

2006

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Recommended Citation

Dauer, Tysen (2006) "The Place of Power: The Christian Acquisition of the Roman Basilica," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 6 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol6/iss1/3>

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HOW CHRISTIANS DEAL WITH TIMES OF TRANSITION: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE FOURTH CENTURY BASILICA WITH THE MODERN MEGACHURCH

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Architecture provides a cultural window into peoples' thoughts, actions, and beliefs. This is especially true of religious architecture. The modern phenomenon of the "megachurch" has resulted from a period of transition for Christians which is strikingly similar to the situation which faced Christians in the 4th century A.D. How the early Christians dealt with their building needs and how modern Christians are dealing with theirs provides an insight into how both the practice of Christianity and the culture in which it is practiced has changed. Research showed that the situations in which these structures were built had much in common: a growing political acceptance, an explosion of converts to the church, and a desire to move from non-religious buildings (for the early Christians this was homes, for modern Christians it was schools, homes, and theaters) to buildings set aside primarily for religion. But whereas the basilica became a giant icon in itself the megachurch today tends to be "desacralized." That is, religious symbols and icons are kept to a bare minimum. The influence of politics, fellowship, missions, technology, theology, iconography, clergy/laity relations, and pop culture on the architecture of the megachurch show why and how Christians have dealt with these similar situations in such different ways.

“What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.”
Ecclesiastes 1.9

The Roman basilica and the megachurch may seem to be polar opposites on the religious architecture spectrum. A closer look reveals that the first public form of early church architecture and the modern megachurch share developmental parallels that grew and developed in similar cultural conditions. Despite these similarities there are also many architectural differences between the basilica and the megachurch: fellowship areas, stages, and a visual aesthetic of “desacrilization” all put the megachurch at odds with its historical predecessor. A comparison of the megachurch and basilica is ideal because the social climate of the megachurch and the basilica are similar.

At this point definitions for the terms “basilica” and “megachurch” are needed. There are actually three different uses of the word basilica:

- 1) The basilica as marketplace and/or judgment hall.
- 2) Basilica as an architectural term refers to a building with a main nave with two (or more) side aisles with a clerestory allowing in light.
- 3) The final definition of basilica is a religious one referring to the honorary papal title given to churches regardless of architectural form (Grundmann 63).

The first type of basilica described above existed in the Roman empire as early as 184 B.C. (Anderson 251). There was a common template on which they were designed. A bare-bones basilica typically had the following features: a central nave flanked by two (or more) side aisles. These side aisles are often divided from the nave by columns. Directly above the central nave was a clerestory, often with windows to allow light into the building. For the purposes of this paper the term basilica refers to the architectural form (definition two) unless otherwise noted. The most common definition of a megachurch is a church with an average weekly attendance of 2,000 people or more.

Even though these two forms of religious architecture developed in a similar way and exist in culturally similar times they are very different structures. What explains the differences? The answer is a complex one involving differing types of cultural power, doctrinal history, societal class structures, and psychology. By looking at what differentiates the basilica from the megachurch one can see how the common religion they house has changed and how believers’ attitudes towards the religion have changed.

The cultural similarities place both the basilica and the megachurch in a time and place where Christians were growing in numbers, gaining more political acceptance and power, holding similar stances on doctrinal issues, and were set in periods of transition for the nation or empire in which they were being built. I believe that these cultural similarities explain much in the way of architectural forms. However, the distinct differences between the megachurch and the basilica arise from the different types of power that Christianity possessed in the two eras.

In the 4th century A.D. until the Reformation, the Church and its clergy, arguably, held palpable power over the lives of not only its believers but also over the social structure of their day. Today, however, the megachurch cannot tap this “legitimate” source of power, but has to entice its worshippers into their churches causing the

megachurch to be built on the concept of church as business as Loveland and Wheeler describe:

“In accord with the ‘marketing orientation’ recommended by church growth experts, they regard the megachurch structures and its architecture as an advertisement for the ‘products’ and ‘services’ offered by the church” (128). Thus the building must meet its “consumers” expectations and demands if the church is going to be able to survive.

Studying the architecture of these two very different structures (the megachurch and the basilica) shows how the message and the perception of the message have changed. What has architecture to do with the reaction of religious peoples in times of transition? The words of architect David Oakley relate the relationship between belief and architecture well, “Architectural forms reciprocate what men believe” (164). The values, beliefs, and ideas of a group of people will be seen in the structures that they create. This reciprocation of beliefs happens naturally since structures are designed around the functions and ideas of those using them (today these functions and ideas often go through an intermediary: contracted architects).

