

SMALL GROUPS IN BIG CHURCHES

by

Nancy J. Martin

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I alone am responsible for any errors and omissions remaining this work.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Joseph F. Hayes,  
whose faith and optimism are an enduring inspiration to me.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation advances our understanding of the structure of social relations between small groups and the larger organizations within which such groups are situated. Specifically, I examine structures of leadership and authority to gain an in-depth understanding of group organization in one nondenominational and one Southern Baptist megachurch. Methods include in-depth interviews with church clergy, staff, and group leaders; participant observation in groups and other church activities; and a written survey for group leaders. Using this combination of methods, I investigate how small groups are structured in terms of their connections to the megachurches within which they reside. I examine the extent to which the church staff provides oversight and exerts control over groups, and I connect variation on this dimension to how groups relate to their members and to the outside world.

My findings include, first, that market metaphors permeate the organization of groups in these two megachurch organizations. The diffusion of ideas and practices from other institutional realms is notable in these two sites, and this may be true for megachurches more generally. Second, I argue that understanding strictness in religious groups is at least as much about the structure of relations between church leadership and membership as it is about beliefs. Third, small groups in megachurches look very much like small groups in American religion more generally, and church oversight may not make much difference in solving problems in small groups identified in previous research. Finally, I find that the level of oversight and control exerted by church

leadership on the organization of groups may have a critical influence on the function of groups. Loose and tight connections appear to encourage a more outward and inward focus, respectively.

Sociologists studying religious strictness or small groups in any setting should pay particular attention to the structure of relations connecting groups to the larger organizations within which they reside. Religious leaders interested in organizing groups of members should understand that the structure they create to connect with group leaders is at least as important as beliefs they teach leaders, in terms of influencing the focus of the groups.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

How are we to make sense of the contemporary social fact of “megachurches”? What happens when a religious congregation grows beyond hundreds and into the thousands? Megachurches, while not new, are a growing phenomenon – growing in two senses. The size of these large Protestant congregations is getting bigger – increasing the upper limit of what it means to be a single congregational unit, and the rate of their appearance on the American religious landscape – that is, the total number of megachurches – has grown dramatically in the last several decades (Vaughan 1993; Thumma 2000; Loveland and Wheeler 2003; Twitchell 2004; Chaves 2006).

One much-touted characteristic of most megachurches are their extensive lists of classes, social and support groups – a dazzling array of choices, seemingly “something for everyone” (Thumma 1998). Researchers have argued that the small group movement is one of the most important religious movements of the late twentieth century. Forty percent of Americans (approximately 75 million adults) report involvement in one or more small group (Wuthnow 1994a). The vast majority of such groups are connected in some way or another with religious congregations. In fact, commentators regularly attribute the success of the contemporary megachurch to the strategic use of such small groups. Limited attention, however, has been paid to small groups in the emerging literature on the megachurch.

There already exists a fair amount of research on small groups. Prior research has provided a wealth of information on who joins small groups and how widespread

participation is in the United States (Wuthnow 1994a). Additionally, some researchers have examined the positive effects of small group participation (see, for example, Krause et al. 2001). The classic text on small groups is Wuthnow's (1994a) *Sharing the Journey*. Its companion volume, *I Come Away Stronger*, provides rich ethnographic detail on 14 small groups. The aim of the case studies in this text was "to understand how the group functioned, what drew people to it, and how it contributed to the spiritual formation of its members" (Wuthnow 1994b:x). This research, however, does not situate small groups in churches. Even though the authors recognize that small groups are frequently located inside congregations, researchers have not examined the connections between groups and churches.

Observers of megachurches have noticed the importance of small groups to these very large congregations. A favorite saying of many megachurch leaders is some version of the following: 'as we grow bigger, we must get smaller.'. In fact, advocates and commentators regularly attribute the success of the contemporary megachurch to the strategic use of such small groups (Cordle 2005; Gladwell 2005; Sharlet 2005). Joining a small group is one of seven key steps to gaining commitment from "unchurched Harry" as outlined by Willow Creek, one of the largest American megachurches, famous for its "seeker services" (Pritchard 1996). We know very little, however, about how these small groups actually function, and how they are connected to the churches within which they are situated.

This project examines small groups within sponsoring congregations, specifically those in very large churches. On the one hand, previous research on small groups has not

studied the groups in their larger congregational settings. On the other hand, research on megachurches has not focused in-depth on the small groups within them. My project brings these two literatures together by studying such groups as they are situated in sponsoring congregations.

Among other things, this project addresses the issue of size, authority, and strictness. Classic church-sect theory contrasts the small, strict, conservative, and world-rejecting sect with the large, less strict, liberal, and world-embracing church (Troeltsch [1931] 1960). From this perspective, the phenomenon of megachurches presents a paradox. Large size would seem to work against what is generally thought of as a more rigorous Christianity (Thumma 2000).

Contrast the megachurch with a well-known American-born religious group. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) is known for its religious strictness. The church has formalized systems of monitoring member behavior, for example, attendance cards at Sunday worship services, along with consequences for failure to meet expectations, such as loss of 'temple privileges'. Along with its strict orientation to member behavior, the LDS Church has a clear policy on size. When a Ward (the LDS term for congregation) reaches about 500 people, it splits into two. This policy recognizes a basic tenet from management theory, span-of-control (Drucker 1954: 139). To the extent that the leader of each Ward needs to exercise control over a set of congregants, the number of individuals 'reporting to' a particular 'manager' is limited.

The megachurch, however, sets no such limits and seems to thrive on its own enormous growth. If people flock to megachurches in part out of a desire to find a

stricter, more serious version of Christianity than they might find elsewhere (Thumma 1996), how can it be that they find this in 2,000 person churches? Do small groups create a solution to the span-of-control problem through tight ties with the larger congregational structure? Do small groups reinforce a strict message from the larger congregation through content, activities, and/or peer pressure? Do small groups integrate members into the larger church? Questions like these about the connections between small groups and their congregations are central to my research.

The project engages a second important theme, gender and religion. Some megachurch observers argue that small groups have specifically gendered implications. Miller (1997) suggests that women in the Vineyard Fellowship do not chafe against restrictions on their serving in the highest leadership structures of the church because they have countless outlets to lead women's groups. Not only are there opportunities to lead small groups, but in some cases larger women's umbrella groups number in the thousands. Twitchell (2004) uses a marketing perspective and focuses specifically on men. He argues that megachurches are engaged in successful branding in part because they have geared a product explicitly to men. Small groups in megachurches provide many opportunities for men to be with men and to be expressive in these private small group settings. Although I will not address these issues in depth, I do explore the role of gender in the organization of small groups in these two sites.

In order to provide a detailed account of small groups in these churches, other questions I address include: Who attends and who leads small groups? How stable are the groups? To what extent are their activities and emphases coordinated by, or

consistent with, the larger church? How important are small groups to the church and how is this evident? What resources do churches provide small groups, in terms of space, funds, training or materials? What organizational structures support small groups and link them to the professional staff?

Using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a systematic survey of small group leaders, I explore classic themes in the sociology of religion while gathering rich data on two of the most important phenomena on the contemporary American religious landscape: small groups and megachurches. Importantly, I extend what we know about both these entities by focusing on their interdependence.

## **Background and Existing Research**

### *Megachurches in the United States*

While large Protestant congregations have existed in various historical periods, the explosive growth of megachurches has occurred primarily since the 1980s (Vaughan 1993). Following Thumma (2000), I consider megachurches to be congregations with an average weekly worship attendance of 2000 or more. Thumma (1996) argues that these congregations have a distinctive pattern of organization, programmatic ministries, and membership relations, and that megachurches hold special place in the American religious imagination (479).

Megachurches tend to be conservative in terms at least of biblical literalism. In a study of 153 megachurches through the Faith Communities Today Project, Thumma (2000) found that 92% of congregations reported that the Bible is absolutely foundational as a source of authority. In the same study, 48% of congregations identify as

Evangelical, 25% as Charismatic or Pentecostal, and 12% as Moderate. Despite their large size, 72% of megachurches in a 2005 national study report that their church “is like a close-knit family” (Thumma et al. 2006: 7). Small groups are reported by 94% of these megachurches, and 50% indicate that these groups are central to their mission (Thumma 2000). Nationally, the largest category of megachurches is nondenominational (34%), followed closely by those affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention or SBC (16%) (Thumma et al. 2006). I chose the two sites for this study to reflect this national picture. The first is nondenominational, the second is Southern Baptist, and both self-identify as evangelical.

In this project, I add to our existing knowledge on megachurches with an explicit focus on small groups, organizational structure, and authority. Through a focus on small groups, I begin to unravel the puzzle of size, strictness and sense of community that characterizes the American megachurch.

### *Small Groups in American Religion*

One important dimension in the organization of small groups in megachurches is the amount of control exercised by the church over the groups. At the extreme of high control is the cell group model which attempts to incorporate every church member into a small group or *cell*, often with a hierarchical structure connecting cell groups to the larger church (Cordle 2005). The largest church in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea, is formed from this model. Schaller (2005) differentiates between cell group churches and other churches with small groups: “Cell groups are not just another program of the cell church – they are the basic unit and expression of the church” (23). Although

systematic national data on small group programs is not presently available<sup>1</sup>, true cell group megachurches seem to be rare in the United States (Cordle 2005). There does appear to be great variation, however, in the level of control exercised by the church and expectations set for small groups. Small groups appear to be more voluntaristic in many megachurches. In addition, in the voluntaristic model, small groups are more likely to be organized around an incredible diversity of themes and activities: not only Bible studies, but also hiking groups and scrap-booking groups, for example.

Wuthnow (1994) argues that the small group movement relates to two important themes in American society – the quest for community and yearning for the sacred. He finds that small groups meet needs for both of these desires, yet the groups are simultaneously reshaping our ideas about community and the sacred. Small groups provide levels of intimacy and emotional support that past generations sought in families, neighborhoods, and ‘tribes.’ As American society becomes more mobile and rootless, small groups provide a sense of community and enables this mobility since small groups are likely to be available in the next town or city. At the same time, while members may faithfully attend a weekly Bible study or 12-step group, the commitment to the specific group may be quite shallow. If conflict arises, for example, one may simply find a new group. Wuthnow (1994) points out that this is quite different from the relationships with family or tribe. Shallow commitment is a critique commonly leveled at megachurch attenders (Warren 2005).<sup>2</sup> However, some scholars argue that the megachurch, like a

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<sup>1</sup> A future extension of this project will be a survey of a representative sample of megachurches nationally to collect this kind of systematic data on the types of small group programs offered.

