

Megachurches in Hampton Roads



MEGACHURCHES IN HAMPTON ROADS

Church attendance is on the decline. The Pew Research Center's longstanding Religion & Public Life Project indicates that the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated rose "from just over 15 percent to just under 20 percent of all U.S. adults" between 2007 and 2012. Fully one-third of adults under the age of 30 do not identify with a particular religion. The decrease in religious participation has been most evident among Protestants, both evangelical and mainline, whose share of the U.S. population fell from 53 percent to 48 percent in the same five-year period. The Pew Research Center suggests that these trends may be informed by younger Americans' distaste for the perceived associations between organized religion and conservative politics, and by their tendency to postpone marriage and parenthood until later in life. Secularization and a decrease in social engagement of all kinds in the United States today also might play a role.¹

There is, however, a standout exception to Americans' move away from organized religion – a simultaneous increase in both the number and size of the largest Protestant congregations, also known as "megachurches." To be considered a megachurch, a church must have an average weekly attendance of at least 2,000 participants, although the attendance at the very largest churches actually is far greater. Lakewood Church in Houston, led by Pastor Joel Osteen, is the largest church in the country, with an average weekly attendance of around 44,000. According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, there are 1,546 megachurches in the U.S. today, including 14 in Hampton Roads (see Table 1). This represents a nearly five-fold increase in the number of U.S. megachurches within a generation. In 1990, there were approximately two megachurches for every 1 million U.S. inhabitants. Today, the ratio is about five per 1 million people (see Table 2).

In this chapter, we'll take a close look at some of the defining characteristics of U.S. megachurches. We'll see how the largest churches in Hampton Roads reflect these characteristics as well as how our region has provided fertile ground for very large churches to thrive. Hampton Roads' megachurches are as diverse as the region itself, and they have successfully appealed to congregants of many racial and ethnic backgrounds.



Bethel Church, 1705 Todds Lane, Hampton

¹ "Nones' on the Rise," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Oct. 9, 2012) at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/#who-are-the-unaffiliated>.

TABLE 1

MEGACHURCHES IN HAMPTON ROADS

	Name	Average Weekly Attendance	Denomination	Website	Established	Location(s)	Senior Pastor
1	Atlantic Shores Baptist Church	2,000	Southern Baptist	http://www.asbc.net/	1981	1861 Kempsville Road, Virginia Beach, 23464	Kyle Wall
2	Bethel Temple	2,613	Assemblies of God	http://www.betheltemple.com/		1705 Todds Lane, Hampton, 23666	Glenn Reynolds
3	Calvary Revival Church - Norfolk	8,000	None	http://www.crcglobal.org/	1990	5833 Poplar Hall Drive, Norfolk, 23502	Courtney McBath
	CRC-Chesapeake					740 Great Bridge Blvd., Chesapeake, 23320	Carlton McLeod
	CRC-Peninsula (South)					119 29th St., Newport News, 23607	Ray Johnson
	CRC-Peninsula (East)					324 Newport News Ave., Hampton, 23669	
4	Faith Deliverance Christian Center	2,000	None	https://www.faithdeliverance.org/	1986	1010 E. 26th St., Norfolk, 23504	Sharon Riley
5	First Baptist Church of Norfolk	2,462	Southern Baptist	http://www.firstnorfolk.org/	1805	312 Kempsville Road, Norfolk, 23502	Eric Thomas
6	Grove Church	2,363	Baptist	http://www.grovechurchva.com/	1840	5910 W. Norfolk Road, Portsmouth, 23703	Melvin Marriner
7	Kempsville Presbyterian Church	2,200	Evangelical Presbyterian Church	http://www.kpc.org/		805 Kempsville Road, Virginia Beach, 23464	Steve Keller (interim)
8	Liberty Baptist Church	3,023	Southern Baptist	http://www.libertylive.com/		1021 Big Bethel Road, Hampton, 23666	Grant Ethridge
	Liberty at Harbour View					7025 Harbour View Blvd., Suffolk, 23435	
9	Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church	2,300	Baptist	http://themountleads.org/	1902		Kim Brown
	The Mount - Cathedral					215 Las Gaviotas Blvd., Chesapeake, 23322	
	The Mount - Elizabeth City					1021 US Highway 17 S, Elizabeth City, NC, 27909	
	The Mount - Peninsula					100 Regal Way, Newport News, 23602	
	The Mount - Chapel					884 Bells Mill Road, Chesapeake, 23322	
10	New Life Providence Church	2,500	None	http://newlifeprovidencechurch.com/	2000		Dan Backens
	Deep Creek Campus					423 Shell Road, Chesapeake, 23323	
	Ghent Campus					1420 Colonial Ave., Norfolk, 23517	
	Kempsville Campus					1244 Thompkins Lane, Virginia Beach, 23464	
11	Rock Church International	2,225	None	http://rockchurchinternational.org/	1968	640 Kempsville Road, Virginia Beach, 23464	Robin and John Blanchard