To properly understand why the basilica was and remains such an important architectural form one must also understand the pre-basilican history of Christian worship (from the death of Christ to 313 A.D.). While the basilica church can be considered to be the first Christian church whose sole purpose was ministry, obviously worship and fellowship were going on before the basilica format was prevalent. Almost all scholars agree that this pre-basilica worship took place in the homes of individual believers (White 4).

Many theories have been proposed to explain the development of this pre-basilica house-worship. One of the earliest and most prevalent theories was proposed by A.C. Zestermann and G. Dehio. Their theory, often called the atrium house theory, was centered on the idea that the early Christian home worship format and architecture directly influenced the development of the basilica form when the latter form came into its own in the fourth century. This theory fell out of favor among art and architectural historians because the model on which the theory was based had no architectural evidence and did not account for the diversity of housing types. The theory had a lasting impact and persists even to the present among ecclesiastical historians (White 13-15). A later theory proposed by Schultze suggested that there was a four step process extending from the first house worshippers to the inauguration of the basilica:

- 1) Small groups meet in each other’s houses. No single house but a number of believers would open their homes to fellow Christians. The main source of documentation for this step is the book of Acts chapters 2-5.
- 2) In this step believers used the synagogue for missionary work and homes for worship proper. (See Acts chapter 20: 7-8). No architectural changes were made to accommodate worship in the homes that were being used.
- 3) Sometime between the first and third centuries A.D. houses began to be changed specifically to meet the needs of the church which met in them. Two adjacent rooms, for example, might be connected by removing the separating wall in order to provide a larger area for worshippers. The only surviving example of this stage (or of any pre-basilican Christian worship structure) is the Dura-Europos (Krautheimer 27).

- 4) Schultze proposes that in the middle of the third century basilicas begin to be built in larger cities (White 15).

Schultze's theory also went out of favor because his model stated that basilicas would have been used as religious buildings in a quantifiable number already in the third century. This date became increasingly viewed as far too early as tituli (title churches) began to be excavated. These tituli are early parish churches that are often found beneath the foundations of medieval churches (White 19-20).

As a result of this new archeological evidence, Richard Krautheimer developed a model to replace the outdated Schultze hypothesis. Krautheimer's model divides the development from house to basilica into four steps:

- 1) From 50-150 A.D. the early Christians worshiped in the homes of wealthy believers. The common meal or agape meal was probably held in the triclinium (dining room) at this stage. There were no specifically religious rooms in these homes. (Krautheimer wrote that, "Until AD 200, then, a Christian architecture did not and could not exist" (White 19)).
- 2) The second period (from 150-250 AD) was a time when homes were still being used but many were being adapted to the worshippers' needs. Other groups of believers purchased homes which were used primarily for worship. Krautheimer calls the house-churches of this period *domus ecclesiae* (house of the church).
- 3) From 250-313 AD this *domus ecclesiae* trend continued but the size of houses being used grew larger and larger.
- 4) Finally, the time from 313 AD on is designated as the early development of the basilica form for religious use. The very first example is believed by Krautheimer to be the Lateran basilica begun in 314 (Krautheimer 23-48).

There were still some issues that Krautheimer's model did not address or explain. The primary point of contention was the issue linking the development between the home-worship and the basilica. Many scholars believed that there was no direct link between the architecture of the basilica and the architecture of the *domus ecclesiae* for the same reasons that the atrium house theory was rejected. The most frustrating factor in all of this theory making is the lack of evidence. For example, the earliest hard physical evidence for any of the structural developments described in Krautheimer's theory above is the *Domus Europos* which he considered to be a *domus ecclesia* from the third period (White 21).

Even as the link between the *domus ecclesiae* and the basilica is being debated more and more, evidence suggests that there is a link between the architectures of the *domus ecclesia* and basilica:

- The *titulus Clementis* (Basilica San Clemente) was being used as a *domus ecclesiae* by the third century (White 114).
- The *titulus Byzantis* (Basilica SS. Giovanni e Paolo) is believed by Krautheimer to be an example of an early third or late second century religious structure which evolved into a basilica.
- Lullingstone villa in Roman Britannia is an example of a hybrid religious structure where one section of a home was set aside as a church (White 116).
- Other examples of homes which were modified into religious structures include the Church of Julianos (Umm el-Jimal, Syria) and the Church of Bishop Theodore (Aquileia, Istria) (White, 115).

The current belief is that these early Christian homes did have an influence on the development of the basilica but with a broad differentiation of influence which must be looked at on a case by case basis.

While the *domus ecclesiae* blazed new trails in the history of Christian religious worship, the more direct ancestor of the basilica is the so called “*Aula Ecclesiae*” or “hall of the church.” Like the basilica, the *aula ecclesiae* had three halls but each of the three halls in the *aula ecclesiae* was separated from the others walls while the basilica’s halls were open to one another. The stunning similarities between the *aula ecclesiae* and the basilica can be seen in the remains of a church beneath what is today San Crisogono in Rome (White 127-133).