<sup>2</sup> Saddleback Pastor Rick Warren was reporting on and disputing the charge of shallowness in this 2005 interview.

shopping mall, provides religious consumers the opportunity to shop around while remaining under one roof (Dalton 2002; Twitchell 2004). It is possible, then, that a shallow commitment to a particular group may be accompanied by a stronger commitment to the umbrella organization.

Research on small groups has provided a wealth of information on who joins small groups and how widespread is the participation in the U.S. (Wuthnow 1994a).<sup>3</sup> Wuthnow finds that women are more likely to participate in small groups than men (44% vs. 36%). This is true of women's religious involvement more generally. Small group participation is fairly similar across racial/ethnic, age, and religious affiliations (Wuthnow 1994a: 46; 111).

National studies of congregations have provided an overview of the kinds of small groups that exist in churches (Chaves 2004; Ammerman 2005). Small groups are certainly not limited to megachurches. Chaves (1998) found that 73.5% of all religious congregations in the United States reported small groups of one type or another that meet at least monthly. From the perspective of attenders in American congregations, the percentage is higher: 88.7% of religious attenders are in congregations that offer some sort of small group.<sup>4</sup> Ammerman (2005) also documents the existence and variety of small groups. In a national study of 549 congregations, she finds that 57% have life stage groups, 24% have activity-based groups, and 17% offer problem assistance groups, which includes support and self-help groups (Ammerman 2005: 58).

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, some researchers have examined the positive effects of small group participation (see, for example, Krause et al. 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I calculated this figure from the *National Congregations Study* (Chaves 1998).

Small groups exist in religious congregations of various sizes, and in fact, small groups are not limited to churches at all. Small groups may meet in community centers, bookstores, or at the neighborhood park. Wuthnow (1994a), however, finds that somewhere between one-half and two-thirds of all small group members are in groups that have a connection to a religious group or tradition.

Small groups in churches are not new. If we include classes in our conception of small groups, we might consider the 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church of Chicago. At the turn of the last century, this congregation had young men's and women's clubs, and offered evening classes in civics, sewing, salesmanship, business law, shorthand, and typewriting (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 72). Wuthnow argues, however, that small groups in contemporary society are an important site for religious expression in the present context of larger societal forces which make Americans more mobile and less rooted. Wuthnow's research focuses on the individual and the small group. In this study, however, the intention is to better understand small groups *as they are situated* in sponsoring congregations, and especially in megachurch congregations.

### *Small Groups in Big Churches*

If megachurch pundits are to be believed, small groups are critical to the success of large churches. According to Lyle Schaller (1992; 2000), a widely read church-growth consultant, large churches have the resources to provide both choice and intimacy through their small groups programs. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback church in California, reports that his congregation has 82,000 members and 2,600 small groups in

83 cities.<sup>5</sup> He promotes the importance of small groups, not just for large churches, but for Western Christianity more broadly:

You know we've had two Great Awakenings in the history of America and we're a hundred years overdue for the next one. If there is a second Reformation in the Church and a third spiritual awakening in the world or in America, it will come through two words – small groups (Pew Forum on Religion, May 23, 2005)

In fact, small group programs in megachurches like Saddleback are particularly interesting. Small groups might explain Scott Thumma's paradoxical finding that 80% of the members surveyed in Chapel Hill Harvester megachurch report that they "felt cared about... [that they were] not just another number" (1996: 512). In addition, small groups in megachurches are interesting because their existence appears to be the "first line of defense" of megachurch proponents and leaders when confronted with those who might question or critique the anonymity or shallowness of very large churches.

This project is focused on the intersection of two interesting and important features of the contemporary American religious landscape – the widespread involvement of Americans in small groups of various types (Wuthnow 1994) and the growing phenomenon of very large Protestant churches, or megachurches (Vaughan 1993; Thumma 2000; Chaves 2006). An important contribution of this dissertation is an in-depth understanding of how groups are structured inside megachurches. However, small groups in large churches relate to larger sociological questions. The next section will review theories and debates that inform this project.

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<sup>5</sup> Reported in a 2005 interview, as an invited speaker in a Pew Forum Conference.

## Theory

The church is an institution which has been endowed with grace and salvation as the result of the work of Redemption; it is able to receive the masses and adjust itself to the world... The sect is a voluntary society, composed of strict and definite Christian believers bound to each other by the fact that all have experienced 'the new birth.' These 'believers' live apart from the world, are limited to small groups, emphasize the law instead of grace. (Troeltsch [1931] 1960): 993).

Sociologists of religion contrast small, strict religious sects with larger and more lax churches (Weber 1978; Troeltsch [1931] 1960); Johnson 1963), and they typically assume that size is causally related to social control and strictness, with strictness declining as size increases. From this perspective, the contemporary American megachurch appears to be somewhat of a puzzle. Its large size contrasts with what its adherents consider to be a more serious Christianity that is more strict and more demanding (Thumma 1996). Most observers resolve this puzzle – how is it possible to be big and strict – by pointing to the many small groups operating within megachurches. But we in fact know very little about how small groups operate inside these very large churches, and this research is designed to fill that gap in our knowledge.

Are small groups the “glue” that holds megachurches together? And if so, how do they accomplish this feat? Similar questions are raised by Hechter et al. (1992) in “The Attainment of Global Order in Heterogeneous Societies.” Focusing on the state as the site of global order, and using religious fringe groups as illustrations to support their theory, the authors argue that global order is produced through many and diverse local orders. Specifically, they claim that local orders may deviate widely from one another as

long as the deviance does not threaten global order. They contrast this rational-choice network thesis with a Durkheimian approach which considers global order to be produced culturally through processes of consensus and internalization. Although I do not test these hypotheses directly, this examination of small groups in the megachurch setting provides the opportunity to explore these questions. The following sections consider these theoretical perspectives in greater detail.

*Religious Group Size, Religious Authority, and Strictness*

The project engages classic work in the sociology of religion. Troeltsch ([1931] 1960) contrasts the small, strict, conservative<sup>6</sup> and world-rejecting sect with the large, less strict, liberal and world-embracing church. Niebuhr ([1924] 1959) extended this typology to develop a maturing process – a path along which sect grows into church. Johnson (1963) argued that religious groups could be understood as existing on a single dimension – the extent to which the group accepted or rejected the surrounding social environment. In his view, for example, Catholics in American society are more sectarian than most mainstream Protestant groups. Although these theories differ, each engages a classic Weberian insight about religion and class. World-rejecting religious groups (sects) appeal to those without high status in the world, offering them meaning for their suffering, alternative measurement of status, and promise of eternal reward. World-embracing religious groups (churches), on the other hand, appeal to the elite by endorsing their status as evidence of God’s favor.

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term “conservative” here in the current conventional sense, meaning traditional moral or social stances versus liberal. Troeltsch actually used “conservative” to describe churches, meaning that they embraced the existing social order, while the sect is more radical and set against it.

In addition, although theorists have developed different understandings of church and sect, size is generally considered to be important. In particular, classic church-sect theory contrasts the small, strict, conservative<sup>7</sup> and world-rejecting sect with the large, less strict, liberal and world-embracing church (Troeltsch [1931] 1960). Thus the relatively new and growing phenomenon of megachurches presents a paradox. The large size is in contrast with what is generally thought of as a more conservative orientation (Thumma 2000). People flock to megachurches in part out of a desire to find a stricter, more serious version of Christianity than they might find elsewhere (Thumma 1996). Yet the large size of megachurches seems counterintuitive to ideas about strictness.<sup>8</sup>

The vast majority of megachurches are associated with conservative denominations or traditions. Their conservatism or apparent ‘strictness’ seems a contradiction to both their very large size, and to their reported membership which appears to be solidly middle class (Thumma 1998; 2000). On the other hand, recent theories suggest that strictness could be responsible for their explosive growth. Following Kelley’s (1972) thesis that strict churches make for stronger churches, Iannaccone (1994) developed a rational choice argument suggesting that strictness reduces the classic problem of “free-riding” in voluntary organizations, thus making strict groups strong.<sup>9</sup> But is free-riding really reduced in a congregation that seats 2000 plus people at weekly worship services? This seems unlikely. In fact, some authors (Thumma 1996) have suggested that megachurches (perhaps very much unlike other congregations)

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<sup>7</sup> See note 6 above.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, analysis of national data on congregations (Chaves 1998) shows that megachurches are significantly less likely to report certain religious rules, including those about alcohol (Martin 2005).

<sup>9</sup> This theory has been criticized as inherently tautological (See Marwell 1996), and empirical studies have had mixed results (Olson and Perl 2001; 2005).

welcome free-riders, that weekly visitors who do not participate in the life of the congregation make their own contribution simply by their presence. The large size at worship services becomes a social vortex that drawing others to the church (Ostling in Thumma 1998). The concept of free-rider is thus problematized in the large church setting. Nevertheless, rational choice theories about strictness inform this project in that I question whether or not small groups create strictness among participating megachurch members.

This project explores small groups in part as they relate to the authority structures of congregations. Do small groups create a solution to the span-of-control problem through tight ties with the larger congregational structure? Do small groups reinforce a strict message from the larger congregation through content, activities, and/or peer pressure? These questions also relate to debates over the sources of order in both small and large groups.

#### *Local Order and Global Order*

The production of local order creates a largely unintended by-product for large societies: social order on a global scale... Local order always will contribute to global order, regardless of the norms of local groups (Hechter et al. 1992).

Through an in-depth analysis of small groups as they are situated in very large congregations, this study explores claims from competing paradigms. In “The Attainment of Global Order in Heterogeneous Societies,” the authors consider the

problem of global order and contrast a rational choice<sup>10</sup> with a Durkheimian perspective (Hechter et al. 1992). The former considers order to be the result of individual decisions to give up certain freedoms (costs) in order to gain securities (benefits). The latter, on the other hand, sees order resulting from consensus on and internalization of a shared set of values. Hechter et al. accept the basic premise of rational choice theory, but expand upon it using a network approach. The authors argue that individual rational choice decisions occur not globally, but through a network of local orders. In this way, local groups may be organized around divergent, even deviant orders that do not correspond with global order. Unless such local orders threaten the larger global order, however, such local orders actually contribute to the larger global order. The authors use the example of fringe religious groups in the United States to illustrate their point. The Hare Krishnas, with norms and values far from that of mainstream Americans, contribute to global order even more than a mainstream Protestant congregation. Hare Krishnas members would likely be cut adrift without their ties to the religious group, while Protestant churchgoers are connected to the larger social order through other small networks such as families, workplaces and the like. The authors argue that heterogeneous societies are understandable through a rational choice framework and network approach. This project seeks in part to understand to what extent the American megachurch is a heterogeneous social form, perhaps comprised of divergent subgroups, and to what extent it is homogeneous. By focusing on small groups, this study explores competing explanations

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<sup>10</sup> While Hechter et al. use a network approach to expand upon the rational choice perspective, individual-level rational choice theory has been the site of theorizing and contention on the specific issue of strictness and individual commitment and group strength. See for example, Kelley 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Marwell 1996; Olson and Perl 2001, 2005.

about the production of global order. In doing so, the project connects with major sociological questions about how individuals are organized into groups, both small and large.