Sources: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Database of Megachurches in the U.S., available at: <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>, church websites and interviews

TABLE 1

MEGACHURCHES IN HAMPTON ROADS

	Name	Average Weekly Attendance	Denomination	Website	Established	Location(s)	Senior Pastor
12	Waters Edge Church	3,594	Southern Baptist	http://www.watersedgechurch.net/	2003		Stu Hodges
	Waters Edge Hampton					2011 Cunningham Drive, Hampton, 23666	
	Waters Edge Newport News					836 J. Clyde Morris Blvd., Newport News, 23601	
	Waters Edge Williamsburg					4615 Opportunity Way, Williamsburg, 23188	
	Waters Edge Yorktown					6830 George Washington Memorial Highway, Yorktown, 23692	
13	Wave Church	4,000	None	http://www.wavechurch.com/	1999		Steve Kelly
	Great Neck Location					1000 North Great Neck Road, Virginia Beach, 23454	
	Richmond Location					4036 Cox Road, Glen Allen, 23059	
	Seaboard Location					2655 Seaboard Road, Virginia Beach, 23456	
	Norfolk Location					421 Granby St., Norfolk, 23510	
	Wave Church NC - Wilson Campus					5334 Lamm Road, Wilson, NC, 27893	
	Wave Church NC - Greenville Campus					4052 Old Tar Road, Winterville, NC, 28590	
14	Williamsburg Community Chapel	2,400	None	http://www.wcchapel.org/		3899 John Tyler Highway, Williamsburg, 23185	Travis Simone (interim)

Sources: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Database of Megachurches in the U.S., available at: <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>, church websites and interviews

TABLE 2

MEGACHURCHES PER MILLION OF POPULATION BY YEAR

Year	U.S. Population (millions)	Approximate Number of Megachurches	Megachurches per Million Population
1900	76	10	0.13
1970	205	50	0.24
1980	227	150	0.70
1990	250	310	1.20
2000	275	600	2.19
2005	300	1,210	4.00
2012	313	1,546	4.94

Sources: Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, "Beyond Megachurch Myths" (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), p. 7, for 1900-2005 and for 2012, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, at: http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday_profile.html



Calvary Revival Church, 5833 Poplar Hall Drive, Norfolk

What Is A Megachurch?

In the book "Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches," Hartford Institute professor Scott Thumma and his co-author, Dave Travis, emphasize that "the megachurch is more than just an ordinary church grown large. The size and approach of a megachurch alters its social dynamics and organizational characteristics, making it bear little resemblance to smaller, more traditional congregations."² In "Beyond Megachurch Myths" and on the Hartford Institute website, Thumma identifies common features that tend to distinguish U.S. megachurches, beyond their large size, from "regular" churches. Many of these features characterize Hampton Roads' largest churches as well, although we echo Thumma's further observation that "there is no 'typical' megachurch model."³ Each of Hampton Roads' very large churches has a unique mission and type of organization; not all of the characteristics outlined below apply to every congregation.

DYNAMIC LEADERSHIP

It would be incorrect to state that all megachurches are personality-driven enterprises. **However, nearly all megachurch pastors are charismatic individuals who possess broad, impressive skill sets. They are dynamic preachers, creative and inspirational leaders, and savvy entrepreneurs.** Most megachurches reached their very large size under the tenure of a single pastor. First Baptist Church of Norfolk and Portsmouth's Grove Church have held worship services since the early 19th century, but their rise to "megachurch" status occurred much more recently. Their weekly attendance numbers rose from a few hundred to a few thousand per week under the leadership of Ken Hemphill (1981-1991) at First Baptist, and Melvin Marriner (1989- present) at Grove Church.