The basilica as an individual and recognized form did not develop until after 313 A.D. as Krautheimer’s model suggested. In that year the pivotal Edict of Milan, “granted toleration to Christianity” (Ferguson 596). Now Christians had the legal power to profess their faith and display it publicly. According to both pagan and Christian writers early believers were already doing both of these things before the year 313. Christians had public places of worship in both Nicomedia and Bithynia (White 130). So while the Edict of Milan encouraged and legally validated the physical growth and development of Christian religious structures it did not create them.

Even though Constantine and his Edict did not create public worship centers he did in effect cause the basilica as a religious building to take form. As a leader of Rome, Constantine knew of the basilica from its original secular setting as a marketplace and judgment hall.

But the architecture of the basilica in the first sense (that of marketplace and/or judgment hall) was in actuality an incredibly diverse menagerie of deviations from the architectural pattern (definition two). The rubble of the Basilica Aemilia in the Roman Forum is one example, while the giant Basilica di Massenzio is a basilica of a different type: here there is only one aisle with walled chambers extending from this main aisle. Some of the earliest basilicas have an open air nave (Anderson 251). And the face of the basilica could be on either the long or the short side of the structure (Grundmann 33). There are basilicas with five aisles (Basilica Ulpia), with and without tribunals (both functioning and monumental (Pompeian basilica)), and some with a gable roof instead of a clerestory (Anderson 250-253)¹.

The role of this first type of basilica is almost as diverse as its architecture. The basilicas of the Roman empire were used not only for law administration but also as banking and stock brokering stations, offices for public magistrates, contracting and leasing, municipal and legal archives, public business, even a library (Basilica Ulpia) (Anderson 252-253). Because of its many roles the basilica was considered an essential even for smaller cities, and as a result would have been a sight that many early believers would have seen or at least heard about (Anderson 252).

More than just the advocate of the Edict of Milan, Constantine was himself a convert to Christianity as a result of his victory at Milvian Bridge in 312 A.D. which he attributed to God. Constantine and his family commissioned many important religious buildings in addition to the building of the first religious basilicas. The very first of his commissions in Rome was for what is today known as St. John’s Lateran Basilica.

¹ The name basilica is from the Greek meaning “king” and the earliest basilicas hold some similarities to the Greek portico but are generally regarded as a Roman architectural form (Grundmann 33).

Originally named the Constantinian Basilica of the Holy Savior, it is sometimes called the “Mother Church” because it became the nucleus of almost every succeeding Christian church. Thus, the fact that it is a basilica in architectural form is a point which cannot be overlooked. With its five aisles and central nave ending in an apse in addition to the clerestory, the building met the requirements for a basilica (Catanni 4). The elaborate structure which one can see today is not what early church-goers would have seen. Rather, successive generations of popes, other religious authorities, and wealthy patrons (including the Medici) commissioned original works of art and restorations which overlay the original interior of intricate mosaics. This lavish interior contrasted greatly with the plain exterior (Grundmann 67) which was later redesigned under Pope Clement XII (Vicchi 69). As time moved on the interior of the church grew more and more ornate not only because of the works discussed above, but also because of the tombs which later generations built into the structure (Catanni 11-15). The side chapels too became transformed as art and monuments competed with altars for attention.

Saint John Lateran is not the only place where this gradual matriculation of art and renovation has changed the essence of the original basilica. From St. Peter's in the Vatican to Santa Maria Maggiore, almost every early basilica now looks more like an art museum than a place of worship. Political insignia even found their way into some of the basilicas (the Medici coat of arms is especially present in Italian basilicas). Constantine also left his own mark on the basilicas. He endowed the churches in the empire with riches and niceties that they had never before needed, wanted, or had use for. With their new -found patron leading an empire, they soon found themselves with marble, mosaics, and spoils from ancient buildings (Grundmann 67).

The only formal change made to the architecture of the basilica as a civic building as opposed to a religious one was the addition of the transept. The transept cut through the nave either at the end of the nave (right before the apse) or (later) in such a manner so as to create a cruciform shape if viewed from above. Later, domes were used to cap the area where the nave and the transept met but these domes had little meaning in and of themselves. By the eighth century one can see that somewhere along the line this dome took on a meaning of its own. Here is a quote from Saint Germanos (8th century):

“The church is heaven upon earth, the place where the God of heaven dwells and moves. It represents the crucifixion, the sepulcher and the resurrection of Christ.” This interpretation held sway even with artist like Michelangelo (Smith 93). More and more iconography and art not only entered but changed the structure of the basilica itself so that before long basilicas have two or more transepts, multitudes of side chapels and a host of icons and relics.