*Large Organizations and the Manufacture of Primary Groups*

Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley introduced the notion that human nature is not an individual phenomenon, but rather could only be comprehended socially, particularly through an understanding of primary groups, the basic social groupings within which children are socialized. Foreshadowing Wuthnow's research on small groups, he suggests that adult associational groups are an important part of a mobile society:

In our own society, being little bound by place, people easily form clubs, fraternal societies and the like, based on congeniality, which may give rise to real intimacy... Where there is a little common interest and activity, kindness grows like weeds by the roadside (Cooley 1909: 26).

Moreover, he notes the emotional importance of such groups as a potential place where intimate ties may be formed.

Some leaders of large organizations put these kinds of insights to work in attempting to manipulate small groups inside their organizations. Shils and Janowitz (1948), for example argue that the tenacity of German soldiers in WWII was *not* related to the persuasiveness National Socialist political ideology. Instead, the loyalty of soldiers to the cause was due to “the steady satisfaction of certain **primary** personality demands afforded by the social organization of the army” (281). Military leaders recognized this at the time, and made the tactical decision to leave units fighting despite being depleted of manpower, as adding

new troops to existing units would disrupt unit cohesion and make desertion or surrender more likely. Studying Confederate soldiers in the Civil War, Bearman (1991) finds that unit cohesiveness has the opposite effect. Comparing Confederate companies that were created from particular communities to those that were not, Bearman finds that as the war progressed, community-based companies were likely to see the resurgence of local identities over confederate ones, and these companies had higher rates of desertion. While unit cohesion in the preceding examples had differing effects, both studies emphasize the importance of small group bonds. This project contributes to this line of inquiry and specifically to the question: what happens when large organizations strive to manufacture small group cohesion intended to serve the larger entity?

#### *Religion, Culture, and Gender*

Historical studies of wartime, as well as rational choice theories, such as the theory of local and global order presented above, typically ignore questions of gender. This project, however, attends to questions about gender explicitly. Scholars of religion have documented ironies of women's religious participation, in which they are disproportionately overrepresented as religious participants and dramatically underrepresented in positions of formal leadership. This study considers women's leadership inside very large churches. Although megachurches are dominated by men, by virtue of the size of these churches, there are often many opportunities for women's leadership at various levels. In addition, at least one scholar has claimed that the successful offering of particular opportunities for male congregants is central to the

success of the megachurch phenomenon (Twitchell 2004). This project explores gender in terms of leadership inside very large churches, as well as how and to what extent gender is important to the leadership, composition, and content of small groups.

In addition, gender is considered as one kind of possible expectation from religious teachings. It is well-documented that traditional patriarchal gender roles are associated with (and perhaps even a defining characteristic of) conservative religious groups (see, for example Riesebrodt 1993). However, Miller (1997) suggests women exercise considerable leadership in their relations toward large women's groups in what he calls 'new paradigm' churches. While this project will not provide definitive answers to questions about gender and religious participation, the research does examine both the gender composition and gendered content of small groups. The full set of research questions guiding this project is listed in the next section.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this project is small groups as they are situated in sponsoring megachurch congregations. What are the links between small groups and their congregations? What do the groups do? How do small groups compare between megachurches with and without national affiliation, and between megachurches who exercise more or less control over the small group program? I elaborate on these main questions below:

- Composition:
  - Who attends small groups and who leads them?
  - What is the gender composition of members and leaders?

- Connections:
  - What authority structures link small groups to the staff of the congregation?
  - What resources in terms of space, funds, training and materials do congregations provide to small groups?
  - To what extent (if at all) are small groups integrated into the congregation's vision or mission?
  - To what extent (if at all) are the teachings and message of weekly worship services reinforced through small group meetings and activities?
- Content:
  - What do small groups do? What happens when they meet?
  - What topics are discussed, what activities undertaken?
  - To what extent is the content of small groups explicitly (or implicitly) gendered?
- Comparisons:
  - How do small groups compare between megachurches that are and are not affiliated with a national denomination?
  - How do small groups between megachurches that exercise more or less control over their small group programs?

These detailed questions will support two main lines of inquiry in this project. First, I intend to provide a detailed picture of the structure of groups inside very large churches, a phenomenon about which we currently know very little. Second, in doing so, I hope to shed light on several theoretical questions including the relationship between

religious group size and strictness, the maintenance of global orders, and the manufacture of social groups. The next section provides brief summaries of the dissertation chapters.

### **Chapter Overview**

In Chapter Two, I connect key research questions to research design decisions, including site selection, research methods, and analysis. The study includes two megachurch research sites which were chosen for their contrast on two dimensions: affiliation (or not) with a national denomination, and how tightly or loosely the church strives to structure the connection between its small group program and the larger church. Research methods include in-depth surveys with pastors, staff, and small group leaders; written surveys for small group leaders including questions about the groups, the leaders themselves, and network data on leader connections to church staff; participant observation in small groups, worship services, classes, and orientations; and analysis of published materials including newsletters, training materials, and sermon notes.

Chapter Three, “Big Faith in Small Groups,” is an in-depth look at the first megachurch site, providing an overview of the organization in terms of its history, theology, and leadership. The section details Desert Christian’s philosophy on small groups called “Free Market Philosophy.” The church’s ‘big faith in small groups’ refers both to the heavy emphasis placed on “life groups” at Desert Christian, as well as to the organization’s laissez faire approach to its small group program. The church considers its program to be highly successful with more than 100 diverse life groups connected with the church. Based on survey, interview, and participant observation data, these leaders appear to be a highly committed group. Life groups, however, are intentionally open to

outsiders. As such, these groups do not consistently integrate members culturally with the larger church. At times, the openness becomes a venue for recruitment, and the church gains new members through its life groups. At other times, however, it appears that life groups create the effect of a community center on the church campus.

Chapter Four is a detailed description of Harbor Baptist, the second research site, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. This section details its history, organizational structure, and theology. They describe their identity as a “Sunday School Church,” and recently decided to ‘return to their roots’ by focusing all of their resources on “the Sunday morning experience.” This includes the large worship services as well as Adult Bible Fellowships (aka, Sunday School). This shift in focus involved a change in philosophy which supports small group creation in the church solely through the medium-sized Adult Bible Fellowship groups. As such, the church intentionally dismantled a centralized ministry for ‘stand-alone’ small groups, and allowed small groups created under that system to ‘die natural deaths.’ The more closely supervised group structure at Harbor Baptist seemed to influence an inward focus on existing members. In addition, the Harbor case study highlights a different way of approaching questions about small group structure and span of control. Leaders at Harbor referred to “span of care” when they spoke about their group structure. The intention of creating smaller sized groups in the larger church may have more to do with solving problems of ministry and social support, rather than with attempting strict forms of social control.

In Chapter Five, I compare the philosophical and practical approaches to small groups at Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist, paying particular attention to the level of

control exerted by each church over its small groups programs. The analysis includes a comparison of the groups in terms of size, composition and content; the leaders in terms of gender, commitment to the church, personal background and leadership experience; and the cultural and material connections between the groups and the churches. In addition, this section details a process evident in both churches of outward expansion followed by a pulling back. In the case of Harbor Baptist, this is evident in the adoption and abandonment of a large scale 'stand-alone' small groups ministry. Desert Christian, although its overall philosophy remains very loosely controlled, conducted a major campaign during the research period in which the church invited and encouraged all life groups to participate with the entire church in a seven week study. These examples at both churches highlight the tension evident in evangelical churches between outward focus and a more inward and cohesive collective identity.

Chapter Six reviews the main empirical findings of the project: (1) that small group organization inside these two megachurches is heavily influenced by economic models; (2) that strictness is a concept that is at least as much about structure as it is about beliefs; (3) that small groups inside these megachurches are similar in many ways to small groups more generally; and finally, (4) that the structure of small group organization impacts the orientation of small groups to the larger world, with loose organizational structure focusing the church outward and tighter structure focusing the church inward toward its own membership. The chapter includes a discussion of the implications of these findings for researchers and religious leaders, as well as the identification of limitations of the study and directions for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

In this chapter, I explain the logic of site selection, and provide details on the research methods for the project including interviews, participant observation, and written surveys. I outline the ethical challenges I faced and my strategies for handling them, and provide an overview of my procedures for analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. I employ a mixed-methods approach. Using multiple methods is a useful way to gain depth of understanding about phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002). Before embarking on data collection, however, I chose research sites based on a combination of theoretically-informed criteria as well as more practical concerns.

### Site Selection

The cases for this study consist of small groups<sup>11</sup> in two megachurches.<sup>12</sup> The purposive site selection is intended to focus on two types of variation, denominational affiliation and small group philosophy. One megachurch is nondenominational and the other is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. This reflects the two largest categories of megachurches nationally (Thumma 2000; Thumma et al. 2006). Importantly, the two sites also vary in terms of their philosophy on small group organization within the congregation. The nondenominational megachurch uses a leader-driven philosophy that places a great deal of control and ownership in member leaders.

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<sup>11</sup> The first megachurch site has more than 100 small groups based on publicly available materials and interviews with church leaders. The second site has more than 30 Adult Bible Fellowship classes. In addition, each class supports between 0-10 groups.

<sup>12</sup> A future phase of this research agenda will add smaller congregations as sites for additional comparisons.

The Southern Baptist megachurch plays a more direct role in its small groups program through a structured and hierarchical organization of both paid staff and volunteers.

These two churches are located in the same geographical region. While it is possible geographical context may affect my findings, I argue that religious tradition (in the form of affiliation) is a more important source of variation. In fact, much of the geographical variance in religion in the United States has to do with religious population densities. That is, most religious traditions are heavily concentrated in particular regions (Southern Baptists in the South, Catholics in the Northeast and Southwest, for example). I intentionally vary religious affiliation in my site selection. Nationally, the largest category of megachurches is nondenominational (34%), and the next largest is Southern Baptist (16%). Remaining categories are all less than 10% (Thumma, Travis, and Bird 2006). My site selection reflects this national picture, and by choosing two megachurches in the same general region, I keep travel costs low and control for unnecessary regional variance.