Elsewhere in Hampton Roads, pastors such as Courtney McBath (Calvary Revival Church, 1990) and Stu Hodges (Waters Edge Church, 2003) established new churches that quickly took off in size. Rock Church International possesses the largest sanctuary in Hampton Roads, with a seating capacity of 5,200.

² Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), p. 2.

³ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, xvi.

Most, though not all, megachurch pastors are men. Norfolk’s Faith Deliverance Christian Center was founded by Barbara Amos in 1986, and is currently led by Pastor Sharon Riley. Anne and John Gimenez founded Rock Church, our region’s first megachurch, in 1968. Today the Gimenezes’ daughter and son-in-law, Robin and John Blanchard, are co-pastors of Rock Church International, and Anne Gimenez serves as bishop of the Rock Ministerial Fellowship. Megachurches are often a family affair, with pastors’ spouses and extended family members assuming prominent leadership roles within their congregations.

The pastors of some of the largest megachurches maintain a public presence that extends well beyond their church leadership. Nationally, Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes and Rick Warren are among the best-known megachurch pastors who have become successful authors and celebrities in their own right. They are familiar sights to anyone surfing Sunday morning television.

In our region, Courtney McBath, Anne Gimenez and Steve Kelly (Wave Church) all preside over self-named ministries in addition to their Hampton Roads church affiliations. They appear regularly on television, travel widely for missions and other speaking engagements, and have authored numerous books. They are entrepreneurs and celebrities in addition to being religious leaders.

MANY HAVE AN INDEPENDENT, DENOMINATION-FREE IDENTITY

The Hartford Institute indicates that 40 percent of all U.S. megachurches are not affiliated with a particular denomination. Table 3 reveals that Southern Baptist and other Baptist congregations make up the next 23 percent of U.S. megachurches; no other denomination accounts for more than 6 percent of the megachurch population. These patterns are consistent in our region as well. Among the 14 Hampton Roads megachurches named by the Hartford Institute in Table 1, six are unaffiliated, and an additional six identify as Baptist or Southern Baptist. Broadly speaking, megachurches tend toward a conservative/evangelical interpretation of Christianity, but there is a great deal of diversity in the theologies and styles of worship that they promote.

Affiliation	Percent
Nondenominational	40
Southern Baptist	16
Baptist, unspecified	7
Assemblies of God	6
Christian	5
Calvary Chapel	2
United Methodist	2
Four Square	2
Evangelical Lutheran Church	1
Vineyard Christian Fellowship	1
Other	18
	100

Source: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, at: http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday_profile.html

Thumma and Travis point out that megachurches tend to be “quite self-sufficient; they don’t need the resources, guidance, or identity that a national body can provide.”⁴ More often, they provide these kinds of benefits to smaller churches that opt to affiliate with them. Wave Church, for example, provides leadership to a “Wave Network” of around 55 different churches; Rock Church International presides over a worldwide fellowship of more than 500 churches. Megachurches that do belong to a familiar denomination may not necessarily emphasize this identity. Thus, Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church in Chesapeake is more commonly called “The Mount,” while Liberty Baptist Church in Hampton and Suffolk identifies as “Liberty.”

These and other Hampton Roads megachurches have highly developed brand identities. Many have adopted eye-catching logos and equally distinctive names. When Pastor Steve Kelly came to our region from Australia in 1999, his

⁴ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 27.

church was initially called the Virginia Beach Christian Life Center. He and other church leaders soon sought a less “parochial,” more broadly appealing name; they ultimately decided upon Wave Church.

