and church planting. As a result, they are moving into carrying out their own development efforts globally, emphasizing direct relationships with churches in the developing world. This is changing their engagement with the 'professional' evangelical development organizations, leading the mega-churches to search and experiment with development methods, approaches, and choice of issues, and bringing them up against questions and challenges inherent in development work.

### **Keywords**

Christian NGOs, Christian missions, evangelical development organizations, international development, mega-churches

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California and author of *New York Times* bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life* and complementary educational materials, is arguably the most prominent evangelical in the USA today. Not only have his publications reached millions, Warren also hosted presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama at the Saddleback Civil Forum, the first and only joint campaign event prior to their parties' respective conventions (Perkes, 2008). And, most recently, he was tapped by Barack Obama to deliver the invocation at the president-elect's inauguration.

But Warren is concerned with far more than church growth and American politics, as witnessed by Saddleback's ambitious plan to 'promote reconciliation, equip leaders, assist the poor, care for the sick, and educate the next generation' (P.E.A.C.E, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> This P.E.A.C.E Plan, launched in 2005, aims to address the world's most significant spiritual and social problems through local churches.

Warren and Saddleback's P.E.A.C.E. Plan is a prime example of the growing phenomenon of evangelical 'mega-churches' carrying out their own development efforts globally. In the past, the bulk of evangelical international development efforts have been the terrain of Christian development organizations, also known as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While NGOs have had close relationships with churches, the mega-church approach to development emphasizes long-term relationships between churches themselves, in which church members engage in hands-on ministry as opposed to funding the more 'professional' development organizations.

This article is a brief description and analysis of this growing trend in the evangelical reawakening to the social mandate of the gospel. The primary purpose of this article, a modest one, is to point to the importance of this movement its implications, and areas for future research. It begins with a review of the possible sources and roots of this trend, examines three cases of mega-churches involved in this process and considers the potential promises, tensions and difficulties that await this movement. Finally, this article points to areas for future research into how the mega-church development movement might be most effective as mega-churches utilize new means and methods to create church-based development models.

## **Roots and Sources of Mega-Church Engagement in Development**

The increasing involvement of evangelical mega-churches in development is the result of a variety of recent and historical trends. Foremost among the recent trends are (1) the emergence of mega-churches, (2) the shifting paradigm of Christian missions, including an increasing awareness and buy-in by the evangelical community into the importance of a Scripturally mandated 'holistic' approach to engagement with society that goes beyond just evangelism and the explosion of congregationally-based short-term missions trips, and (3) the rise of evangelical international development organizations and the contributions to the evangelical 'reawakening' to social issues by specific leaders in the evangelical movement.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to review any of these trends in depth, a quick look at how they have fed into each other is in order. The first is the dramatic rise of the international mega-church movement. Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research generally defines a mega-church as a 'Protestant congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2000 persons or more in its worship services'. While large churches are not a new phenomenon, 'some researchers suggest that this church form is a unique collective response to distinctive cultural shifts and changes in societal patterns throughout the industrialized, urban and suburban areas of the world' (Thumma, n.d.). In fact, the rapid growth and proliferation of mega-churches internationally, and their common characteristics and the networks of affiliation they form, suggest that the world is witnessing a mega-church movement.

Mega-churches are changing the global makeup of Christianity to the extent that some scholars are characterizing them as the harbingers of 'The Next

Christendom' and the 'African Century of Christianity'. Asia has the largest known mega-church in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) in South Korea, and many other mega-churches have sprung up in China, Malaysia, India, Indonesia and Singapore. The Asian mega-church movement is largely Pentecostal, growing mainly in secularized and urbanized societies that allow religious freedom. However, it is from Africa and Latin America that mega-churches are now driving the global mega-church movement in growth, enthusiasm and cash flow. In these regions, mega-churches are growing twice as fast as Catholic and Anglican congregations, and as in Asia they are largely Pentecostal (Gifford, 2004).

Mega-churches have also changed the face of the North American church since the 1980s. Spanning a vast array of styles and ministry approaches, there are currently over 1300 mega-churches in the USA alone. These mega-churches tend to share common characteristics, including a conservative theology, a high-profile senior pastor, and a variety of ministries for their members (Thumma, n.d.).