## **Data Collection**

### *In-Depth Interviews*

I conducted in-depth interviews with clergy and staff of each congregation. The focus of these interviews was to understand the philosophy on, strategy for, and administration of small groups in the congregation. I asked questions about the expectations the congregation has of its members, and how these expectations are communicated and enforced. I also conducted in-depth interviews with small group leaders, starting with, but not limited to, the groups with whom I did participant

observation. I asked the small group leaders to act as informants for their groups, describing the group's activities and members. I asked about their role as leaders and asked them to provide details of how and how often they connected and communicated with clergy and staff in the church. I also asked about their expectations of group members, and about their personal and religious background. An important goal of these interviews was to understand how these leaders and their groups connected to the larger congregation.<sup>13</sup>

At each site, my first in-depth interview was with a senior leader of the church, in order to formally request a site authorization (See Appendix A) to conduct research at the church. This was a requirement of the Human Subjects Protection Program at the University of Arizona, and also good ethical practice. Before these meetings, however, I did attend the worship services and some other activities open to the public in order to learn enough to arrange the site authorization meetings. I did not have prior *connections* with either church, so I had to rely on the other three strategies recommended by Lofland and Lofland (1995) for gaining access to research sites: accounts, knowledge, and courtesy (37). By attending large worship services and reading publicly available materials prior to these meetings, I was able to provide an honest account of my research

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<sup>13</sup> I did not interview church members who are not active in small groups. The comparison between church members who are involved versus those who are not involved is an interesting one, but is not the focus of this project. Prior research has established that individuals with higher participation levels in megachurches report higher satisfaction levels and higher levels of giving (Dalton 2002). The central questions in this project deal with the connections between small groups and the larger churches in which they reside. I build on prior findings that suggest megachurch leaders are particularly adept at empowering staff and lay leaders (Zook 1993). While there is an emerging literature on megachurches and an existing literature on small groups, no one has yet focused on the link between the two entities. This project explores this intersection – between the churches and the groups – in depth. Through face-to-face interviews, systematic surveys of small group leaders, and participant observation in selected groups, I map the structures of coordination and relationship and assess the level of integration of small groups with the larger church.

tailored to the specifics of each church. While Lofland and Lofland emphasize courtesy in making initial contacts, I also employed the practice of writing brief thank you notes to each interview subject when I mailed them a copy of their Human Subjects paperwork. I was, of course, sincerely grateful for their time. In addition, however, I believe the practice was helpful in my receiving continued access when I asked for additional information or other contacts.

One difference in management practices emerged when I asked to whom I should speak for such an authorization. At Desert Christian, I was directed to the senior pastor, the well-loved charismatic leader who preached at most Sunday services, and who is credited with much of the church's growth. At Harbor Baptist, however, a church with a somewhat larger membership and a substantially larger paid staff, I was directed not to the charismatic senior pastor, but instead to the executive pastor, a strong, behind-the-scenes administrator. Leaders at both churches were supportive<sup>14</sup> of the research project, and provided me with an overview of their view of and vision for small groups in their respective churches.

I concluded the site authorization meetings (and all interviews) by asking for names of others I should interview. I also used published materials listing staff and

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<sup>14</sup> I was nervous at the first site authorization meeting at Desert Christian Church. As a result, I initially mistook the Senior Pastor's speed in signing the authorization paperwork as a cue that he was busy and wanted me to complete our business. That was not the case. Rather, he was indicating both his lack of concern for the legalistic details and his great enthusiasm for my project. After I regrouped and we began the interview, he spoke to me at length and with passion about his vision for and belief in small groups. The Executive Pastor at Harbor Baptist was friendly, but made a point of verifying up front that I was not a reporter. (I have since learned that the church had quite recently experienced a painfully divisive conflict when a local reporter wrote a feature article about the church that included a quote by a staff member which was insensitive to a large group of older members.) Once I explained that I was in fact a researcher and not a journalist, he also spoke to me at length and was enormously helpful, providing me with a detailed organization chart to assist my contacting other leaders.

groups: Sunday bulletins and member handbooks<sup>15</sup> at Desert Christian; and an organization chart, and flyers listing Adult Bible Fellowship at Harbor Baptist. In the case of clergy and staff, my goal was to interview all staff at each church with direct connections to small groups in the church. In the case of small group leaders, my goal was to interview leaders from a variety of groups to gain perspectives from the diversity of groups existing in each church. I generally focused on interviewing clergy and staff first, while beginning to do fieldwork in groups, then followed with interviews of group leaders.

I contacted interview subjects by email, by phone, in person, or through a combination of these. I found phone and/or email to be most effective with clergy and staff. For some senior-level pastors, I arranged appointments through secretaries or administrators, while I made appointments directly with most. I often made contact with small group leaders while doing fieldwork. I visited many small groups, and often asked those leaders if I might call or email them about an interview. At Desert Christian, I attended an orientation for small group leaders and made contacts with new leaders there. At Harbor Baptist, when I interviewed leaders of Adult Bible Fellowships (Sunday School classes), I asked for names of small group leaders connected to their group. Most people I contacted agreed to be interviewed. One or two at each site responded that they were too busy or that it was a bad time.

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<sup>15</sup> The title and format of this publication changed while I was doing fieldwork at Desert Christian. When I arrived, the book was called the “Life Group Catalog,” and was organized as such. It was changed to “Pathways Handbook” and began including new content intending to guide members through an involvement and commitment process. A substantial portion of the book, however, continues to be a listing of small groups and church staff.

Interviews were often prefaced by a brief round of ‘small talk’ about the weather or other mundane topics. I then asked each interview subject to read through the Subject’s Consent Form (see Appendix B) and let me know if they had any questions before we began the formal interview. I emphasized that I would like them to read through the document, and, despite its length, most appeared to do so. Some jokingly expressed disappointment about not receiving any compensation for the interview. A few group leaders indicated that they would not want to make confidential records available to me. I explained that I would ask them for demographic characteristics of their group members, but that I did not need to see lists with names or personal information.

I opened the formal interviews with small group leaders by emphasizing that my main focus was to understand how their group fit into the larger church, and I then outlined the main topics we would cover: their role as leader, details about the group itself, their connection and communications with the church, and some background questions about them personally. By providing the overview, and by leaving basic demographic questions for the end of the interview, I followed general guidelines of good practice for establishing rapport with interview subjects (Blee and Taylor 2002; Fontana and Frey 1994; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Rubin and Rubin 1995). See Appendix D.1 for the interview schedule for clergy and staff, and Appendix D.2 for group leaders. Table 2.1 compares interviews and interview subjects at the two sites. I interviewed fifty-two leaders singly and in pairs in forty-four separate interviews. I interviewed slightly more clergy and staff at Harbor Baptist (10) than at Desert Christian (7).

**Table 2.1: Interview Subjects and Locations**

		Desert Christian	Harbor Baptist
	Clergy or Staff	7	10
Interview Subject's Role in Church	Medium Group Leader	--	11
	Small Group Leader	19	5
Interview Subject's Gender	Women	16	11
	Men	10	15
I attended leader's group...	Yes	13	10
	No	4	6
	N.A. <sup>16</sup>	2	--
Interview Location	Church Campus	19	10
	Off-site Public Place <sup>17</sup>	--	9
	Interviewee's Home	3	3

<sup>16</sup> I interviewed one member at Desert Christian who was not currently a small group leader but who had a long history with the church, since its founding. She described a number of earlier experiences leading small groups, and I have included her as a small group leader. I also include a member of DCC who currently coordinates other small group leaders and previously started a small group that was unsuccessful.

<sup>17</sup> All nine off-site interviews in public places were with leaders at Harbor Baptist. I think several factors impacted this difference with Desert Christian. My first off-site interview was with a staff member at Harbor Baptist who requested we meet for lunch away from the church. Another staff member also suggested a coffeehouse. Although I had always offered when scheduling interviews to meet someone at a time and place convenient to them, after these two interviews, my wording was "I've met with people at church, at coffee shops, and in their homes." In addition, a number of group leader interviews were with ABF Directors. There was too much activity on Sunday already with church and leading their group for some of these to want to interview on a Sunday. I also interviewed more group leaders at Harbor (6 of 16) whose group I did *not* attend, than at Desert Christian (4 of 17).

This reflects in part that Harbor Baptist's paid staff of 105 is significantly larger than Desert Christian's paid staff of 33.<sup>18</sup> I interviewed slightly more women (27 of 52) than men (25 of 52). Virtually all interview subjects were white, which is consistent with the very small minority presence in these congregations.

I conducted the interviews in person at various locations. The majority of interviews were on the church campuses (29 of 44). Public spaces, mostly coffee shops, were the next most common location (9 of 44), and I conducted three interviews for each church in homes (6 of 44). With the interview subject's permission, I recorded each interview,<sup>19</sup> and took brief notes of key points as they spoke. Such "jotted notes" are good practice for interviewing as well as fieldwork (Emerson et al 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1995: 90). They assisted me in recalling nonverbal behaviors, facial expressions, distractions or disruptions that may not be evident in the interview recording. Table 2.1 compares characteristics of interview subjects at each church, whether or not I attended the leader's group (if applicable), and locations of the interviews.

### *Participant Observation*

Fieldwork provides a depth of understanding that is difficult to achieve through other methods (Adler and Adler 1994; Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Lichterman 2002; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Van Maanen 1988). Participant observation allowed me to see and briefly be a part of many of the groups whose leaders I interviewed. I participated in Sunday services, gaining an understanding of how the church came

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<sup>18</sup> Harbor Baptist reported 100-110 paid staff, 75 full-time equivalents (FTEs), not including the Christian School. Of the paid staff, 20-25 are ordained and 6 are staff support. Desert Christian has approximately 30-35 regular staff, a few of whom are not paid, and 6-8 of whom are ordained.

<sup>19</sup> I recorded all interviews with the exception of site authorization interviews where I wrote detailed notes. I used a tape recorder for the first 7 recorded interviews, and a digital recorder at the remaining interviews.

together for large group worship. In addition, I took advantage of orientation classes, ministry programs, and other opportunities to have first-hand experience in the life of each church.

Gold's (1958) classic typology of fieldwork suggests four roles arrayed on two dimensions: from completely embedded in the field (complete participant) to completely separate from it (complete observer); and known as a researcher and unknown. I was not previously a member of either of the churches I studied, however, I did participate actively during the course of the research. My role fell between Gold's participant as observer and observer as participant, closer to the latter. I was not completely embedded, but also not standing apart with clipboard in hand.