WORSHIP SERVICES ALSO ARE CHOREOGRAPHED PERFORMANCES

Nontraditional names often go hand in hand with nontraditional worship styles. Beginning with the need to accommodate very large audiences, the physical appearances of megachurches usually are quite different from their smaller counterparts. **Many megachurches cultivate a self-consciously contemporary style, without pews, hymnals, a cross-bedecked altar or other familiar trappings of Christian churches.** Hartford Institute surveys indicate that “the vast majority of megachurch worship is characterized by contemporary praise music, led by a worship team, accompanied by orchestra, drums, and electric guitars and augmented by state-of-the-art sound systems and huge projection screens.”⁵

Megachurch services usually are impressive, high-quality productions. “If you’re bored, then we’re doing something wrong” is a sentiment that we heard from several pastors in our region. Indeed, a tour of Hampton Roads’ largest churches reveals an array of innovative worship styles that are not bound by convention. At these churches one may encounter an eclectic range of popular music (from the Beatles to large gospel choirs to Latin swing), baton twirlers and impassioned sermons that are accompanied by sophisticated video imagery.

RELIANCE UPON NEW MEDIA

Megachurches have not hesitated to embrace new technologies. They maintain well-designed websites and mobile apps, and they connect with their members through multiple social media channels. They accept donations online, by text message and at on-site credit and debit card kiosks. Sermons or entire church services are available for prospective members (and anyone else) to watch or listen to online. Live-stream technology has encouraged the expansion of megachurches to multiple sites, or “campuses,” throughout our region. New Life Providence Church, Waters Edge Church, Wave Church and Liberty Baptist

⁵ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 27.

Church regularly live-stream part or all of their services to worshippers gathered at different church locations.

These technologies have allowed a few churches to extend their reach well beyond Hampton Roads. Waters Edge Church Online and The Mount Global encourage visitors from all over the world to live-stream services and interact with other users in real time. Bishop Kim Brown has a tablet computer nearby when he preaches at The Mount in Chesapeake, so that he can immediately incorporate long-distance prayer requests. The Mount Global holds online classes for its virtual members and even sends them communion by mail.

MEETING EVERYONE’S NEEDS

Americans are used to shopping at malls and big-box stores like Walmart and Target. In a sense, megachurches aspire to be a similar kind of one-stop shop for their members’ spiritual needs. A typical megachurch has dedicated groups for children, teens, college students, young adults, retirees and more. Other ministries might address the specific needs of single parents, recovering addicts, adults studying for their GEDs or military service personnel and their spouses. Some megachurches host schools and day care centers; others have counseling and wellness centers. There are bookstores, coffee shops and even a bowling alley associated with the largest churches in our region. The offerings can seem overwhelming; for this reason, megachurches encourage and provide their members with many opportunities to connect with others in smaller groups.

LARGE-SCALE COMMUNITY SERVICE

Most churches in Hampton Roads engage in different kinds of community service – preparing meals for the hungry, sheltering the homeless and providing other kinds of support to at-risk children and adults. Megachurches are no different, although their initiatives take place on a significantly greater scale. Some of the largest churches in our region support independent nonprofit organizations that promote service to the community. Wave City Care and the Life Enrichment Center of Norfolk (associated with New Life Providence Church) are two prominent examples. Our region benefits from the kinds of service that very large churches can coordinate and provide.

Why Megachurches In Hampton Roads?

The proliferation of megachurches has not occurred evenly throughout the United States. The Hartford Institute’s numbers indicate that the majority of North American megachurches are located in the U.S. South. Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida together account for nearly one-quarter of all U.S. megachurches (see Table 4). Texas and California are the states with the most megachurches. Virginia is home to 42 megachurches; 18 of these are located in Northern Virginia and 14 are in Hampton Roads.

Only two Virginia churches – McLean Bible Church (Vienna) and Thomas Road Baptist Church (Lynchburg), with weekly attendance of 16,500 and 8,350, respectively – rank among the 100 largest U.S. churches, according to Outreach Magazine.⁶ Table 1 reports Hartford Institute data indicating that Hampton Roads’ best-attended churches are Calvary Revival Church, Liberty Baptist Church, Waters Edge Church and Wave Church, all with average weekly attendance of more than 3,000.⁷ **Table 5 reports that just over half (52 percent) of all U.S. megachurches welcome 2,000 to 2,999 congregants each week, compared to 10 of 14 (71 percent) of all Hampton Roads megachurches. Thus, Hampton Roads’ megachurches are somewhat smaller than the national average.**

Outreach Magazine counts Waters Edge Church, located in Yorktown and other sites on the Peninsula, among the 100 fastest-growing churches in the U.S. Waters Edge Church gained 616 new weekly attendees in 2013, a growth rate of around 21 percent. River Oak Church (Chesapeake) and World Outreach Worship Center (Newport News) also made the magazine’s list of fastest-growing churches, suggesting that the ranks of our region’s megachurches may soon be expanding.⁸

⁶ <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/2013-outreach-100-largest-churches-america.html>.