- Lateran Basilica (313) holds to the basic basilica form (Krautheimer 46).
- S. Croce in Gerusalemme (329) also cast in a simple form (Krautheimer 50).
- St. Peter's (400) introduces the transept crossing the nave directly ahead of the apse (Krautheimer 53).
- Holy Apostles in Milan (382) also has transept, this time forming a cruciform with the nave (Krautheimer 82).
- St. John in Ephesus (450) has a complex apse area with an increased focus on the area of intersection between the nave and transept (Krautheimer 106).

As time went on more and more iconography, relics, and symbolism entered the basilica until they became what we see today: veritable art storehouses with little worship

still taking place. This natural progression was not left unchallenged. The most notable change came during the Reformation when the acoustical needs for the emphasis on preaching forced an adaptation of the traditional church forms (Ankerl 223). The new acoustical desires were not the only reason that the architecture of the Reformation was a break from the past: the “excessive” iconography caused some religious leaders to incite the people to destroy the art which was housed in the churches and basilicas.

The path which the early Reformation churches took was similar to the development of the basilica. First the Protestant believers would meet in homes and/or churches once controlled by the Catholic Church. As their numbers grew, larger facilities were needed and new structures were built. This process took much less time than its predecessor the basilica took to develop because of better technology allowing faster communication and the historical precedence of the basilica.

The tradition of a simpler worship setting continued in the European Protestant church and came into the new world with the Puritans and other protestant emigrants. The worship places which they built would later serve as the inspiration for the modern megachurch.

While some have also hailed the modern Megachurch as a “new” church with a “new” architecture, when one looks at its roots it appears to be a natural growth from the early revivalist meeting places. In their intriguing book *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch* authors Anne Loveland and Otis Wheeler trace the history of the megachurch from its true origins: the seventeenth century meetinghouse of the early Puritans. Like the modern megachurch, the Puritan meeting house was also described as a “new architectural creation” which set apart a place to worship God but avoided excessive “theatrical gaudiness” (Loveland Wheeler 5).

As was the case with the basilica, where people worshipped before they had separate facilities is essential to understanding how the future structure develops. So where were these Puritan worshippers before they had their revolutionary new churches? The answer again puts us into the believers’ homes. Indeed, it can be hard to tell the difference between some of the early meetinghouses and a home as the puritan architecture was little more than a restructured house. This lack of architecture creativity did not bother these Christians; rather, their notion of church did not involve a physical space or even a “sacred” space. A church was simple a group of believers regardless of where they gathered (Loveland Wheeler 7).

The history between the Puritan meetinghouse and the modern megachurch is a revealing one that has been broken down into four main parts by E. Brooks Holifield:

- 1) Comprehensive churches which include the whole community. Unity is emphasized and worshippers largely share a common culture.
- 2) The era of “devotional congregations” (1789-1870) was begun by the Second Great Awakening and resulted in the splintering of American Christianity into groups based on society, theology, etc.
- 3) From 1870-1950 mainstream religion in America made the church the social home of its members. Thus this period could be called the era of the social congregation. Church at this time was a place to go just like the mall is today: one could see friends, socialize, while many people joined religious groups in the church which were not always religious in nature (political, social welfare, etc.).

- 4) The participatory congregation lasted from 1950-1990. In this period lay-people began to take more and more leadership positions in the church resulting in the expansion of services the church could offer and opportunities for its members (McClymond 169).

By the time we reach the end of the fourth stage; the meetinghouse has become a full-fledged megachurch. The architectural timeline which accompanies the four stages is important:

- 1) The Puritan meetinghouse and before that, homes were the main church facilities. As stated before, the goal of these buildings was simple: provide a place for the church (assembly of believers) to meet.
- 2) Camp meetings, “tabernacles” (Second Great Awakening 1800-1830) and later theaters were used during this period (McClymond 82). The Gothic Revival (1840’s) was also a player at this time, signaling a retreat from the tabernacles and tent meetings used during the Awakening (McClymond 92) and a return to more “traditional” worship structures (both in architecture and iconography).
- 3) Following directly from the previous stage’s use of theaters the third era primarily used auditoriums for its gatherings.
- 4) While no single architectural style predominates, the auditorium church continued alongside more unique buildings such as North Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana which experimented with new shapes (elongated hexagon) and forms which emphasizes their mission (Loveland Wheeler 113).

Large gatherings in public places were a large part of the American religious scene from the second stage onward. Preachers such as Sunday and Graham and others acknowledged this tradition which continues even today (Herz 46-53).