I entered the field at each site through the most obvious access point: large Sunday morning worship services. These gatherings are open to the public, and in some ways are in fact geared to the newcomer. At each church I followed signs to "Visitor" and "First-time Visitor" parking. These areas had parking available close to the building, whereas much of the remaining parking was quickly filling up. At Desert Christian, a volunteer stood under an arch and main entryway to the church. He greeted me warmly and asked if it was my first time visiting. When I said yes, he welcomed me again and walked with me to the church lobby where he directed me toward another greeter, letting that person know I was new. The second greeter handed me a church bulletin and also picked up and handed me a catalog of small groups; he then walked me to stadium style seating on one side of the worship auditorium.

I attended services several times a month during the period I focused on each church. Note-taking was encouraged at both churches through bulletins and sermon outlines that explicitly made room for notes, so I could unobtrusively make jotted notes during sermons, both on the content of the services, and on my observations of the congregation. Both churches had large stadium seating style seating expansion areas toward the back, with more traditional seating toward the front. I chose the stadium seating more frequently, in order to better view the entire worship space. I also sometimes arrived early and/or stayed late, in order to observe the socializing and other activities taking place on campus before and after services.

Both churches offered three service times each. Services were approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. Desert Christian offers a Saturday evening service at 5:30, and two services on Sunday morning at 9:00 and 11:00. Worshippers from the two services mingle in the outdoor courtyard area during the 45 minutes between services, and ministry tables are staffed with volunteers providing information about church activities. Harbor Baptist has three back to back services on Sunday morning at 7:50, 9:15 & 10:45. Many worshippers bustle back and forth from worship services and Adult Bible Fellowships (Sunday School classes). At both churches, parents drop off and pick up children from children's programs that accommodate hundreds of kids every Sunday. Also at both sites, families and groups enjoy low-cost food and beverages served by volunteers at outdoor cafeteria-style buffet lines. Weekend services provided an excellent opportunity to participate in and observe the core activities and social life of each church.

Although there are a few on-site Bible studies on Sundays at Desert Christian Church, their Sunday School program was strictly for children. Harbor Baptist, on the other hand, considers Adult Bible Fellowships (ABFs), or Adult Sunday School, to be central to its purpose as a church.<sup>20</sup> Like traditional Sunday School, these ABFs are offered on Sunday in addition to larger corporate worship. The ABFs are scheduled in education building classrooms and run on a similar schedule to the worship services (8:00, 9:15, and 10:45). There were thirty-one ABFs when I began fieldwork at Harbor, and several more have been added (and a few combined or dissolved) since. While these groups are ‘medium-sized’ and different than true small groups according to the leadership of Harbor Baptist, I chose to include them as groups for this project. ABFs are reported to range in size from 10<sup>21</sup> to 100, although the smallest I observed was about 20 and the largest I observed was about 70. Since a central focus of this project is how small groups link to the larger church, I argue that it is useful to consider groups of various sizes. These groups, while ‘medium-sized,’ are substantially smaller than the church as a whole with almost 3000 regular attenders. Leadership of the church estimates that one third of attenders participate in Adult Bible Fellowships, and they are pleased with this level of participation. They are continuing to emphasize this, and their goal is a participation rate of 50%.

Harbor Baptist organizes ABFs into demographic categories, based on age, gender, marital status, and age of children. Some were very specific, for example,

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<sup>20</sup> Sunday School is an important tradition for the Southern Baptist Convention, and for Baptists more generally (Ammerman 1990; Jones 2000).

<sup>21</sup> The smallest ongoing group is the men’s ABF with 8-12 regular members. This is in contrast to two women’s groups at both 9:15 and 10:45, both with 35-40 members each. The ABF of 20 which I observed was a group that had just recently split from another and considered itself to be in a growing stage.

“Married Couples and Parents of Young Children,” while others focused on one demographic and were inclusive for another, for example, “Women of All Ages.” Two ABFs defined themselves by a mission emphasis and disregarded demographic categories, but these were the exception. On a color-coded flyer summarizing the program, the thirty-plus ABFs are organized into eight demographically-based groupings of 1-6 ABFs each. I attended one or more ABF from each of the eight groupings, with the exception of the only Men’s class which is listed as its own group.<sup>22</sup>

Most ABFs had greeters who welcomed me as a newcomer, asked me to fill out an attendance form, and provided me with a name tag. I identified myself to the greeter as a researcher, asked for a class leader, and then asked permission to visit, participate, and observe the class. After a period of socializing that varied in length, most ABF Directors (the group leader) opened with announcements during which they introduced me as a researcher to the class, or asked that I do so myself. This occasionally resulted in joking and laughter about being on ‘good behavior’ or about being ‘watched.’ ABF members sometimes approached me after class to ask about my project, and/or to welcome me and encourage me to return to their class.

I quickly learned to bring a Bible for participant observation in ABFs as extra Bibles were not typically available, and lack of one hindered my full participation in what was usually some form of Bible teaching (although occasionally a class watched a video and/or worked from hand-outs). My ability to take jotted notes beyond notes on the content of the teaching was limited as I was usually seated close to another member at a

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<sup>22</sup> I interviewed the leader of the Men’s ABF as well as a leader of a men’s small group.

table, and I did not wish to be distracting. However, I did take notes on announcements and on class content.

Socializing after the close of class was often limited for several reasons. At the two earlier time slots, the group would hurry to clear out to make room for the next class. Some members were rushing off for a restroom stop during the short break before the next worship service began. Also, parents had an obligation to pick up children from their Sunday School programs by specific times. Nevertheless, I sometimes used the time after the ABF to make contact with the leader of the class (ABF director) and ask for an interview, or to talk with members about small groups associated with the ABF.

In order to understand how small groups operate, I have participated in a selected set of small groups in each congregation. After becoming familiar with each congregation, and getting a general idea of the varieties of small groups in existence, I selected appropriate small groups for brief or more extensive participation. Access to small groups proved more difficult at Harbor Baptist than at Desert Christian. Desert Christian publishes an extensive catalog of small groups three times a year. The catalog lists day, time, location, and leader contact information, along with a description of the group. Using the catalog, I grouped the listings into larger categories (study groups, support groups, social groups, hobbies and games groups) and then attended a diverse set of groups across these categories.

Harbor Baptist proved to be more challenging. The intentional focus at Harbor Baptist is its “Sunday Morning Experience,” including large corporate worship and medium-sized Adult Bible Fellowships. As described above, I attended a cross-section of

these ABFs. Small groups, however, are not listed in church publications. Leadership at Harbor Baptist explained that the church believes in the importance of small groups, but intends for small groups to branch off from the ABFs. Thus, in order for a new member (or in this case, a researcher), to attend a small group, they should first attend and become part of an Adult Bible Fellowship. Flyers describing each ABF have a standard format. Under a section titled “Outside Activities” small groups were frequently listed along with socials, activities or more specific versions of the same (Bible studies, holiday parties, softball, and hiking for example). Of 33 ABFs, half (17) listed small groups as one of their activities. Harbor Baptist does not maintain a church-wide listing of small groups. However, individual ABF leaders are aware of many of them. By attending ABFs and talking with ABF leaders, I was able to attend some small groups at Harbor Baptist, although fewer than at Desert Christian.

In addition, there are some small groups which connect to ministry programs and not ABFs. There is, for example, a women’s ministry program with two weekly Bible studies, one in the daytime and the other in the evening. These studies include teaching to a large group (40-60 women) and break out into table discussions. The tables remain together for at least a season (approximately three months), and the leaders of the Bible studies consider these tables to be small groups. I attended the women’s daytime Bible study at Harbor Baptist and joined a table group over a period of six weeks.

In most cases, I have visited with small groups for one or two meetings. This has allowed me to visit many different types of small groups. In a few select cases, I visited multiple times over the research period. This has allowed for a better sense of the

variation in group activities and membership over time. Extended visits also allowed me a different and deeper level of access to the groups as described by Gold (1958).

Some groups are made up exclusively of men. As such, I faced one of four important challenges to access described by Lofland and Lofland (1995), the ascriptive categories of the researched and researcher. While I did not attend any men's groups, I made it a point to seek out leaders of men's groups to include in my interview sample.

Along with participation at worship groups, Adult Bible Fellowships, and small groups, I also participated in other activities at each church. These included orientation classes, leadership meetings, large scale ministry programs, and a special program at Desert Christian designed to launch a large number of new small study groups simultaneously.

Member orientation classes provide an excellent opportunity to see what the congregation expects of members who are joining. Churches sometimes offer separate classes for conversion (becoming a Christian), and joining (becoming a member of the church.) I attended the latter type of class at Desert Christian to see how small groups are presented and offered (or not) to new members. This was a one day class on a Sunday afternoon, lasting an hour and a half. Desert Christian also offers an orientation class for people who would like to become small group leaders. I attended this class which was scheduled for an hour and a half on each of two Sunday mornings during the early service. This orientation allowed me to participate in the initial set up of and expectations for small groups through its training and communication with new leaders.

Along with small groups, I attended larger ministry programs at both churches, usually as an access point to small group participation. Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist offer women's Bible study in both the evening and daytime, and I attended studies at both churches. At Desert Christian, I participated in the large group program only. At Harbor Baptist, I participated in the large group program, and joined a small group of women for table discussions over a six week period. The Celebrate Recovery format is similar to that of women's Bible study. Like the women's Bible studies, Celebrate Recovery starts with a large group (50-100 people) for an hour and a half of worship, praise, and testimony. The large group then breaks out into small discussion and support groups which are oriented to particular problems, including alcoholism, drug addiction, sex addiction, and codependency. Celebrate Recovery<sup>23</sup> is a Christian-based version of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program which was developed by Saddleback Church in Southern California. I attended the large group portion of Celebrate Recovery at Desert Christian. When the large group broke up, I remained with other newcomers for an orientation session about Celebrate Recovery, and received an invitation to join a small group at a future date. More so than other small groups, these support groups deal with intensely private and difficult issues. I chose not to seek access to these small groups. I did, however, interview both the pastor and director of the Celebrate Recovery program at Desert Christian.

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<sup>23</sup> The program is designed as a "safe place" for Christians who are also encouraged to attend Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, where they report feeling uncomfortable talking about Christ instead of the more inclusive term "Higher Power." The AA and NA programs, while placing importance on "spirituality," take pains to distance themselves from organized religion, and members are reportedly hostile to anything perceived as evangelizing.