⁷ The weekly attendance figure of 8,000 for Calvary Revival Church appears to include CRC-Norfolk, CRC-Chesapeake and CRC-Peninsula, all of which operate autonomously.

⁸ <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/2013-outreach-100-fastest-growing-churches-america.html>.

The Roman Catholic Church in the Diocese of Richmond (of which Hampton Roads is a part) does not distribute attendance numbers. By common agreement, however, the three largest Roman Catholic parishes in Hampton Roads are St. Gregory the Great and St. John the Apostle (both in Virginia Beach) and St. Bede in Williamsburg. It is not clear if these parishes ever approach the large attendances recorded at services held at the region’s megachurches, such as Wave Church.

TABLE 4

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF MEGACHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA (2012)

Regional Division	Percent	
New England	1.1	ME, VT, NH, MA, CT, RI
Mid Atlantic	6.0	NY, PA, NJ
South Atlantic	23.6	MD, DE, VA, NC, SC, GA, FL
East South Central	8.2	WV, KY, TN, MS, AL
West South Central	16.8	AR, LA, OK, TX
East North Central	12.7	WI, IL, IN, MI, OH
West North Central	5.7	ND, SD, NE, KS, MO, IA, MN
Mountain	6.7	MT, ID, WY, CO, UT, NV, AZ, NM
Pacific	17.9	WA, OR, CA, AK, HI
Canada	1.3	
	100.0	

Source: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, at: http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday_profile.html

TABLE 5

**DISTRIBUTION OF MEGACHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA
BY SIZE (2012)**

Size Grouping	Percent
2,000 to 2,999	52.3
3,000 to 3,999	17.6
4,000 to 4,999	9.7
5,000 to 9,999	14.6
10,000 or more	5.8
	100.0

Source: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, at: http://hir.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday_profile.html

In Hampton Roads and elsewhere, the growth of megachurches has mirrored the growth of the U.S. population since the 1960s and 1970s. Megachurches emerged alongside the shopping malls, big-box stores and multiplex theaters that came to characterize American suburbia in the late 20th century. Megachurches tend to thrive in fast-growing suburban and exurban locations, where new churches accommodate the needs of booming populations.

Young cities like Virginia Beach have offered large plots of land with comparatively few zoning restrictions, ideal for the construction of new churches (as well as for the auxiliary buildings and generous parking lots that typically accompany them). In some cases, megachurches have expanded by repurposing older suburban commercial buildings. Calvary Revival Church’s current location in Norfolk was once a Brand Distributors store that sold jewelry and electronics; The Mount’s Cathedral was a former Winn-Dixie supermarket. Repurposed buildings often are a constituent part of the spirit of renewal that exists within megachurches.

As a growing metropolitan area generally considered within the country’s Bible Belt, Hampton Roads has provided fertile ground for very large churches to thrive. According to Thumma and Travis, suburbanites “are exactly the type of people most attracted to megachurches: consumer-oriented, willing to commute great distances, highly mobile and often displaced, middle-class, in middle-

level management positions, well-educated and with a traditional nuclear family structure.”⁹ The average age of those attending megachurches is several years younger than that of the churchgoing population as a whole. Thus, it seems likely that our region’s large population of military families has contributed to the success of Hampton Roads megachurches. These churches’ online offerings may be particularly appealing to servicemen and women stationed abroad.