During the second phase, one of the most intriguing forerunners of the megachurch was the Broadway Tabernacle. Holding 2,500 people, the Tabernacle was actually a renovated theater that encouraged a new worship component: the surveillance of others. This was a result of its seating arrangement which was kept intact from its earlier use as a theater. People could now see fellow worshippers with ease. This put extra pressure on the preacher as he was not necessarily the sole focus of the audiences’ attention (McClymond 91). The speaker now needed to put even more effort into keeping the interest of the listener since the listener was now more easily distracted by fellow worshippers.

There was another new component at work in the Broadway Tabernacle and other auditorium churches at the time: the pastor’s place of authority traditionally seen architecturally in the raised dais and pulpit was done away with as the theater’s stage put the pastor on an equal or lower physical level than the worshippers. In addition, the seating arrangement put the worshippers on the same physical level, often with a racially diverse crowd (Kilde 96) It is not a coincidence that at the same time a more socially involved and layperson lead community began to grow in the theater-church (Kilde 94-95).

The laity and clergy balance of power began to level, and at the same time many non-religious groups began to use the space for meetings and gatherings. Some of these groups were political in nature and became associated in the public’s eye with the church even though they were only renting the space. This association upset some church members as well, exacerbated by the fact that even some of the church’s decorations had

political overtones as a result of its renters. Antagonism between the public and groups who gathered at the church eventually lead to a riot during an antislavery meeting at the church (McClymond 95-99).

The Broadway Tabernacle was well liked by clergy and laity but was not copied architecturally due to the rise of the Gothic revival and the disintegration of the unity which the Second Great Awakening had ushered in (Kilde 91-92). The Broadway Tabernacle also became caught up in the Gothic revival and it moved into a new Gothic style church three miles up the street (McClymond 92, 102-107).

In many ways the modern megachurch is not so different in form from the Broadway Tabernacle with their theater style seating and eye level staging. But the modern associations of the megachurch were set by a church in Chicago called "Son City." The story of Son City (1972-1980) is an intricate one which involves the final step of Holifield's division of the development of the megachurch. The church went from a group of 35 people to 1000 in eighteen months by "present[ing] Christ in a creative way" (McClymond 178-179). This involved the use of separate spaces for newcomers and current believers, increased decibel use, secular and Christian music, competitive sporting events, drama, modern media technology, and a message that was relevant to non-churchgoers and youth.

These demands put strain on the rather traditional church which Son City was using at the time. But that was not the only thing that was being strained. The leaders of the youth movement which was expanding so rapidly (Hybels and Holmbo) were facing increased concern from the congregation that the property, especially the sanctuary, may have been misused. Physical damage had indeed been done to the sanctuary, especially when the winter games were moved indoors. Further spiritual damage had been done to some in the congregation when a Halloween party in the church used the baptistery as a witches' haunting place. The congregation was becoming split into two camps: those who felt that the developments were worth whatever damage had been done because the word was reaching more people, and those who believed that simple numerical growth was not as important as the fact that the building was being "misused" (McClymond 191-193).

The debate caused Hybels and Holmbo to leave the congregation (and found Willow Creek Church) and it became clear that the point of contention was a debate over the sacred. What was sacred and what objects were simply tools? The question arose throughout the tenure of Hybels and Holmbo because they often attempted to "desacralize" the church. That is, they tried to get rid of or hide overtly religious iconography and even traditional objects such as the choir loft and the crucifix (both of which became covered by a large projection screen) (McClymond 180). The affect of this "desacralization" became more and more evident as the megachurch family grew.

This aspect of the modern megachurch is the most often criticized (Slate, "An Anatomy of Megachurches"). Slate goes so far as to claim that megachurches have, "...turn[ed] their backs on tradition..." and recommends that they "...find appropriate architectural alternatives." The writer then attacks the designing attempt at the Los Angeles Catholic Church which it finds, "not inspirational" and compares the attempt like trying to translate Shakespeare into hip hop, i.e. not aesthetically pleasing.

This lack of religiosity in its architecture and iconography does not concern too many megachurch leaders. Rather, they, like their Puritan forerunners, define their church

in terms of its members/believers rather than on the basis of where they worship. Even so, is it true that the megachurch has turned its back on tradition?

Knowing where the megachurch comes from architecturally, it should not be viewed as an astonishing development but a natural one. The camp meetings have combined with the auditorium to create an indoor revival meeting area. The same aesthetic drive that inspired the early Puritans is at work today: building a place for the church to meet with only the essentials. But this describes only the worship area of the megachurch. The sanctuaries of these megachurches are inspiring only insofar as they are enormous. Most of these megachurches have an average attendance of at least 2,000 people with some as high as 30,000 ("Database" Texas).