The rise of mega-churches has taken place in, and been influenced by, the context of a major shift in mission paradigms in the modern era. First, perhaps more than anything else, changes in the demographics of the Church have reshaped Christian missions, especially in the shift of the center of Christianity from Europe and North America to the global south.<sup>2</sup> Today, more than half of all Christians live in the developing world and nearly 70 percent of evangelicals live in the non-western world. Recent years have seen, further, a dramatic increase of independent, nondenominational Christians from 9 to 19 percent, most in the global south (Myers, 2003: 54). These Christians of the global south, including the mega-church movement, are changing the face of Christianity with local insights and interpretations, sending missionaries abroad themselves and challenging Christians of the world to reconsider old paradigms.

Second, as a result, in the modern mission era, mission thinking and paradigms have evolved from an emphasis on the Church as a civilizing or westernizing agent to the Church as 'pilgrim community' (Myers, 2003). Specifically, missiology has begun to disciple the nationals for spiritual *and* social transformation. Recognizing the centrality of holism, emerging mission paradigms focus on transforming all of life for all of the people of God (Bosch, 1991). This emphasis on holism has crept up among missionaries, their sending agencies and, as a result, on the churches and mega-churches. While evangelical missionaries have continued to raise their support through churches and to be sent through a host of different mission sending agencies, they also have begun to gravitate more towards seeing the importance of understanding local cultures and customs as well as the situation of poverty and how that affects people's spiritual condition and their receptivity to the gospel message. This movement, or reawakening to the social mandate of the gospel, has also happened apace in the sending agencies themselves.

Finally, in addition to being affected by the shift in demographics and the rethinking of missions along holistic lines, mission paradigms have also been reshaped by the tremendous growth in international short-term mission trips by youth and adults from evangelical churches all over the USA. This movement has fed into the openness towards holism in missions, sparking an interest and passion for working on issues of poverty and social change in churches large and small, and mega-churches have not been exempt from this impact.<sup>3</sup>

While the involvement of mega-churches in development can be explained by their growth as a movement in the context of a shift in mission paradigms, especially the trend towards seeing the social aspects of the gospel as part and parcel of missions, the analysis would not be complete without pointing to the impact made in this process by two other variables. The first is the significant history and track record of evangelical development organizations such as Compassion International, Samaritan's Purse, Tearfund, World Relief, and World Vision, and their tie-in with the churches and mega-churches through a variety of channels. The second is the 'against the grain work' on social issues carried out by leading evangelical figures such as Tony Campolo, Rene Padilla and Ron Sider as far back as the 1970s, joined more recently by young leaders such as Shane Claiborne, that set forth the Scriptural and theological framework for such a framework in a variety of settings, including in documents such as the 'Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern' in 1973 and the 'Lausanne Covenant' a year later. In particular, the Lausanne Covenant, signed by a host of evangelical entities, affirmed the importance of a holistic or 'integral' approach to Christian mission. With respect to 'Christian Social Responsibility', it stated:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead. (The Lausanne Covenant, 1974)

While this theological groundwork was extremely important, and has gained purchase over time among more and more evangelicals, the relationships between evangelical development organizations and the evangelical churches in this context have been more complicated. The case of World Vision, for example, is instructive. World Vision was started by Bob Pierce in order to respond to the suffering of children after the Korean War. Prior to founding World Vision, Pierce traveled to needy communities and brought compelling video footage back to churches in the USA, where he would appeal for donations. He would then send the money to missionaries or mission organizations working in these communities. The first child sponsorship program began in Korea in 1953, and later

expanded across Asia and throughout Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East (World Vision, n.d.).

As World Vision (WV) continued to expand, it decided that stronger ties with foundations and private donors were needed if WV was going to be able to advance as a leader in the relief and development sector. This decision came about as a result of the realization that with rapid turnover of pastors in churches, many partnership efforts with churches ended abruptly, as new pastors often did not share the sense of global mission or concern for the poor.