Regent University, whose website describes the university as “one of the nation’s leading academic centers for Christian thought and action,”¹⁰ has had a symbiotic relationship with the region’s megachurches. Founded by Pat Robertson in 1978, the university now enrolls nearly 6,000 students in a wide array of undergraduate and graduate programs. Regent students and alumni have played an active role in Hampton Roads’ largest churches as congregants, worship leaders, ministers and in a variety of other staff positions. The university provides a forum for pastors of some of the region’s largest churches to gather together on a regular basis. It has also invited nationally prominent megachurch pastors to speak on campus; in the past year, T.D. Jakes and Greg Surratt have participated in Regent’s weekly chapel service.

Megachurches are not entirely a suburban phenomenon. A smaller subset of very large churches has prospered within older urban centers such as Portsmouth and Norfolk. In our region, these churches (including Grove Church, Faith Deliverance Christian Center and Calvary Revival Church) most often serve chiefly African American populations. Intriguingly, two of our region’s fastest-growing suburban megachurches have recently established new locations in older Norfolk neighborhoods. Wave Church holds Sunday morning services at the downtown Granby Theater, and New Life Providence Church purchased a century-old building from a dissolved Methodist congregation on Colonial Avenue in Ghent. Calvary Revival Church started in Norfolk and has since expanded throughout Hampton Roads, aligning with sister churches in suburban Chesapeake, as well as in older neighborhoods of Hampton and Newport News.

⁹ Thumma and Davis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 12.