Within the sanctuary a huge change has taken place in regards to the front focal point of the worship center when compared with the basilica. The altar area of the basilica derived from the judges raised platform in the days when basilicas were still courts of law. The church which adopted the building used this natural nucleus within the sanctuary to physically elevate the clergy above the level of the congregation. This arrangement has been shown to subliminally relate the power structure of the group to the people in the room (Hazard 292-293).

This arrangement fostered the idea that the clergy had power over the laypeople and also (very likely subconsciously) cultivated the "clergy as lawgiver" perspective. The worshippers no longer stood right next to their pastor (or apostle) and looked at them face to face but now viewed them from a distance and from below the clergy's eye level. This tradition of raised apse area persisted until the camp meeting of the great awakening in the early 1800's.

The Camp outline put the preacher not in a pulpit but in the center of activity and on an even level with the audience. This not only created a "one of the gang" impression but also allowed the preacher to move among his audience thus increasing the energy level of the crowd. In addition, the crowd was now seated around a stage rather than lined up behind the dais. This also had huge social impact on the congregation as members could not see each other's faces and therefore their emotions and expressions. As a result, churchgoers expected excitement in other's faces and could tell if others felt uninterested. This enhanced level of emotional contagion forced the worship service to ensure that people would have an "experience."

Today one can see this same process going on in many (but not all) megachurches. Auditorium style seating is used and the altar area is raised, but still lower than the level of the congregation as a whole. Today's charismatic leaders stroll among the aisles or at least wander about the stage. This is directly linked to the modern use of the pulpit, which is often "contemporary" in design and moveable. Examples of such pulpits can be seen in Speak the Word International (Golden Valley, Minnesota) and Westwood Churches (Chanhassen, Minnesota).

As suggested above there is more to a megachurch than its sanctuary, though this is often the nucleus of the church. The fellowship areas of the church are more important than ever before. This too should not come as a surprise when one considers that without an emphasis on fellowship members would soon get lost in the huge crowd of worshippers who surround them and could easily lead to a dehumanized and detached feeling among parishioners. As a result, a large percentage of megachurches' area is devoted to small group rooms, prayer rooms, welcome rooms, and other such areas which

make meeting and talking to other people unavoidable. One interesting example of this can be seen in the architecture of Grace Church (Eden Prairie, Minnesota). Realizing from the beginning that the fellowship areas would be an essential and important part of their ministry, the design team decided to turn the sanctuary 180 degrees and place a large fellowship area directly in front of the sanctuary's entrance so that in order for the churchgoer to get in or out of the worship center they must go through the fellowship area. With a relaxing and inviting view of a pond and hillside, the glass wall of the fellowship area has become one of the most popular areas of the church for parishioners. (It is interesting to note that the leaders who developed this idea acknowledge that while the fellowship area is liked by the churchgoers not many understand the careful reasoning behind it.)

Almost every church representative I spoke with acknowledged the lack of religious symbols (iconography) in their churches and were unapologetic for it. Only two churches, both Lutheran, expressed a desire to have more religious art in their buildings. The only piece of iconography which every church did have was a cross. Some claim that this lack of iconography is, at least in part, because they fear that the iconography may become an object of worship (Martin, interview). Others, like Son City, wanted as welcoming a place as possible for first time churchgoers and church skeptics who do not find such iconography appealing. The goal is to make the experience as pleasant, friendly, and relaxed as possible. This desacralization and secularization of religious space is the proposed fifth step of Holifield's model (McClymond 169).

This lack of iconography resembles the pre-basilical worship situation but for very different reasons. Before government sponsorship and public approval of Christianity there was little in the way of Christian religious visual art. And while there was a lack of a distinctly Christian art or architecture before Constantine, there were other art forms which were being used by Christians: literature and music being the most important. The lack of iconography and religious art in today's megachurches is the result of the business model on which they are built: they are there to please the customer and the customers both new and old feel uncomfortable with high levels of religious art (it belongs to the "stodgy" religion of their parents and grandparents). As a result iconography has not found a welcome home in many megachurches.

This emphasis on word and music by the early church can be seen in the megachurch today as well. As I visited these locations one of the first things which my tour guide would show me was the acoustics in the sanctuary. These churches spend thousands of dollars on getting the acoustics just right for their purposes, even giving up design, seating configuration, and lighting to suite the acoustician. Even the heating and cooling systems are carefully selected based on how little they will interfere with the acoustics of the worship area.

The broad diversity of megachurches is also not unlike the basilica situation in the fourth and fifth century. And the reason for this diversity is similar. While the *aula ecclesiae* and *domus ecclesiae* influenced how they may have been transformed into a basilica so also the former meeting places of the members of megachurches often influenced how they were built. A good example of this is Westwood Community Church whose members originally worshipped in the Chanhassen Dinner Theater and, when designing the church, wanted to capture some of that same feel in their new setting (Remington, interview).