According to Steve Haas, WV's Vice President of Church Relations, 'As a business decision, it was brilliant ... We probably tripled in size in that time period. But about eight or nine years ago there was a real concerted look at what our mission was, and ... [we realized] that if we were in fact going to maintain our Christian identity, one of the clearest ways to do that was to maintain a much more aggressive partnership with the church'.<sup>4</sup>

As Haas emphasized, 'We were growing relationships with the church, not only in terms of partnering with what we were doing internationally, but as a resource agent so they could realize a *world vision*'. More than a brand, according to Haas, the term signifies 'a global understanding of what God is doing in the world'. The effort seems to be paying off; WV's partnerships with churches have grown dramatically, and Haas expects this trend to continue.

Churches of all sizes are actively involved in WV's various programs, such as child sponsorships and the 30 Hour Famine (The 30 Hour Famine, n.d.), but most partnerships tend to be in conjunction with mega-churches. Larger churches have greater resources, a more developed international ministry strategy, and often even have a better understanding of the ways in which their members are gifted – all of which lend themselves well to large-scale partnerships. As Haas explains, 'These are all wonderful ingredients for us ... We can meet a variety of skill sets or experiences because we're also a much larger organization'. Therefore, while child sponsors come from a variety of places, WV's work has benefited extensively from the proliferation of mega-churches and from their increasing interest in social issues.

In fact, according to studies by the Hartford Institute of Religion Research, mega-churches are showing increased interest in a more holistic approach to ministry, with noticeable shifts during the past decade alone. For instance, more than half of all mega-churches are now making efforts to focus on community outreach and social justice (Thumma and Bird, 2008). While these findings are largely reflective of local outreach, mega-churches are increasingly implementing similar strategies internationally.

What, then, explains the trend of Saddleback and other mega-churches choosing to bypass existing Christian development organizations, instead preferring to operate in a more direct, church-based manner, often in partnership with local churches in poor areas and with non-western organizations? There are, in short, three main reasons. The first is their lingering suspicion of evangelical development organizations and their commitment to evangelism. As with other churches in the evangelical movement, mega-churches are still cautious about becoming involved in what up until recently were viewed as activities that were the domain of theologically liberal groups and carried with them the pejorative connotation of 'social gospel' endeavors: the emphasis on taking care of the poor at the expense of preaching the message of salvation. And, in many evangelical quarters, WV and other evangelical development organizations have come under suspicion along those lines. According to Haas, in fact, this tension can be seen when some

mega-church pastors express concern about WV's approach to development, saying, 'I'm not hearing enough Jesus'.

The second reason is the belief by leaders of the mega-churches that they can do development work better and more efficiently than the development organizations, and that by working on their own they give their own members more opportunities to be directly involved in these efforts. Haas himself, in his former capacity as Extension Coordinator at Willow Creek, held the point of view that after learning how to do development through a partnership with an NGO, the church could engage in development work more efficiently on its own. And, along with this, there is a shift away from a traditional 'pay, pray, and get out of the way' approach to international ministry by the mega-churches. Church members, many of whom have now embraced a theological understanding of biblical holism and who have been taught that they are uniquely gifted for a particular purpose, are seeking opportunities to get more directly involved in development work.

In summary, the trend of mega-church involvement in development can be explained by the rise and increasing force of the mega-church movement in the context of a shifting paradigm of mission that is part and parcel of the evangelical reawakening to its social responsibilities. What stands out about this trend is the complex relationship the mega-churches have with the evangelical development organizations as they seek to make their way into this field of holistic mission, and a brief look at the case studies of three mega-churches in the USA will help give greater insights into the dynamics of these relationships and efforts and what the future might hold.

### **Mega-Church Case Studies**

The three mega-churches that will be examined as case studies of mega-church involvement in development are Calvary Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Emmanuel Faith Community Church, in Escondido, California; and Willow Creek Community Church, in South Barrington, Illinois. These three churches were chosen to represent three different areas of the USA, and interviews were conducted with officers of each. Additional material and information was pulled off their websites.

#### **Calvary Church, Lancaster, PA**

From its inception at a missions' conference in the 1930s, Calvary Church has prioritized sending its own members as cross-cultural missionaries. In the words of founding pastor Frank C. Torrey, 'Missions is a matter of life and death for the local church. The missionary enterprise is well defined in Scripture. It is the love of God in action. It is the stewardship of life, gospel, prayer and money. It is preaching and teaching. It is Christ Himself' (Rohrer, n.d.)

