

# God as a drug: The rise of American megachurches

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American megachurches use stagecraft, sensory pageantry, charismatic leadership and an upbeat, unchallenging vision of Christianity to provide their congregants with a powerful emotional religious experience, according to research from the University of Washington.

"Membership in megachurches is one of the leading ways American Christians worship these days, so, therefore, these churches should be understood," said James Wellman, associate professor of American religion at the University of Washington. "Our study shows that -- contrary to [public opinion](#) that tends to pass off the megachurch movement as consumerist religion -- megachurches are doing a pretty effective job for their members. In fact, megachurch members speak eloquently of their spiritual growth."

Wellman and co-authors Katie E. Corcoran and Kate Stockly-Meyerdirk, University of Washington graduate students in sociology and comparative religion respectively, studied 2008 data provided by the Leadership Network on 12 nationally representative American megachurches.

Corcoran will present their paper, titled "'God is Like a Drug': Explaining Interaction Ritual Chains in American Megachurches," at the 107th Annual Meeting of the [American Sociological Association](#).

Megachurches, or churches with 2,000 or more congregants, have grown in number, size, and popularity in recent years, coming to virtually

dominate the American [religious landscape](#). More than half of all American churchgoers now attend the largest 10 percent of churches.

Megachurch services feature a come-as-you-are atmosphere, rock music, and what Wellman calls a "multisensory mélange" of visuals and other elements to stimulate the senses, as well as small-group participation and a shared focus on the message from a charismatic pastor.

The researchers hypothesized that such rituals are successful in imparting emotional energy in the megachurch setting -- "creating membership feelings and symbols charged with emotional significance, and a heightened sense of spirituality," they wrote.

As part of their study, Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk analyzed 470 interviews and about 16,000 surveys on megachurch members' emotional experiences with their churches. Four themes emerged: salvation/spirituality, acceptance/belonging, admiration for and guidance from the leader, and morality and purpose through service.

The researchers found that feelings of joy felt in the services far exceed the powerful but fleeting "conversion experiences" for which megachurches are often stereotyped.

Many participants used the word "contagious" to describe the feeling of a megachurch service where members arrive hungry for emotional experiences and leave energized. One church member said, "(T)he Holy Spirit goes through the crowd like a football team doing the wave. ...Never seen it in any other church."

Wellman said, "That's what you see when you go into megachurches -- you see smiling people; people who are dancing in the aisles, and, in one San Diego megachurch, an interracial mix I've never seen anywhere in my time doing research on American churches. We see this experience

of unalloyed joy over and over again in megachurches. That's why we say it's like a drug."

Wellman calls it a "good drug" because the message provides a conventional moral standard, such as being a decent person, taking care of family, and forgiving enemies and yourself. Megachurches also encourage their members, such as by saying, "Things can get better, you can be happy," he added.

This comforting message also is a key to megachurches' success, Wellman said. "How are you going to dominate the market? You give them a generic form of Christianity that's upbeat, exciting, and uplifting."

The researchers also found that the large size of megachurch congregations is a benefit rather than a drawback, as it results in resources for state-of-the-art technology -- amplifying the emotional intensity of services -- and the ability to hire more qualified church leadership.

Wellman said, "This isn't just same-old, same-old. This is not like evangelical revivalism. It's a new, hybrid form of Christianity that's mutating and separate from all the traditional institutions with which we usually affiliate Christianity."

Megachurches, which rarely refer to heaven or hell, are worlds away from the sober, judgmental puritan meetinghouses of long ago, Wellman said.

Wellman will continue studying the topic of the new American Christianity with a book-length profile of Michigan-based pastor and author Rob Bell due out in late fall, and a book in 2013 titled "*High on God: How the Megachurch Conquered America.*"

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Provided by American Sociological Association

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