The nature of the megachurch has much in common with the *domus ecclesiae* and the *aula ecclesiae* in that it is largely devoid of a distinct or recognizable art or architecture and is also like the basilica in its size, mission, and diversity.

There was in fact a common story being told by these megachurches. I found four common steps in this evolution from small gathering to megachurch:

- 1) Worshipers in this stage meet in private or small public, non-religious settings such as bar rooms, theaters, schools, and auditoriums. Usually the location is within the city.
- 2) In the second phase there is a desire to grow into a physically larger space spurred either by a growth in numbers or a location is found where growth will take place. Locations are investigated and options for a move are considered.
- 3) A location is selected and a “base building” is constructed which will be the center for further building and development. A large majority of the time the location is a suburban one (although example of megachurches within the city can be found as well (Cote, interview)).
- 4) In the fourth stage the predicted growth of the church mirrors the growth of the surrounding suburb resulting in a need for more physical space. Additions (modules) are made to the base building and the church often becomes a campus of sorts.

The developers of these megachurches are very particular about the location of their facilities and do an amazing amount of research on the area. From market assessments to ethnographic research the preparation at this stage is not that different from that of a business. This is another complaint that is often leveled at megachurches: they are run like businesses. Indeed, Westwood Community Church (Chanhassen, Minnesota) was the recipient of a Business of the Year award. This returns to issue of secularization and desacrilization, the fifth step of Holifield’s model. This entire step could be viewed as a business marketing solution used in a church setting. The megachurches justify their lack of iconography by saying that it is not only unnecessary but not desirable to people who may come to the church. So to get more people in the door to hear the word, the use of iconography is kept to a bare minimum. This was also the case with music at Son City where secular music was used to draw people into the church. The Son City experiment showed that the more de-churched they made the church the more members it had (McClymond 194). This is exactly what can be seen in much of a megachurch’s literature, iconography, and architecture today.

Should this be a concern? Again, it brings the discussion back to the question that Son City had to grapple with: are numbers the most important thing or can concerns for things sacred be placed on an equal or greater level? Most of the churches I visited were very clear in their mission/vision which usually includes three main parts:

- 1) A desire to make more disciples for Jesus Christ
- 2) A track describing the education of said disciples
- 3) So that they in turn can make disciples.

Nothing is worth more to most of these megachurch members than fulfilling this mission and vision.

While the mission and vision statements from all of these churches are similar they also have what are sometimes called “core values” or key words which describe their church (they are often “hooks” and use rhyme, alliteration, and other mnemonic

devices). It is in these core values that the physical and numerical strength of the congregations laid. The core values usually include the following:

- emphasis on the personal development and well being of the worshippers,
- social fellowship and small groups which serve as ministries,
- family values and care,
- community engagement, and
- world outreach.

These core values are the perfect marketing tools for the suburban areas in which these churches are often built. These church-goers are looking for a place to belong (to the community and something larger than themselves) and meet others while having their family well cared for.

Every innovation of the modern megachurch is a result of one of these values. As mentioned above the fellowship areas of the megachurch are large and many religious leaders suggest that even more fellowship areas are necessary (“Detailed Data”). These areas serve as relationship building and creation centers for the church. Fellowship areas in their many forms are pivotal to the megachurches’ existence: people need relationships within the church which can not be provided in the sanctuary due to the large numbers of congregants.

The focus on family is also reflected in the architecture of the megachurch. An extensive portion of building space is dedicated to Sunday School rooms and nursery centers (also, some churches have elementary or high schools or are planning on adding them (Martin, interview)). These children’s centers are elaborate and colorful. Wooddale Church has created a “forest” feeling in its children’s center, complete with a lodge and artificial forest grass. Every church visited was eager to show off its children’s facilities which they had clearly spent much time and money on.

As stated before, the combination of community with the church is nothing new. However in the example of the Broadway Tabernacle the building was rented-out out of necessity while today many megachurches are built with community ministry in mind. The thinking is this: if corporations, government, and schools use the building to bring thousands of people into their churches these newcomers will find them to be welcoming places and in turn be more inclined to attend a church (Franklin, interview; Remington, interview.)

Megachurches are also built around the sense of belonging in a much larger picture: the Christian worldview and mission. Almost every megachurch visited had some sort of physical representation or depiction of the mission work which it was sponsoring abroad. This component was especially emphasized in Speak the Word Church International where the sanctuary ceiling was hung with the flags of all the countries where the church is broadcasting its message.