Rooted in this conviction, Calvary Church (CC) currently supports over 120 full-time missionaries serving in a variety of roles in the USA and throughout the world. 'The church has tried to create a kind of missionary environment where people could go overseas', says Missions Pastor Steve Beirn. 'From the very beginning, part of that has been a good incarnational ministry model'.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, CC has made a strong distinction between 'missions' and 'development' for fear that the latter would entail 'a social gospel approach to ministry' that focused on good works alone, to the neglect of verbal proclamation. In recent years, however, the church has begun to realize its 'inherent weakness in terms of understanding or even implementing holistic or transformational ministry'. With

this in mind, Beirn and two other leaders in the church plan to take a distance-learning course to get a better understanding of what a more holistic ministry might look like for CC.

This shift in ministry understanding, albeit gradual, is already beginning to emerge in a variety of ways. In 2006, for instance, the church entered into a multi-year partnership in Cambodia with World Relief, a major evangelical development organization, along with five other churches around the USA. This initiative represented a new ministry approach for the church, but momentum has been building as more and more members have had the opportunity to visit Cambodia for themselves, whether teaching English to Cambodian staff members or leading a leadership retreat for the staff and their families. Those who visit Cambodia then have the opportunity to report back on what they experienced, which, according to Beirn, 'continues to add legitimacy to the development side of ministry for us'. Seeing the cell church movement that grew out of practical ministry in poor Cambodian communities helped CC overcome 'traditional hang-ups' and provided 'real assurance that if we attempt to speak into the ends and see things as ministry platforms, then it really is all legitimate, sound, Christ-honoring ministry'.

In addition to the Cambodia partnership, the church is exploring new avenues for ministry. One new initiative is in conjunction with a western organization with strong local church ties in the Quito, Ecuador area, working especially with the residents of the garbage dump. At the same time, CC is beginning to partner with an Indian mission organization to provide indigenous training to 40 pastors who will then seek to plant churches in the Kolkata area. This will represent the church's first partnership with a non-western organization, and is being approached as a learning experience and pilot project, expecting it to be a mutually beneficial relationship followed by similar partnerships with other non-western organizations.

CC will continue to send missionaries through traditional mission agencies, but even these organizations have taken a more holistic turn, a process characterized by Beirn as one of 'maturation'. Some of CC's preferred organizations, working in parts of Africa, for example, have begun ministries to orphans, the hungry, and those with HIV/AIDS. 'These organizations we're working with are going through this evolution of change like we are', Beirn says, 'and because they are heading in the same direction organizationally, because their vision for ministry is the same as [ours], and because they have good field supervision of missionaries and member care track records, we want to work with these organizations and [they] are going to become strong alliances in ministry for us in the days ahead'.

Beirn makes clear that the ministry of development will not be replacing evangelistic or church-planting efforts for the church: 'What we're really striving to do is to get a better integration between faith and service, between body and soul ministries ... [W]hether it's development or traditional church planting, we're really trying to view all of these things as viable ministry platforms. We see them as a means to end and not an end in themselves'.

As the church explores ways to be involved in development, it also seeks to focus its missionary efforts in the so-called 'least reached' parts of the world. Beirn believes these two shifts will coincide. 'In some of these areas of the world, [development] is a very appropriate first response to establishing a credible witness ...'. 'The gospel can then be shared and the church can eventually be established where the gospel is shared. So I'm not saying the distinction between the two has been

completely broken down ... [but] in the last five years the church has made some pretty significant strides'.

Ultimately, Beirn hopes that CC's mission and development efforts will become sustainable over the long term, and much more focused on local churches, with the desire that these non-western churches might become 'more holistic than we are'.