Perhaps one of the most important aspect of fieldwork is its “emergent” quality (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 30). As I attended worship services and small groups, and conducted interviews at Desert Christian, I became aware of a unique opportunity. The leadership of the church was connecting two sermon series to an activity they called “The Easter Challenge” intended to thoroughly engage the church and potentially generate new members, or more importantly, new believers. The sermon series leading up to Easter Sunday was designed in part to get existing members involved, specifically by volunteering to lead short-term study groups. In addition, existing small group leaders were encouraged to lead their own groups through the same study which would begin on the Sunday after Easter. The church began offering a series of orientations geared toward both existing small group leaders and potential new leaders.

I asked for and obtained permission to attend all of these orientation sessions (three were offered initially; and two more were added). In addition to learning from the orientation, I used this as an opportunity to distribute written surveys to leaders in person. The senior pastor was on point for these orientations and getting the study groups organized, up and running. At the end of the orientation classes, he also asked for volunteers for a committee to help him lead the overall endeavor. I initially volunteered to help by typing lists of contact information collected at each orientation. Pastor Mike gladly accepted my offer of help. As it turned out, his administrative assistant resigned just a few weeks before the program was to launch. At Pastor Mike’s request, I picked up a substantial portion of the administrative work associated with launching the project. As such, I became part of small leadership group, including myself, the senior pastor, and

two staff members working on a temporary basis for the church, one a former pastor at another church, and the other, a seminary student in training. The experience gave me an inside view of both the ongoing organizational workings of the church and the specific ‘social experiment’ of attempting to launch 50 new small groups at once.

### *Written Surveys*

In addition to interviewing a subset of small group leaders, I asked all small group leaders at Desert Christian<sup>24</sup> to complete a written survey. In the survey, leaders provide basic information about themselves, their experience with the church, and their small group. The survey includes questions about the group such as group norms, group size, stability of membership, and activities. The survey item on group activities is designed to be comparable with national survey data (Wuthnow 1994a). Questions designed to collect data on the leaders include how they became a leader, how long they have been a leader, how much involvement they have in other church activities, and how regularly they attend worship. The items about church attendance for the leaders are taken from the *General Social Survey* (Davis and Smith 1999). The survey includes a large network data section in which small group leaders are asked to place a checkmark next to the name of paid staff members with whom they have had contact in the last three months (for advice, support, or coordination) in relation to their small group leadership. This section is designed to collect quantifiable information on the level of communication and connection between the larger church (operationalized as paid staff) and the small groups (through the leaders). The survey also asks basic background questions about the

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<sup>24</sup> At this writing, surveys have been distributed at Harbor Baptist and will be included in future analyses.

leader's age, gender, household composition, and household income. The complete questionnaire for group leaders at Desert Christian is included in Appendix E.1.

The survey was distributed in three phases, first in person, and then through a first and second mailing. The initial distribution took place in Spring 2006 during leader orientation sessions for the "Easter Challenge" program described above. At the end of each orientation session, I made a brief introduction, explained the surveys, and distributed them to leaders and potential leaders sitting at tables. I provided them with stamped, addressed envelopes to mail the surveys if they did not wish to complete them immediately. In the second phase, I obtained a mailing list from a Desert Christian administrator and mailed surveys to 120 households, recognizing there would be some duplication from the orientation sessions. In July, I sent out a second mailing of the survey, seeking both to obtain a higher response rate, and to better determine reasons for non-response. Included in this final mailing was a return post-card, asking respondents to confirm participation or briefly identify reasons for non-response (for example, that they prefer not to, or that they believe they are not eligible).

Along with increasing the response rate, the second mailing was intended to correct for several problems with the original survey distribution. The first was the use of the term 'anonymity' versus confidentiality in the survey introductory message. I will discuss this issue further in the next section. Relatedly, the surveys did not include a face sheet with identifying information for each leader. Thus, the return post-card enclosed with the second mailing included a unique survey identification number, which allows me more accurate information about who did and did not return the survey. Because the

church records may not be completely up to date (that is, they may not include all active leaders, and did include some leaders who are no longer active), determining a baseline for my response rate was challenging.<sup>25</sup> However, I calculated a response rate of 52% based on the best data I was able to obtain. A total of 77 leaders completed surveys, out of a possible 147.

### **Ethical Concerns**

The only safe way to avoid violating principles of professional [and, we would add, personal] ethics is to refrain from doing social research altogether (Bronfenbrenner in Lofland and Lofland 1995: 64).

All social research involves ethical dilemmas, and qualitative research is rife with them (Lofland and Lofland 1995). In this section, I describe the ethical challenges and concerns specific to my project and explain my actions for dealing with them. Before I began my formal research activities, I submitted my proposal for approval by the University of Arizona Human Subjects Protection Program.

#### *Compliance with the Human Subjects Protection Program*

In order to have the project approved, I first had to verify that I had completed the required human subjects training. This involves reading assigned materials and passing an online examination about ethical issues in research. I submitted a complete plan of study. In particular, the review board is interested in all materials used to consent subjects, that is, scripts and letters designed to invite people's participation into the research.

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<sup>25</sup> I received 55 return post-cards, of which 38 indicated they completed a survey, 14 reported they were ineligible, and 3 indicated they preferred not to complete the survey. While some of those who did not return the post-card are likely ineligible, I used the conservative estimate of the total mailing list (161) less those who reported themselves ineligible (14) to calculate a final baseline of 147.

Key materials for my project included the initial site authorization letter from a senior leader at each church site. I met with the senior pastor at Desert Christian and the executive pastor at Harbor Baptist, explained my overall study goals and methods, and obtained their permission to proceed. Each of them signed a site authorization letter (Appendix A), and, as required, I provided copies of these signed authorization letters to the Human Subjects Protection Program.

I asked each interview subject to read a “Subject Consent Form” before we began our interview. While all materials involving consenting subjects required the approval of Human Subjects Protection Program, the consent letter required an official stamp from the organization. This letter explained the overall goal of the study, who would be included, along with costs, risks, and benefits. The primary cost to subjects was their time, and the letter mentioned a slight risk of breach of privacy if personal records were made available to me. The letter states that there are no direct benefits, but that the subject will be contributing to our knowledge base about small groups in large churches. I asked interview subjects to read the consent letters in full, and they almost always appeared to do so. I also highlighted two key points from the consent form: the voluntary nature of the research and confidentiality. I explained that the voluntary nature of their participation meant not only could they could withdraw at any time, but that they could skip any question which made them uncomfortable. In discussing confidentiality, I explained that if I were to quote them in my writing about my research, I would use a pseudonym, and would take other action as appropriate to protect their identities. I discuss some of the challenges involved with confidentiality in the next section.

The Human Subjects Protection Program was also concerned with how I would consent fieldwork subjects. Because my fieldwork occurred in fairly public settings, or settings open to visitors at most times, I was able to use a disclaimer (see Appendix C). In practice, I often covered the key points in the disclaimer verbally during an introduction time when I participated in a group setting. However, as appropriate, I also gave copies of the disclaimer to members of groups with whom I participated, or left several copies available to the group at a table in the back of a room where we met, for example.

The survey instrument itself is considered a consenting document, since the beginning of the survey includes an introductory letter from me explaining the survey and inviting participation. Although I obtained approval of my survey document before using it in the first phase of survey administration, I had not received the required official stamp.<sup>26</sup> This became evident when I received an, albeit friendly, complaint by one of the subjects who received a mailed survey in phase two of the survey administration at Desert Christian. This potential survey respondent happened to be a survey methodologist, and disagreed with my use of the word ‘anonymous’ in the survey’s introductory section. In fact, because some (although not all) groups are uniquely identifiable, and because I collected group-level information from the leaders in the survey, it was more appropriate to use the language of ‘confidentiality’ rather than ‘anonymity.’ The caller who identified this problem also asked if the survey had been approved by the University Human Subjects Program and wondered why the survey did not have an approval stamp.

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<sup>26</sup> There was apparently some disagreement within the Human Subjects’ Protection Program organization about whether or not surveys required the stamp, or simply approval in advance.

I revised the introductory language to the survey in consultation with the Human Subjects Protection staff. I also drafted an explanatory cover letter, and used the opportunity to make a second mailing with the goal of both increasing my response rate, and identifying non-responders who were ineligible (thereby decreasing the denominator for my response rate calculation). For the complete text of the original and modified survey introduction, see Appendix E.2, and for the text of the cover letter accompanying the second survey mailing, see Appendix E.3.

While compliance with institutional requirements is important, the methods were sometimes cumbersome. The legalistic language of consent documents did not usually help open up real conversation about some of the more nuanced ethical issues involved in my research. I did have such conversations when it seemed appropriate, however, with interview and other research subjects. The issue of confidentiality, for example, is much more complicated than my simply creating a pseudonym for each interview subject.

#### *Issues of Confidentiality*

While the vast majority of respondents did not seem to worry at all about confidentiality, I was concerned about confidentiality on a number of levels. Although I created and use pseudonyms for both individuals and churches in the study, the problem of confidentiality is not necessarily solved, depending on who is reading published work: church leaders, other ‘insiders,’ or the general public. Borgatti and Molina (2005) make a similar point arguing that organizational research entails greater risks for individuals than other kinds of research. For an insider who knows she is reading about her own church, for example, a pseudonym will not disguise an associate pastor if I have

identified him by his role in the church. Moreover, the individual member may be visible to a church leader depending on how much and what kind of information about the individual I reported. Uniquely identifying information, at least identifying to insider readers, includes church staff positions, lay leaders of some specific groups, or other special characteristic such as “church matriarch.” In some cases, I have avoided such specific description when linking individuals to findings. In other cases, when quoting someone after describing what may be identifying information, I have asked their permission to do so. This problem of uniquely identifying information came up in the survey I administered at Desert Christian. The original survey introduction indicated that the survey was anonymous.<sup>27</sup> In fact, many of the respondents in the first phase of administration were new group leaders signing up to lead a study group, and for them the survey was anonymous. However, for leaders of existing groups, by completing identifying information about their groups, they were also identifying themselves, as this information could be cross-referenced in group catalogs. In later survey administrations, I used the term ‘confidential’ instead of ‘anonymous.’

Confidentiality of the churches under study presents a special problem. Others have chosen not to even attempt to disguise the church itself (Thumma 1996). However, many congregational researchers do disguise and keep confidential the churches they study (Ammerman 1990; Becker 1999; McRoberts 2003). I have chosen to create pseudonyms for the two megachurch sites I have studied. However, the descriptive information about

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<sup>27</sup> I had used the language of anonymity both to remind survey respondents that they should not write their names at the top of the survey, and also partly out of deference to church leadership who were fine with the survey, but slightly uncomfortable with the question at the end about household salary. Making the survey anonymous had eased that worry for them.

the churches included in the study makes it possible for someone interested in doing so to have a good chance of guessing the church identities. A reviewer of some early work, for example, used an internet search engine with the text of the mission statement I had included in a presentation. By doing so, he accurately identified one of the sites. One option would be to obscure the identities of the churches through providing misinformation. I have chosen a middle ground. While I use pseudonyms for the church names, I also spoke to church leadership about the difficulty of providing real confidentiality at the level of the organization. The combination of providing descriptive information about the churches and my institutional affiliation at the University of Arizona may lead the curious to identify likely church sites in the state. I let the church leadership know this up front. Although I do not provide major items of misinformation, I have made some attempt to obscure the church identities, for example, by not listing church missions verbatim.

Participant observation provided me with another set of ethical issues to confront. Although I participated in groups of many types, I was frequently included in group prayers. When this came up, I did participate. In some cases, one person was designated to pray. In other cases, various people participated by praying aloud. Typically, I closed my eyes, bowed my head, and sat silently. While I was invited to pray aloud fairly regularly, I usually did not feel pressured to do so and declined such active participation. I was only asked directly to pray once. In this case, late in fieldwork, I found myself in the first situation where each member of a small break-out group was expected to pray aloud. This was a break-out group inside an Adult Bible Fellowship, and the instruction

for each person to pray was not made by the ABF leader or teacher. There were no designated leaders of the break-out group, and the idea came from one of the five members of my group. She suggested that each of us take notes on the praise or prayer request of the person next to us, and then pray aloud for that person. As is typical in fieldwork, I found myself 'on the spot.' Although I had introduced myself as a researcher, the group member who had taken the lead was treating me as a member. As such, I found myself unintentionally participating in one if not both types of invasion of privacy identified by Adler and Adler (1994): "venturing into private places and misrepresenting oneself as a member" (387). Punch (1986) encourages common sense and moral responsibility in navigating difficult fieldwork situations. I chose to participate by praying aloud for my neighbor's request when it was my turn to do so, rather than disrupt the group by bowing out.

Prayer is just one part of a larger concern relating to my religious identity as perceived by those I studied. I was asked about this both in interviews and during fieldwork. I was rarely asked directly whether or not I was a Christian. Instead, the questions usually took one of two forms. Some individuals would ask me in a general way about my religious background. To this question, I usually answered first that I was raised Catholic. Often, this was the extent of the conversation. However, if someone asked further questions, I would answer them honestly and diplomatically. By diplomatically, I mean that I made it a point to speak about my sincere respect for the faith of the people I was studying, even though my own identity is different. The second way that people inquired about my religious identity was to ask me if I was a member of

the church, to which I would reply that I was not and that I was visiting for the research. They would also ask where I go to church to which I replied that I did not attend regularly.

While I was asked by some about my religious identity, the majority of people with whom I spoke did not inquire. In many instances, I believe this is because they simply assumed that I shared the same identity as they did. This was illustrated for me in one instance when an associate pastor at Harbor Baptist was giving me the name of a small group leader he suggested I interview. Our conversation was brief, and the pastor was very busy. He said, "Just let him know that you are a student and a Christian, and that I gave you his name and number." Caught off guard, I did not correct him and just said thank you before we said good bye. I believe this example illustrates what was likely true for many of those with whom I spoke. They simply made the assumption that I was someone like them.

Relatedly, I experienced the typical challenge of overt vs. covert fieldwork in identifying myself as a researcher to people around me. When participating in groups, I or the leader always introduced me as a researcher. When appropriate, I also placed disclaimer forms in visible places. However, people forget (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 36); they come in late, or are not paying attention during announcements. As long as my focus was on the group, I did not worry much about those who may not know my status. Whenever I had individual conversations during fieldwork, however, I made it a point to inform or remind the other person briefly that I was a researcher.

## **Analysis of Data**

### *Qualitative Data and Analysis*

Qualitative Data consists of recorded interviews and notes from interviews and participant observation. Texts on qualitative methods stress importance and varieties of note-taking (Emerson et al 1995; Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Table 2.2 describes several levels of data and notes for this project, starting with the raw data most directly connected to actual events, and moving by levels further from the actual experience. I made jotted notes during interviews or while in the field, writing overtly most often, but occasionally covertly using the classic notebook-in-bathroom method.

Throughout interviews and fieldwork at Harbor Baptist, I began keeping all notes in a journal-style notebook. Since most groups at Harbor Baptist were study groups, I found that this journal blended in well, and I could take notes quite openly. Increasingly, my jotted notes included not only observations, but hunches, hypotheses, and thoughts about theoretical issues. Richardson (1994) suggests researchers regularly take observational, methodological, theoretical, and personal notes (526), and my field journal includes all but the latter which I kept in a separate journal.

I typed field notes upon return from both participant observation and interviews, and dated materials such as flyers or hand-outs that I collected while in the field. Finally, the third level of notes consists of notes typed while listening to interview recordings. Although complete transcription of interviews has its benefits (Bird 2005; Lapadat and Lindsay 1999), it also has drawbacks such as the time and costs of transcription, and drawbacks are more substantive as well. While the best transcription includes some

indicators of nonlinguistic verbal data, such as long pauses or laughter, textual versions of conversation often miss some of these, and do a poor job of capturing tone and tempo. I have chosen to use a combination of note-taking and selective transcription which is particularly appropriate to a mixed-method study such as this one (Halcomb and Davidson 2006).

Richardson (1994) emphasizes writing as a *method of inquiry*, writing to discover versus “writing up” one’s findings (516). Writing notes while listening to interview recordings was the first step where data collection and analysis overlapped substantially. With successive listening to interviews and reviewing notes, I began the process of coding emerging themes.

The goal of qualitative research is understanding (Fontana and Frey 1994). Although I did review the data with particular questions in mind, my primary goal was to understand the structure of small groups as they connected to the larger church at each of my two research sites. As themes became apparent, I returned to the interviews and notes with more directed inquiries. I have recorded all typed notes in Microsoft Word. Although less sophisticated than specialized content analysis software, word processing software provides many useful capabilities for qualitative analysis (Richards and Richards 1994: 450).

Initially, I began with the single case analysis of Desert Christian Church. Having already spent time with this data from the first site, my analysis of Harbor Baptist simultaneously included both within and cross-case analysis, and eventually impacted my earlier analysis of Desert Christian.

**Table 2.2: Levels of Qualitative Data**

Level	Data / Notes	Description
I	Recordings of interviews	Mini-cassette recordings and digital files recorded with interview subject's permission
	Jotted Notes, Interviews	Handwritten during interviews or immediately afterward, included major points made by respondent, nonverbals, interview interruptions, and reminder flags to jog my memory later for field notes
	Jotted Notes, Participant Observation	Handwritten during fieldwork or immediately afterward, included content of group activities, individual actions, and reminder flags to jog my memory later for field notes
	Artifacts	Papers collected from the field, including materials published by the church such as Sunday Bulletins, catalogs, and flyers, as well as group hand-outs such as announcements and study materials
	Recorded Observations	Observations digitally recorded privately by me, typically driving home from fieldwork or interviews
II	Field Notes, Participant Observation	Typed immediately upon return home from field (or as soon as possible)
	Field notes, Interviews	Typed immediately upon return home from field (or as soon as possible)
III	Interview Notes	Typed notes taken while listening to interview recordings, including outline of overall interview, responses to key questions, and selected quotes verbatim

This iterative nature of qualitative analysis is typical and productive (Huberman and Miles 1994). The structure of chapters in this dissertation reflects this process: within-case analyses of each site (chapters 3 & 4); and a cross-case analysis of the two

sites (chapter 5). My analysis of qualitative data is supplemented by quantitative data from a written survey administered at the first site.

### *Quantitative Data and Analysis*

I designed written surveys in which leaders act as informants about their groups and answer questions about themselves as leader. As such, there are two units of analysis in the survey data: groups and individuals. Some individuals who completed surveys had not led a group yet at Desert Christian, but were attending an orientation in order to do so. Therefore, my sample of groups (N=65) is less than my sample of leaders (N=77).

I entered survey data into SPSS. I performed descriptive analyses on group characteristics, including group age, size, membership composition, and activities. I also analyzed leadership of the group, how leaders began in their role with the group, how long they held the leadership position, and how they communicated with group members. I collected network data on communication between group leaders and paid staff or other leaders in the church. The defining characteristic of this data was its sparseness, and my analysis is basic and describes this lack of connections between groups and staff. I collected basic information from leaders on their church attendance, membership in other groups, as well as background data such as age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, household composition and income. I use this data to paint a descriptive picture of small group leaders at the first research site. The quantitative analysis is a supplement to the mixed methods qualitative analysis described above. In the next chapter, I provide an in-depth picture of the structure and culture of Desert Christian Church.

**CHAPTER THREE: BIG FAITH IN SMALL GROUPS:  
“FREE MARKET PHILOSOPHY” AT DESERT CHRISTIAN**

Desert Christian Church is an independent Christian Church, with a loose affiliation to the Independent Christian Churches / Churches of Christ. Church leadership describes the church’s identity as a ‘permission-granting’ church. This general philosophy is reflected in a loosely organized team structure for the paid staff, and an ‘entrepreneurial’ approach to small group organization. By empowering members to take the lead on organizing ‘life groups’ (as they are called at Desert Christian) the church feels it has successfully provided an infrastructure for members to find intimacy and create community, while keeping overhead for the system very low. The emphasis of the life groups and the structure supporting them is relationality. Church leadership intends for members and non-members to connect in these groups, forming relationships around shared interests, that deepen into sharing personal religious journeys. In addition, leaders of these groups are encouraged to find support from church leadership based on their existing relationships with any pastor or staff member, rather than based on a defined structure. This new system was implemented approximately three years before this research, soon after the departure of a pastor responsible for a different sort of small group organization. The old system provided a higher level of oversight and support for a smaller number of and more homogenous set of groups. The current system has created an “explosion” of new groups, according to Steve, Desert Christian’s Outreach Pastor. Unlike groups under the previous system, these groups are organized around a diverse set

of interests that range from traditional Bible studies to craft groups and groups that ride motorcycles together. This chapter details Desert Christian's setting, people, beliefs, activities, and its system for organizing groups.

### **Setting**

Desert Christian built and moved to their current site on the outskirts of town in order to have more space. The drive from the center of town takes twenty to thirty minutes or more, depending on traffic. The city is sprawling, and the route to the church passes older working class and newer middle class neighborhoods, apartment buildings, strip malls, and the entrance to a military base. Church members who have been around for years say that some time earlier in church history, the base and a local defense contractor were the primary suppliers of members: 'Everyone was either military or Defense-Tech.'<sup>28</sup> When the church moved, several years ago, there was very little nearby, but increasing development gets closer each year. A mile away, a new Target and Ross Store opened while I was doing fieldwork. Traffic was particularly bad as one of the main East-West arteries underwent improvement projects.

Two other churches sit on the same side of the road and just adjacent to Desert Christian. One imagines the members of the neighboring church, where 40 or so cars fill the parking lot on any given Sunday, might feel defiant, perhaps even threatened, when their mega-neighbors require police officers to direct traffic in and out of their driveway on Sunday. In an in-depth case study of the changes in a United Methodist Congregation

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<sup>28</sup> Quotation from field notes. Throughout this report, I have used single quotation marks to designate quotations recorded as field notes, and double quotation marks to designate verbatim quotations from recorded interviews.

in a Southern exurban town, Eieseland (2000) finds that the congregation could only ignore the explosive growth of a nearby megachurch for so long, before it began to feel the effects in loss of membership, and then eventually adapted its own identity and created a niche for itself.

Desert Christian's modern architecture and very large campus, like many megachurches, could easily be mistaken for a community college. The worship center seats more than 2000 people, and the campus includes a separate office building, a two-story education building, a smaller worship hall that accommodates up to 150 people, one permanent and two modular buildings with classroom and additional office space. Between the worship hall and education building is a shaded basketball court with rock climbing wall. This space is filled with round tables for eating and fellowship between Sunday services. Like Lyle Schaller's (1992) "Seven-Day-A-Week" churches, Desert Christian Church (DCC) has plenty of cars in its large parking lots on any given day of the week. The church hosts more than one hundred small groups and dozens of classes for members in these buildings throughout the week. A Christian charter school rented one of the buildings through the spring of 2006. However, the church did not renew the lease for fall 2006, as DCC needs the space for its own many activities.

This is the third home for the Desert Christian congregation. The old site, just a few miles down the road and closer to the center of the city, grew too small. Another church purchased the old land and building, and I pass it on my way to do fieldwork. The first home for the church, as described to me in an interview by a long-time (30+ years) member, was in fact a private residence. A group of congregants from another church

decided to start a church on the far side of town. They got together and purchased a new home in a newly built subdivision. They knocked down the walls on the first floor for worship space, and made use of bedrooms upstairs for Sunday School. The church remained small for many years, and eventually purchased the second site where membership was steady under several pastors. Substantial growth began under the leadership of the pastor preceding the current senior pastor of the church. This leader died tragically in his middle years, and the church called his good friend, Senior Pastor Mike, asking him if he would leave his church in California to join them. The church had already broken ground on the new site when Pastor Mike arrived, and he oversaw both the transition and an expansion of the church on the current site. The church continued to grow, from 1000 to more than 2000 under his leadership. The church added two major wings to the initial worship space which seats about five hundred. Each of the two wings has rolling bleachers that combined can seat an additional eleven hundred people. The wings can be closed with movable walls to create a more intimate worship service on one side, or to be used as sports courts or large meeting space on the other. The design is very functional, although walking up and down the stairs of the bleachers can be noisy and therefore disruptive when people enter or exit during the service.

## **People**

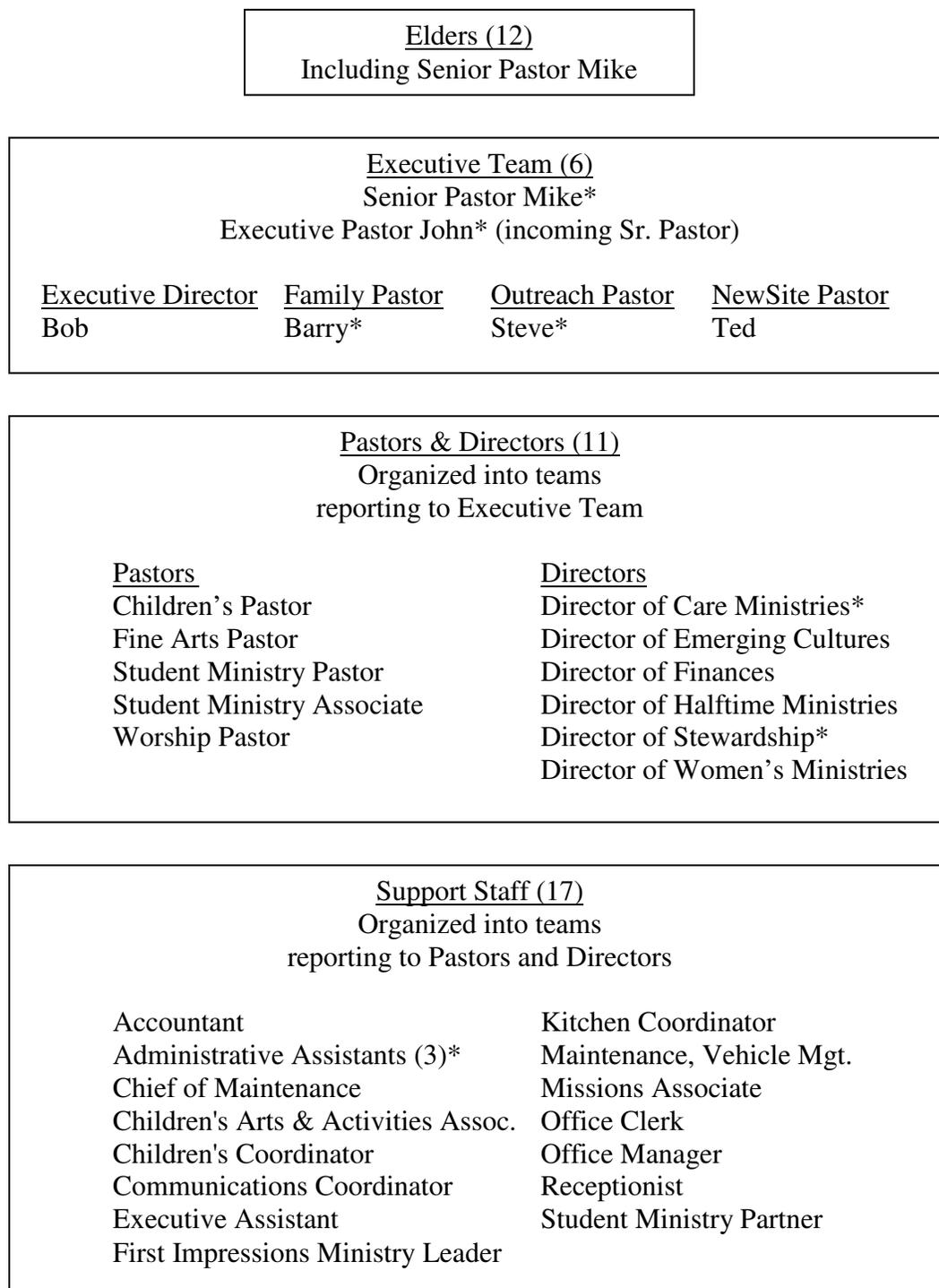
### *Leadership and Organizational Structure*

The church employs 34 paid staff along with several unpaid regular staff members. There are also many dozens of volunteers serving the church on a regular basis. The church is governed by an elected board of about fourteen elders, all men.

However, the board does not involve itself in the day to day running of the church. The senior pastor, who is also an elder and member of the board, is responsible to the board for managing and leading the staff and congregation.

The leadership team includes three associate pastors and the executive director. The pastoral members of the leadership team comprise ‘the teaching team’ in the church. Unlike many megachurches, where services are mostly offered by a single charismatic leader, the responsibility for teaching at weekend services is shared among this group of four pastors. The leadership team, like the elders, is all male. However, the next level in the church organizational structure includes a number of women as both pastors and directors.

The church was close to completing a major leadership transition during the period of my research. Senior Pastor Mike had initiated a three-year transition plan to have the executive pastor step up into his role. The senior pastor would step down but remain at the church in an active capacity. This began with the announcement to the congregation. At the time I began my research, the incoming senior pastor was beginning to take on some senior leadership responsibilities; however, the outgoing senior pastor remained at the helm. During the year in which I completed most of my interviews and fieldwork with the church, the executive pastor took on the day-to-day management of the church. However, the outgoing senior pastor was still in charge. He had the authority to ‘trump’ decisions of the incoming senior pastor. The final transition occurred toward the end of my research with Desert Christian, and the membership formally voted to accept the younger leader as the new senior pastor.

**Figure 3.1: Organization Chart for Desert Christian<sup>29</sup>**

<sup>29</sup> Asteriks (\*) indicate staff members interviewed.

This transition was, not surprisingly, fraught with difficulty. While the incoming senior pastor was popular in his own right, the outgoing senior pastor is a charismatic and well-loved figure. Members lamented his decreasing presence in the pulpit. Others wondered if the new senior pastor could possibly run the church effectively while the former senior pastor remained a presence in the church. As the date of the formal transition neared, it was still not clear how the outgoing senior pastor would fit into a new organizational structure.

The organizational structure at Desert Christian seems to be continually in flux. The current structure is a 'team approach.' Outreach Pastor Steve describes a redesign of a previous structure in which the organization was like 'silos.' Each department was interested in itself, its needs, and its resources, and it was difficult for people to communicate across the different silos.

Five years ago what [DCC] looked like was independent silos of activity. We hired a pastor to do small groups, we hired a pastor to do family, we hired a pastor to do outreach, we hired a pastor...and they did not work together hardly at all. Cooperation was scarce even. And it was not their fault. It's just the way that we, that was our culture. It's the way we hired people into this culture. And so everybody was very possessive of their ministry.

Now the staff is organized around teams, each connected to an associate pastor or the executive director. Steve's team is responsible for outreach, which includes things like missions and social service activities. Barry's team is responsible for families' ministries, which includes all kinds of pastoral and counseling services, such as Celebrate Recovery, women's ministries, and seniors. Bob's team manages the business side of the church, including, finance, administration, the kitchen, and maintenance.

### *Membership*

Founded in the late 1960s, the church has experienced rapid growth since the late 1990s. As of spring 2006, the average weekend attendance is about 1800 adults and 500 children. This number is less than January attendance, since the Desert Christian sponsored a major effort to start a new church in a nearby town, thus reducing its own membership by 250. Prior to the effort to start the new church, some Desert Christian members commuted 30 minutes or more from a rapidly growing new community south of the church. There were limited churches in the community itself, and DCC launched a new congregation by sending a pastor along with several hundred members interested in starting the new church. DCC also provided start-up funding and other resources. The new site is now a Desert Christian satellite church and continues to use office space on the DCC campus.

Not including the loss of members to the new site, Desert Christian has been growing by 6-8% in the last several years and hopes to increase that rate. