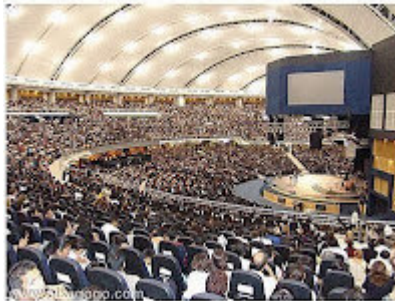


# The Collapse of Mega-Churches

By Samuel Santana\*

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In a bookstore in the small town of Vega Baja, Puerto Rico, I stumbled onto a book titled “How to Pastor a Small Church.” This profoundly attracted my attention.

At that time, I was in the process of founding the Assembly of God “Oasis of Love” Evangelical Church. I could not believe that someone would have written a book dedicated to this topic, and it was even more difficult to believe that it would be a successful sales item.

Those were times when the evangelical world was deeply immersed in two main topics: 1) leadership development (power) and, 2) church growth. Books, seminars, conferences, meetings, studies and everything else were focused only on those two aspects. Everyone was excited to learn how to direct others and how to have the biggest church in the community.

However, without realizing it, little by little we were changing the profile of the true church of Christ and the character of the Lord’s true ministry.

Lay workers, pastors, ministers and leaders were assuming an attitude that was becoming more and more focused on marking, techniques, strategies and, even, politics. It didn’t take long to experience conflicts, diatribes and struggles for power, both outside and within evangelical organizations.

The desire for power and to have the largest church produced a great deal of tension. The rules of the game were distorted and broken in many ways.

Mega-churches began to threaten everything. It seemed like they were going to sweep away all the other small communities of faith that had been established, some for many years, in the different regions. It was like the enormous supermarket chains that

overshadow the small business in the towns and neighborhoods. “Which little store or store-front can survive in the face of a Walmart? From the pulpit of the Crystal Cathedral, Pastor Dante Gebel advised the members of small churches to leave them.

No one wanted to remain behind.

The desire led to turn to well-known models in Central and South America and in the United States. This produced internal tensions in the traditional institutions.

Today we recognize that the desire for power had a terrible affect on the healthy relations that had existed among God’s servants.

**Finally, everything indicates that the concept of mega-churches is not sustainable.**

The Crystal Cathedral has just presented a claim for bankruptcy in California due to an unmanageable debt of \$55 million. Hill Hybel, pastor of the famous **Willow Creek Community Church**, located near Chicago, had to admit in a leadership conference that he had spent millions of dollars for the purpose of helping people, which had the opposite result.

In a very interesting article published in the magazine *Pentecostalism*, Dr. Osías Segura, a Costa Rican missiologist and theological advisor to the Latin American Viva Network, **explains several reasons for the collapse of mega-churches. Let’s look at those:**

**First**, mega-churches focused on attracting believers from other churches rather than seeking people in the world who are lost. There really was not much interest in saving souls. “In time the number of visitors dwindled and the congregation became more exclusive than inclusive.”

**Second**, a lack of pastoral care. Segura says that some mega-churches do not develop a ministry focused on small groups. How can thousands of people be given pastoral care? At least in small groups it is possible to offer personal attention. But, when more attention is paid to massive activities than to small groups, these churches begin to decline more rapidly. They forgot that a large church grows from a small church. Meanwhile I ask: Who will close the back door? Other churches have adopted abusive models such as the 12, G12, G8 or “The Vision.” They demand complete loyalty, commitment and surrender that leads to sacrificing families, employment and health. In some of these churches they require that everyone be part of the process, and sign a “heavenly corporation contract” in which the person submits to total obedience and a spiritual alliance with the pastor-apostle. And what about Christ? These models commit spiritual and power abuses, all for the growth of the church, but not of the Kingdom.

**Third**, the focus in mega-churches is on programs and not on people. The members must wait months to see their pastor and receive counseling or guidance. The “general pastors” (charismatic celebrities, CEOs) found that people followed them, but not Christ.

**Fourth**, messages were not founded on the Word of God but rather were a composition of psychological elements focused in personal improvement, success, money and a brilliant future. This is what is known as popular psychology. A careful study or analysis of these television preachers with their mega-churches will show that they make little use of the Bible. If you want to know about the latest Hollywood movies of the esoteric books of personal improvement then listen to Dante Gebel’s sermons. It is like a supermarket that has a little of everything. But he speaks of his connections with the world’s resources. How is it possible to speak from the pulpit about the diabolical works of Narnia?

**Fifth**, the numbers do not always correspond to the economic reality. In some of these mega-churches that do not require membership, many people do not agree to give their tithes and offerings. “Maybe 20% of those who attend serve in a ministry and sustain the finances of the church.” The rest are more like repeat visitors without any commitment. It becomes difficult to maintain the large buildings and installations. They fell into a vicious cycle! They could not contract more pastors to take care of those who were not committed (80% of those who attended); the installations and high salaries of the celebrities and other personnel swallowed up what the other 20% contributed. This leads to the church being run like a business rather than being an instrument for the Kingdom.”

All this is contrasted to the huge expenses of these large churches due to the cost of television, radio, Internet, and other programs.

**Sixth**, a lack of firmness in a well-defined doctrine. This happens because of the theological formation of their leaders and because the content of their teaching is founded on popular psychology and not on the Word of God

**Seventh**, marketing became the most important tool for designing their ministry model.

**Eighth**, Segura states that the senior pastors of the mega-churches like to talk about working as a team. “But when the pastor and his wife are the governing pastors, the decisions are made in the bedroom and not with the other pastors. Even worse, the members of their pastoral teams are clones of themselves—leaders that they have trained and that were contracted because they were intimate friends, not because of

their life experience or professional capacity. These kinds of leaders are not brave enough to contradict the senior pastor; it is a hierarchical not a democratic team. Is this team work? Who hires and dismisses the associate pastors in the mega-churches? "Working as a team requires that people work on the same level, never in a hierarchy."

**Ninth**, despite being churches with some degree of passion to affect society with the Gospel, their support of missions or transcultural ministries is minimal. Their focus is not over there, but rather here. All their energy is focused on the Sunday show. The budget speaks for itself. It is incredible to see the operational budget of these churches in comparison with the budget that they provide to missions and social programs. The fact of being fat does not mean being healthy.

**Tenth and last** is the strong emphasis on the "theology of prosperity" in some of the mega-churches, particularly of the neo-Pentecostal persuasion. The central theology of these churches is prosperity! If one is prosperous it is a sign of loyalty to God and of His blessing in return. They promise that everyone can be prosperous if they sow with faith. However, it is interesting that some of these churches explain (not very openly) that those who receive such a promise of prosperity need to have certain spiritual and moral qualities near the ethical-spiritual description of St. Francis of Asís. In other words, I can sow all that I can, but if it does not prosper it is because of some little sin in my life (even the sin of omission of which a person might not be aware). "The thing is that there is no way to lose or win in this business of arguments regarding sowing and reaping!"

**Other reasons** that we can include are the low levels of transparency with which these churches are managed. In whose name are all the assets? To whom are all the resources and the way they are used reported? This is a real problem when there is very little administrative oversight (checks and balances).

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