### **Emmanuel Faith Community Church, Escondido, CA**

Like Calvary Church, Emmanuel Faith Community Church (EFCC) is roughly 70-years old and has historically been a missionary sending church as well. Today the church has over 100 missionaries serving in a variety of ways in over 20 countries, and although these missionaries serve throughout the world, the church has recently tried to focus its international ministry in areas that have less access to the gospel. 'We try to do more sending into the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia – broadly speaking, into the 10–40 Window if we can – but we do not limit ourselves to that', says Outreach Ministries Pastor Dave Hall.<sup>6</sup>

One shift in the church's cross-cultural ministry focus is its increasing desire to partner directly with local churches. 'We are probably still on an upward learning curve on how to more effectively partner with the emerging church around the world', Hall says. 'How do we bring resources and partner with them? We're doing that in some cases, and we're also providing some financial support for missionaries being sent out from other countries'. For example, EFCC supports some Arab workers through a partnership with these workers' home church in North Africa, though Hall acknowledges there is still a lot yet to learn about how to do these sorts of partnerships. He hopes that in the future EFCC will be able to partner with more and more local churches around the world.

EFCC is also seeking to do more in terms of holistic ministry. In addition to evangelism, church planting, and leadership development, Hall indicates a desire to do a better job in community development, which he considers one aspect of missions rather than a distinct new undertaking. 'As a church we have historically tended to emphasize more of the proclamation, preaching, evangelism, and discipling of people as mission', he says, indicating that the church has 'not gotten intentionally all that much involved in things like healthcare, agriculture, [and] human trafficking'.

This has been due in part to the fact that like many evangelical churches, EFCC has at times tended to view such efforts, in the words of Hall, as 'unrelated to the gospel'. Beliefs and opinions may vary from one generation to the next but, Hall says, 'We are trying to fight through [the distinction between physical and spiritual] both locally and globally and seeing that the two were never really intended to be disengaged from one another ... [W]e're trying to bring them back together, as one informs and relates to the other'. Doing so, Hall believes, is part of 'trying to bring God's rule, reign, and authority over all of life, and to reclaim what has been corrupted by sin and the evil one'.

However, Hall makes clear that 'we're not just interested in creating well-fed, healthy individuals who are comfortable on the way to an eternity apart from God, either ... We're trying to go in as whole people, letting people know we're doing these things because we're followers of Jesus Christ and that our hope is only to be found in him, and tell them about it'.

Hall has hope that these various aspects of EFCC's changing focus will converge in the near future in Senegal. The church plans to send a full-time missionary couple to the West African country, where they will be serving in partnership with

local churches under Senegalese leadership. They will also be engaged in holistic community development ministries, addressing needs such as clean water, health care, and agriculture. This five-year initiative represents a new type of ministry for EFCC, with the focus on transforming one particular community rather than supporting missionaries in disparate parts of the world indefinitely. While the size of EFCC and its history in international ministry have made this sort of partnership possible, Hall also says that since a church of its size does not change its way of thinking lightly, this is a very significant step.

While not to the same extent as this partnership with churches in Senegal, EFCC has also looked to Christian development organizations on a project basis. For instance, after Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar, the church chose to partner with WV in an effort to relieve some of the suffering of the Burmese people. Hall says that the church is also discussing the possibility of entering into a more long-term partnership with World Relief.

EFCC has no desire to abandon its focus on sending its own missionaries in more traditional ways, however. EFCC continues to look to traditional mission organizations to provide supervision and oversight for the missionaries the church sends around the world. And while the extent of relationships between mission organizations and sending churches may vary, Hall desires to foster active communication and active involvement in the missionary-sending process, which he believes is indicative of a healthy partnership.

### **Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, IL**

One of the most prominent mega-churches in the USA, Willow Creek Community Church emerged in the 1970s out of a dynamic youth ministry in the Chicago area. Seeing the impact that services featuring contemporary music, drama and applicable teaching were having in the lives of teenagers, a group of leaders – including a young Bill Hybels, currently Senior Pastor – decided to start a similar church for adults (Willow Creek Community Church, n.d.[a]).

In addition to over 100 ministries and an average weekly attendance of 23,500,<sup>7</sup> the church has formed the Willow Creek Association, a network of more than 12,000 churches spanning 90 denominations in 45 countries. ‘These churches, and others we serve, represent a wide variety of sizes, denominations, and backgrounds, and are ministering in literally every corner of the world’. Clearly, Willow Creek’s influence is substantial not just among North American mega-churches, but throughout the world as well, in churches of all shapes and sizes.