The emphasis on personal growth, development, and well being has been well documented and is generally treated as a verbal message process. The stage and pulpit situation which was described above is the necessary framework for this message: it must put the pastor on a level with the congregation, he must be “accessible” to the audience (not physically covered by the pulpit), and the face of the speaker must be visible (humans judge reliability largely on nonverbal facial communication). The last goal is met through the use of large projection screens which make the face of the speaker visible and even extra large to all.

The architect and philosopher Pitirim Sorokin has theorized that there are three ways that humans look at art (including architecture):

- 1) As a celebration of God. This view is traditionally linked with the Middle Ages. The art from this standpoint is generally other worldly and full of symbolism with meaning and purpose for others who hold this view. Sorokin calls this view ideational.
- 2) The second form of art is sensate. Usually sensate art is focused on material things and fulfillment of physical desires. Thus it could be viewed as the opposite of the ideational view. Sensate art is often visual and full of emotion and exploits technology.
- 3) The Idealistic or median view is man-centered. Idealistic art focuses on the creativity of the human mind and can be considered a combination of ideational and sensate art forms. Idealistic/median art often tries to blend and transform ideas to fit with the artist's ideals (Oakley 165).

I believe that the supposed "newness" of the megachurch is not really new at all but simply non-traditional way for churches to look at and construct its surroundings. Unlike the churches of the past where no expense was spared in order that the building and art may glorify God, megachurches today are blending the ideational view with the sensate in order to bring in and maintain disciples who live in a very sensate world. This blending is by its very definition the third view of looking at art: idealistic/median.

There is another way to look at this situation. What motivates people to go to a church (however one defines it) for the first time? What motivated first time churchgoers in the past? There were a host of reasons for the basilica worshippers: growing political prominence of Christianity, career opportunities (Constantine was a Christian and thus one may think that being a fellow Christian could help one's chances of getting a government job), fear of persecution (By 395 A.D. Emperor Theodosius had banned paganism (Chadwick 58)), the spectacular building itself, or the message itself. Such an array of motivators were not present during the time of the *domus ecclesiae*. Instead one was either there for the message that they preached or the possibility of partaking in some of the communal goods which they shared. The megachurch too has its own set of motivators: the message, friends, family, children's needs, location, band/music, charismatic preachers/leaders, social events, small groups, or a host of other reasons.

The point here is to observe that the modern megachurch leaders know that these motivators exist and use them to bring people inside the doors. Once a person has gone to a church once or twice what makes them go back again? For the worshippers in the *domus ecclesiae* and before, the message is the only thing that would keep a person coming back. These early Christians' communal goods were enough to live on but nothing extravagant. The reasons for continued attendance and maybe even membership in either the basilica or the megachurch on the other hand remain the same as the motivators which inspired people to go for the first time.

It is clear from the interviews and research I have done that the leaders of the megachurches know these motivators for both first attendance and retention. As a result, and as should be expected from their mission statements and visions, these motivational factors are used and even emphasized in order to encourage new and current members. Take a look at any pamphlet provided by a megachurch and you will see almost every one of those details touched on; these churches strive to be family centered, close to

home, allow connection to friends, offer contemporary and engaging music, focus on charismatic leaders, present multiple happenings each day, and present a myriad of social groups to join.

The leaders of the basilica in the fourth and fifth century also knew what motivated people and it shows in their buildings. People were awed by the splendor and impressed by the great size and pomp of the basilica. This awe only continued to increase until it the public fascination moved on to other modes of power and expression. As stated before the over the top basilicas eventually lead to a popular disdain of their excess which was balanced by the Reformation and its more simple approach to religious architecture.

The danger for megachurches to day is twofold: the first is the same one that faced the basilica: the message can be lost among all the other motivators, no matter how noble they may seem. The second danger is that the desacralization will continue to spread to the remaining forms of religious expression: music and word. If the megachurches do not face these issues the result may be a religious black hole in the American society and/or a reformation of some kind.

There is reason to believe that some megachurches are slowly beginning to use more iconography. The gothic preoccupation with light for example has found a modern counterpart in the enormous glass sanctuary of the Crystal Cathedral (Garden Grove, California). And one of the most stunning examples I found was inside the sanctuary of Wooddale Church (Eden Prairie, Minnesota) where the roofline above the balcony seats is identical to that of the earliest basilicas. Just as the Broadway Tabernacle gave way to the Gothic revival, perhaps the megachurch will turn towards a similar revival.

It is clear is that while the basilica and the megachurch share developmental parallels and cultural conditions the desacrilization of the megachurch has lead Christian architecture to a break with past forms. Only time will tell which path the megachurch will take: towards further desacrilization or a return to traditional iconography and architectural forms.

“Is there anything of which one can say,
‘Look! This is something new’?
It was here already long ago;
it was here before our time.”
Ecclesiastes 1.10

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