¹⁰ http://www.regent.edu/about_us

FIGURE 1

LOCATION OF MEGACHURCHES IN HAMPTON ROADS

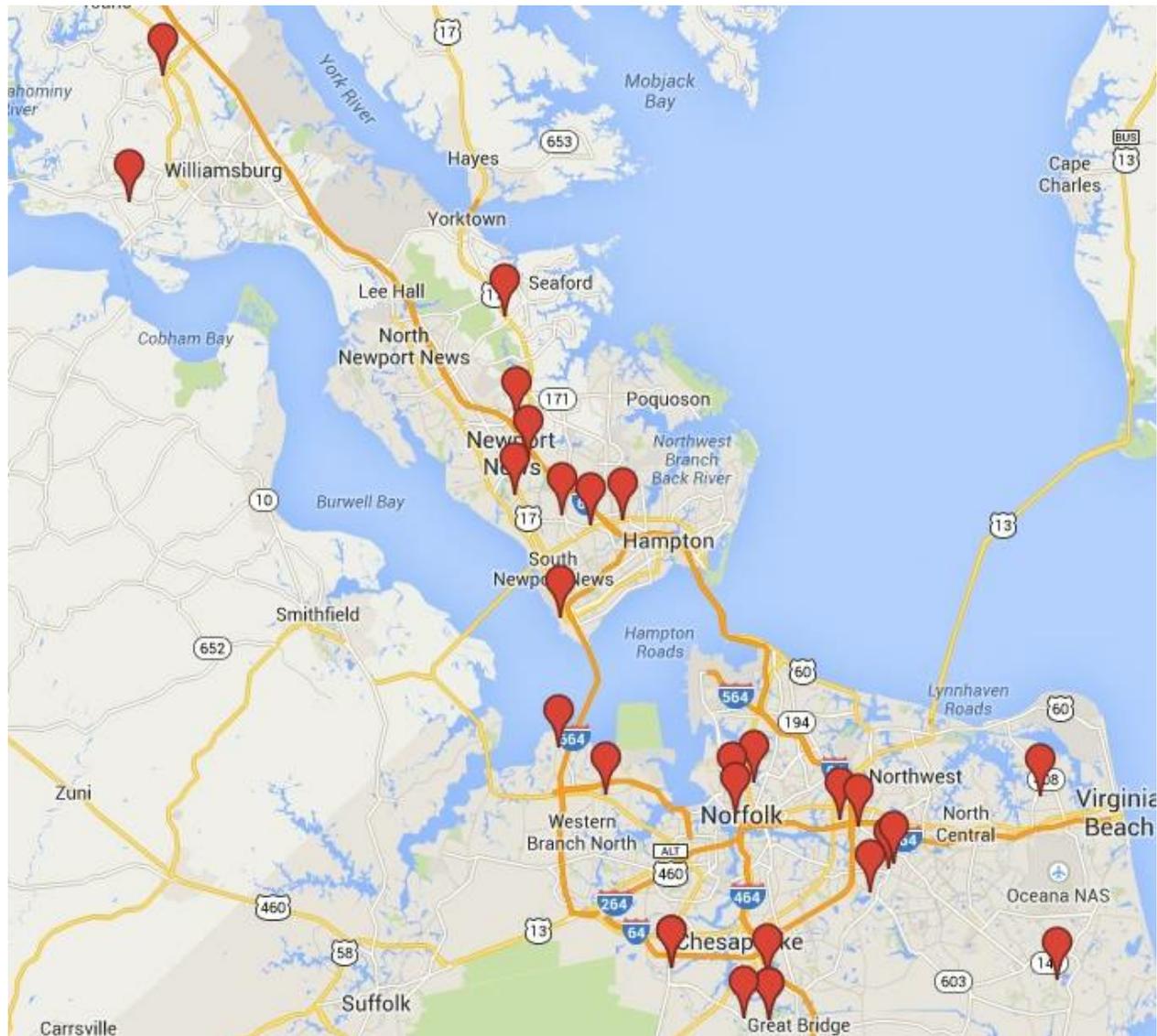


Figure 1 locates our region's megachurches within Hampton Roads. It is apparent that their presence extends throughout our region, from Williamsburg to Elizabeth City, N.C. Several of these institutions maintain campuses in multiple Hampton Roads localities, both Southside and on the Peninsula. Waters Edge Church has pursued a decentralized, "multisite" strategy of expansion; no one of its four well-attended locations accommodates more than around 1,000 congregants. New Life Providence Church seeks to grow by one new campus per year, with the goal of establishing a presence in every Hampton Roads locality. Even those megachurches that operate from a single large location draw their members from a wide geographical area, well beyond the borders of their city. Megachurches must be counted among Hampton Roads' most distinctively regional institutions.

Racial And Ethnic Diversity

In a 1953 sermon on "Communism's Challenge to Christianity," the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously expressed his shame that "Eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in Christian America."¹¹ Sixty years later, communism has withered on the vine and the U.S. has elected its first African American president, but U.S. churches remain overwhelmingly segregated. Survey data indicate that 85 percent of all U.S. congregations are composed of at least 90 percent of one racial group.¹²

Megachurches, too, tend to reflect a significant degree of racial segregation, although less than in the U.S. church population as a whole. Hartford Institute research from 2005 "found that 31 percent of megachurches claimed to have a 20 percent or more minority presence in their congregations," and that "the average megachurch had 14 percent of the congregation not representing the majority race."¹³ Megachurches' enthusiasm for new styles of worship and forms of church organization may well encourage this kind of diversity. The very notion of a megachurch is grounded upon broad popular appeal.

¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr., "Communism's Challenge to Christianity," *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 149.

¹² Michael O. Emerson, "A New Day for Multiracial Congregations," *Reflections*, spring 2013, available at: <http://reflections.yale.edu/article/future-race/new-day-multiracial-congregations>.

¹³ Thumma and Davis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 140.

Although all of the Hampton Roads pastors with whom we spoke emphasized their churches' openness to worshippers of all races and backgrounds, most very large churches in our region tend to have a staff and congregation that are either mostly white or mostly African American. A brief look at these churches' self-presentation on their websites seems to confirm this observation. There are, however, some noteworthy exceptions. Rock Church International's distinctive, charismatic style of worship has long attracted a highly diverse group of followers; Bishop John Gimenez was of Puerto Rican descent and his son-in-law, Pastor John Blanchard, is Korean American. **Pastors Dan Backens and Kevin Turpin founded New Life Providence Church in 1999 with the explicit intent of fostering a multi-ethnic congregation. According to Backens, New Life Providence's membership is now almost evenly represented by whites and blacks (in addition to a smaller contingent of congregants of other ethnicities and national backgrounds), a status that has been carefully cultivated through the integration of diverse worship styles and traditions. Bethel Temple in Hampton likewise represents itself as multi-ethnic. Both Bethel Temple and First Baptist Church of Norfolk sponsor Spanish-language ministries to serve Hampton Roads' growing Hispanic population.**

Final Observations

The term "megachurch" first entered into widespread usage in the 1980s, just as both the number and size of very large U.S. churches had begun to take off. However, not all pastors of large congregations embrace the term, for a variety of reasons. Some of the pastors with whom we spoke cited a media-driven image of the "megachurch" that has become associated with corruption or scandal, as well as the implication that megachurches are superior, or pose a threat, to smaller churches in their communities. Other pastors saw the label more benignly, as a neutral shorthand for referencing churches with especially large congregations.