‘There is nothing like the local church when the local church is working right’, says Hybels. ‘The local church has been entrusted with carrying the life-changing message of Jesus Christ, and it’s the only hope I see for this hurting and broken world. There’s nothing else like it’ (Willow Creek Community Church, n.d.[b]).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Willow Creek’s international ministry efforts have a decidedly local church focus. Warren Beach,<sup>8</sup> Director of Global Connections, emphasizes that local churches – when working biblically – will address both material and spiritual needs. ‘Evangelism and community development’, says Beach, ‘are two sides of the same coin’.

This belief is captured in the Global Connections mission statement: ‘The mission of our global connections ministry is to fight global poverty and HIV/AIDS through serving and partnering with churches in the developing world who are passionately committed to the holistic transformation of their communities’ (Willow Creek Community Church, n.d.[c]).

Willow Creek (WC) focuses its international ministry in Africa and Latin America, working at times in conjunction with missionary and development organizations, but more often through partnerships with local churches in these locations. Beach says that in looking for 'transformational' churches or networks of churches with which to partner, WC tries 'to go as listeners and learners, to see what the church has determined to be their calling ... and to be a part of that transformational process [by coming] alongside them and see how we can play a role'.

According to Beach, 'the bulk of our resourcing and energy is to help [local churches] serve the poor and marginalized in their community materially' in areas such as income generation, job training, education, and care for those affected by HIV/AIDS. When seeking out partnerships, however, WC looks for churches whose practices include 'orally proclaiming the gospel as well as discipling their flock ... while not neglecting the material realm'.

WC began its work in Latin America by putting a staff in place in the Dominican Republic, which Beach describes as WC's first 'serious global initiative'. These staff members, having been equipped with theological training, served as 'scouts' in search of churches that shared WC's vision for embracing both the physical and the spiritual components of the gospel. In time, they established a network of churches throughout Latin America that were committed to holistic ministry.

In Africa, WC did not feel it had the luxury of taking years to develop a church network from scratch, and through a South African church affiliate from the Willow Creek Association, it discovered that a network of hundreds of local churches was already in place. WC then specifically sought out partnerships with black-led churches in the townships of South Africa that were on the frontlines of combating the AIDS crisis in their communities.

WC's work has since expanded to other countries throughout Africa, and includes efforts in conjunction with development organizations in addition to local churches. For example, WC partners with Bright Hope, an American organization working specifically in communities whose residents live on less than a dollar per day, and RISE International, which works in Angola to develop communities through education.

Due to WC's global influence and fame, one can only postulate that many other churches will take note of WC's efforts. In all of these initiatives, however, Beach is forthcoming with the fact that mistakes will be made along the way. 'A humble spirit and the willingness to learn from our mistakes is extremely necessary in this game', he says, 'because everyone will make them, and hopefully, grow from them'.

## Conclusions

Despite the relatively recent emergence of the mega-church phenomenon and the rapid changes taking place within the movement, all indicators are that mega-churches will remain a substantial part of American evangelicalism for the foreseeable future. As can be seen from these case studies, mega-churches, as the world of evangelical churches as a whole, are awakening to the importance of tackling poverty and social issues even as they continue their focus on evangelism and church planning.

As they begin to act on their newfound conviction, mega-churches are choosing their way carefully and their partnerships deliberately. While they are forging ahead slowly with their own programs and staff on the ground that emphasize direct relationships with churches in the developing world, they continue, in large part, to support a large number of missionaries through missionary agencies who are also caught up in the evolution towards a more holistic ministry. This does not

mean, however, that they are completely casting aside relationships with evangelical development organizations: in fact, it appears that in some cases they are strengthening their ties with organizations like WV and World Relief who they used to regard with substantial suspicion.

On the other side, evangelical development organizations are taking steps to shore up their relationships with the mega-churches and overcome the lingering doubts from the past. WV, for example, every quarter takes 10 to 20 pastors of US mega-churches to Africa to see WV's work first-hand. During the orientation to these trips, according to Haas, it is not uncommon for these pastors to express that they are 'really looking forward to winning some folks to Christ'. But once these pastors get out to visit actual villages, they find that many of the community members are already Christians and come to realize that 'the way in which the gospel is imparted is so much more deep and broad and meaningful than I thought'. The Christian beliefs of the villagers, according to Haas, are the result of villagers getting to know the Christian development workers and learning about the gospel through these relationships. 'They're seeing that lived out holistically, incarnationally', says Haas. 'You know, [it's] Jesus with skin for 15–18 years. A lot of heads get turned by that'.

In summary, as Haas explains, the evangelical development organizations are seeking to shore up their relationship with the mega-churches: 'You're going to see a greater movement among the larger organizations like ours in finding ways to utilize the gifts and skills of those in the local church ... I do believe that partnership is the name of the game and what we're trying to do is positioning ourselves to be the best possible partners we can be'.

The case studies also show that as the mega-churches move more into development, they are searching and experimenting with methods and approaches and the choice of issues they take on in the vast spectrum of development and social change activities. Community development activities and assistance to the more vulnerable sectors of the population, such as orphans, appear to predominate, although leaders of the mega-churches express a vision for becoming involved in more. In looking to the future, for example, Steve Beirn of Calvary Church referred specifically to the possibility of becoming involved in disaster relief, HIV/AIDS ministry, human trafficking, and micro-finance banking.

However, in considering the various issues, methods, and approaches being considered, both Beirn and Dave Hall from Emmanuel Faith Community Church gave special mention to the 'business as mission' movement and the importance of incorporating that approach into their ministries. In their estimation, business as mission would address the challenge of doing mission work in certain 'closed' countries, a challenge that they saw as becoming more and more difficult. It also would help address the increasing challenge of funding missions endeavors by helping to partially or totally sustain the missionaries financially through their employment in various locations throughout the world, and especially in least reached areas, a need that is becoming more acute because of the dwindling older generation on whose support the missionaries have depended. Finally, as Beirn stated, the business as mission movement will provide unique opportunities for Christians to serve throughout the world, and represents one of the many factors that are 'going to break down the very neat and sanitized and traditional ways we've looked at ministry and really force people to look at things differently'.

As the mega-churches become more and more involved and committed to development work as part of their ministry, the questions and challenges they will face in this endeavor will be the same as those faced by all of those who have

significant experience in development work. To cite just a few, how do you go about best establishing relationships and partnerships with those with whom you are working at the local, national, and international level, whether they be churches or other actors? To what extent do you collaborate with other actors in development, even if they do not share your same principles and beliefs? How do you avoid falling into the temptation of assuming an attitude of superiority and falling prey to blind spots in terms of assumptions about the people with whom you are working? What kinds of techniques, methods, and approaches do you use in this kind of work to give you the best results, ranging from issues of planning, to management, to evaluation, to fundraising? And, finally, what do you do when you come up against the fact that development has inherent political overtones that will require, in one way or another, dealing with local powers and government authorities, many times in a way that is not to their liking?

There are signs that the mega-churches are beginning to consider these questions, seeking the advice and expertise of development organizations, academics, and others with experience in this field, and are hiring people with training and skills in development work. In short, it appears that they are in the process of building up their capacities in this area, much like other organizations have done before them, and much like their counterparts in the developing world are doing as well. Once again, Haas from World Vision sheds some light on this process: 'There's a number of [mega-churches] that I can think of right off hand that I think have jumped right into the development game, only to find out, okay, which end is up?'. According to Haas, mega-churches are learning to identify and mobilize key leaders in communities and to work in partnership with churches of all varieties, not as those with all the answers but as learners. Many, according to Haas, realize once they have begun doing development work that it is much more complicated and difficult than it appears, and they will need to learn from those who have made mistakes in the past. Mistakes, Haas says, are inevitable in development. The question, he says, is whether churches that have made mistakes will return: 'In other words, once burned, will they give up and go back to just local ventures and kind of squeeze out a couple of bills [for international development]? Or, will those groups say, "You know, I really learned a valuable lesson, and I'll either walk with somebody who's already been there doing it, or I'll retrench my efforts and get a little training"'.

Finally, Haas believes that what we see unfolding today is ultimately the result of prayer. 'I would say, in terms of the grand experiment of megachurches and mission organizations like ours, the beauty is that we've been praying for years. I'm standing on the shoulders of spiritual giants who were praying a lot longer than I have been about the church awakening to issues of the poor ... And out of them, many of the top leaders are waking up. The question is, are they doing it just like us, are they doing it with us? In some cases yes, in some cases no. Is that a good thing? Well, that depends on how you look at it. You know, we prayed, and they are doing it. God's awakening the body ... I can't say it's widespread but it's certainly moving in a positive direction'.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This article has been a preliminary attempt to articulate the present move of the mega-church movement into the field of development and missions. Considerable research remains to be done to ascertain more fully the nature and scope of mega-church involvement in development, to learn from the possible innovations they are coming up with as they engage in this process, and to help the mega-church

movement learn from past experiences and challenges faced by those who have spent much time working in development.

For example, the international ministry efforts of churches such as Saddleback and Willow Creek are nationally and even internationally known. However, it is not clear to what extent their ministries reflect those of the majority of mega-churches. Are other mega-churches more, equally, or less committed to holistic ministry and engaged in development throughout the world? Are there examples of mega-churches even more innovative than the aforementioned well-known examples?

In the same way, Calvary Church and Emmanuel Faith Community Church, though they have separate histories and are located on opposite sides of the country, seem to have similarities that might not be common to the majority of mega-churches. Namely, both churches describe a focus on sending missionaries as central to their ministry. How much of this has to do with the fact that both churches are approximately 70-years old, whereas the majority of mega-churches have much shorter histories?

While the three churches examined are fairly representative of the mega-church movement in suburban locations, there are a considerable number of other mega-churches with varying demographics. For instance, do African-American mega-churches look and function in unique and distinctive ways when it comes to international ministry? Do charismatic or fundamentalist churches show greater or lesser commitment to development work? Are mega-churches that are affiliated with denominations more or less likely to engage in development? Which denominations are the most likely to be involved? Does 'prosperity gospel' teaching – which is common in some mega-churches – lead to greater or lesser emphasis on development? Are mega-churches in one region of the USA more likely than churches in other regions to be actively engaged in international holistic ministry, or churches in urban settings as compared with the suburbs?

While we have only examined churches in the USA, as noted in the first part of this article there are rapidly growing mega-churches throughout the world. How do the international ministries of mega-churches in Latin America, Africa, and Asia compare to their western counterparts? What similarities and differences exist in mega-churches in different regions of the world? Do non-western mega-churches, on the whole, work directly in development or do they seek to partner with development organizations? Finally, as the center of gravity in the church continues to shift from North and West to South and East, what impact will this have on traditionally northern Christian development organizations?

In the end, future research pursuing these and other questions needs to be focused on helping these churches, and the evangelical movement as a whole, to be effectively obedient to the full mandate of the gospel. It is tremendously encouraging that the leaders of the evangelical churches are stepping up and becoming involved in holistic ministry, focusing on their relationships with churches in the developing world, and encouraging their congregations to do the same. There is no doubt that the church is the place where holistic discipling should occur, both in the developed and the developing world, and one of the weaknesses of the evangelical development organizations has been that many times they have shied away from establishing strong and healthy relationships with the churches in the developing world. If the mega-churches, the local churches, and the development organizations can forge healthy partnerships between themselves, using their respective gifts and talents to nurture and encourage each other and bathing their relationships them in prayer, God is sure to use this movement in great ways to bring people to Him and to minister to their needs.

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## Notes

- 1 The P, which now stands for 'promote reconciliation' originally stood for 'plant churches'.
- 2 See Jenkins (2002) and (2006).
- 3 There has also been an explosion in the literature on short-term missions in the last decade. See, for example, the following journals: *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, beginning in 2000; *Missiology*, especially 36(4) in 2006; and the *Journal of Latin American Theology*, especially 2(2) in 2007.
- 4 All quotes from Haas come from the phone interview conducted on 21 November 2008.
- 5 All quotes from Beirn come from the phone interview conducted on 18 November 2008.
- 6 All quotes from Hall come from the phone interview conducted on 15 November 2008.
- 7 See the Hartford Institute's database on mega-churches at <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>
- 8 All quotes from Beach come from a phone interview conducted on 17 November 2008.