

## **The Giga-Pastor, Innovation, and the Health of Megachurches**

by Randall Neighbour

Why you don't want to be that über-innovative lead pastor you so admire...

This morning, I was pondering why mega-churches in America cannot hold a candle to the size and influence of what I call "giga-churches" elsewhere in the world. Some of the factors are obvious:

- In many countries abroad, the cultures are far more relational. This is the greatest factor, but as you will read below, it is not always the deciding factor.
- The people in these churches—for the most part—cannot afford to own or operate technology. This forces them to share information more relationally, which is also a strong factor.
- The source of income for many in these giga-churches is found in the trades or by working in a factory. Most are not stressed overseeing the work of other people or computer processes that would sideline their desire or ability to lead in a church.
- Persecution. Anywhere Christians are persecuted, the believers are rarely distracted by much of anything because they have made a life or death choice to be a follower of Christ.

Here's what I believe to be the biggest factor, but one that no one has shared with me:

The lead pastors of these 100,000+ member churches are not über-innovative leaders.

Argue if you like, but I have spent time with a handful of giga-church pastors. If you were to compare their personalities to what may be true of some mega-church pastors leading a few of America's largest churches, you'd see a strong contrast:

- Giga-church pastors abroad still lead their churches, but they almost lead from the shadows. You will rarely find them trumpeting the next-big thing God has given them for the church to do or focus on. In fact, I've seen many of them humbly share that God took them to task (again) to do what the members of their small groups sensed God calling the church to do, requiring them to die to their own ideas of what should be done or developed next.
- Giga-church pastors abroad are squarely focused on member growth, not church growth. Each of these churches has a discipleship pathway for membersthat has become an embedded part of their church's culture. This develops members into missional believers who lead as a natural part of their spiritual maturation process.
- Giga-church pastors are not overly confident individuals. I've met them. I've talked to them. I've prayed with them. And I can tell. They are scared nearly senseless about the

position in which God has placed them. This is why they pray for many hours every day. And you know what they probably say in their private prayer closet? "God, help me. I have no idea what I'm doing. I never have, really. Thank you for allowing me to lead a sizable army of your people into battle, a battle they are anxious to win on their own with my encouragement."

Now the last point above is the key. I'm sure every American mega-church pastor prays like this as well, but are their church members, by and large, anxious to take a bullet to spread the Word of God and extend the Kingdom to as many as possible at great personal expense?

Certainly, American mega-churches have hundreds and hundreds of people who have laid down their life for Christ and will keep doing it for the rest of their lives. However, the mega-church culture in America is characterized by following a prominent man in a pulpit, not passionately following Christ in community with others and being supported in mission by one's pastor.

Is this situation the fault of the American mega-church pastor? Yes and no. I do not believe in my heart that any American mega-church pastor wants to keep innovating the way he does or continue to make himself prominent. He probably feels he has no other choice. His people are not rising to the occasion to grasp the baton and run hard with it so he can cheer them on from the sidelines and provide small course corrections for them to keep them operating powerfully without another grand church-wide campaign.

Conversely, the fact that none of the churches over 25,000 members I have studied in America have built their churches on a foundational culture of relational discipleship gives me cause for great concern. These churches have small groups aplenty, but they're holding tanks for the most part. Relational evangelism and relational spiritual development are not a cornerstone identifier in their small groups. The cornerstone identifier is the lead pastor's personality and innovative mind, while the small groups are in place to help members practically apply his innovations.

Conclusion:

So don't admire the American mega-church pastors with their amazing ideas and programs and ability to pull a rabbit out of a hat every other month. Deep down, I believe this kind of ongoing innovation is seriously limiting their churches in ways they may never understand, and it is fueled by well-cloaked desperation. Their members are consumers and haven't fully grabbed the baton and run ahead of the pastor's vision the way members of mega-churches do abroad.

In Proverbs 29:18, we find "Where there is no vision, the people perish..." Around the U.S., this is interpreted in a way that demands innovation on the part of the lead pastor, or shall I call it, the lead innovator. In reality, it means the PEOPLE must fully adopt God's vision for them and passionately pursue it, not the lead pastor. Selah\*.

\*Blog comments\*:

Great Article. I think Randall hit the target with this one. Last night, I attended our church's Women's Ministry called R.Are (discovering who your Really Are in Christ). We started a series watching the Deeper Still Series and last night session was Kay Arthur. Really Great Teacher and Leader in the Church.

She made such a profound statement in this session about how so many in the church do not know the Word of God. Afterwards, we broke up in groups to discuss our impressions of the session and everyone in my group agreed that we have allowed other things to come into the church and have removed ourselves from even foundational principles of our Christian Faith like sharing the Gospel and giving Salvation Altar calls at the end of our Sunday services.

For 10 years, I was part of a "mega-church" community, I even met my husband there. There were a lot of things that I took from my experiences there the good, bad, ugly & indifferent.

The mentality there was that the pastor wasn't approachable. He had a security team around him and the only way you were going to speak to him is if you stood at the front of the church after the service and you had about 30 seconds to talk to him. The ministry revolved around him and his media ministry. While they did these huge amazing music and drama productions ever year and so many people would be ministered by that; however, on the other side of it there wasn't any discipleship, no missions, no urban outreach... It all revolved around the Senior Pastor. Big names in ministry would come to visit this church to speak, but that was the extent of its true reach into the community.

The Word Says 'we will know them by their fruit...' Where's the fruit of these mega churches? Many of the leaders end up with no accountability, only "yes" men and women surrounding them. Many times its revealed that they have skeletons in the closet and the extra-curricular activities they are involved with many times bring shame not only to the church but also the Christian Faith.

Then when this happens people leave hurt, confused and abuse and don't ever want to step back in the church. Well, people would say, "if they were truly Believers, then..." But here's the problem with that... These people have confessed with their mouth and believed in their heart that Jesus is Lord and yet were not disciples or taught to know and love the Lord and no direction on how to live it out!

No wonder we have so many young people, brought up in church, that don't want to have anything to do with God or the church - they have a skewed view of it.

The church I attend now is large but by no means a mega-church. We've been part of this community for going on 4 years now. It has been awesome to be part of a community of

believers that love and serve one another. It did take as about a year to get to know people, but it is well worth the wait.

While you will never find a perfect church on earth, I think it is important that every Believer find a Church that is preaching the Word of God; the Ministry Leaders aren't egocentric and lead as a team; they are missions minded, do community outreach; disciple, teach and train up leaders just as Jesus did and aren't about making their name great only Jesus!.... whether a small church of 50 to 100 or a large church of 800 or even a mega church of thousands (I know they have to be out there) I believe the fruit will be the best!