It does seem clear that the term – like the phenomenon that it describes – has great staying power, in Hampton Roads and elsewhere around the U.S. The ongoing consolidation of Christian religious communities into fewer, but larger, houses of worship has important implications for all residents of our region, regardless of religious affiliation.

We can make the following generalizations and observations:

- 1) Scott Thumma estimates that the average U.S. megachurch has an income of around \$6.5 million per year.¹⁴ Megachurches in Hampton Roads are thriving, million-dollar businesses, each with dozens of employees. They have a substantial and growing economic impact in our region – in most cases, much larger than conventional, denominational churches.
- 2) Megachurches in Hampton Roads are expanding their regional presence. A generation ago, fast-growing churches typically constructed ever-greater sanctuaries. Today, live-streaming and other Internet technologies allow these churches to adopt a more flexible, multisite approach. “Instead of, ‘How do we get people to come to the mountain?’ it’s, ‘Let’s bring the mountain to the people,’” multisite church consultant Jim Tomberlin recently told *Outreach Magazine*, further predicting that soon “megachurches will become gigachurches.”¹⁵ Multisite expansion seems particularly suited to Hampton Roads, given the region’s decentralized population and geographic sprawl. A few successful megachurches may eventually become well-known regional “brands,” not unlike commercial businesses such as YNot Pizza or Taste Unlimited.
- 3) Hampton Roads megachurches draw a large proportion of their members from new arrivals to the area, as well as from the “unchurched.” Nonetheless, the growth of megachurches has consequences for smaller congregations that cannot offer an expansive menu of ministries or other high-profile attractions. Smaller churches may struggle to survive and may need to clarify or redefine their missions in order to maintain their appeal. In this, they are not unlike many small, local businesses that have been confronted by competition from Amazon or Walmart.

¹⁴ “Mega churches mean big business,” CNN.com, Jan. 21, 2010, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/21/religion.mega.church.christian>

¹⁵ Jennifer Kabbany, “Reshaping the American Megachurch,” *Outreach Magazine*, Nov. 25, 2012, available at: <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/5065-reshaping-the-american-megachurch.html>

- 4) Hampton Roads charities and other nonprofit organizations should recognize the potential value of partnering with area megachurches. Megachurches’ considerable human and financial resources, when paired with a passion for innovation and community engagement, will permit the undertaking of service projects on an ambitious scale and increase impact.
- 5) Megachurches fulfill spiritual needs that attendees feel are not being met by conventional, denominational churches. Megachurches buck the more general societal trend toward lower church attendance.
- 6) While megachurches are explicitly religious organizations, they also are businesses whose leaders simultaneously are businessmen and women who instinctively appear to have mastered the principles of marketing, advertising, brand management and vertical integration. Some megachurch leaders receive criticism for their businesslike approaches to religious life and a few for their lifestyles. Those who deliver such barbs often point out that Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the ancient temple in Jerusalem (Matthew 21:12-13) and imply that much the same thing should occur today. Most observers acknowledge that tensions could exist between the spreading of the Gospel and the focus of megachurches on effective, businesslike operations. However, megachurch leaders note that they must be good stewards of the resources with which they have been entrusted and at least one cited the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) as support for his ministry. Hence, it would be unbiblical for church leaders not to utilize the resources entrusted to them in the most effective ways possible. Following this logic, it also would be foolish for megachurches not to rely upon modern technologies and presentation techniques to spread the Word. It is well beyond the scope of *The State of the Region* report to weigh in on such matters. It is sufficient to note that on occasion such questions do arise concerning one of the most fascinating and important religious trends of our time.



Rock Church International, 640 Kempsville Road, Virginia Beach

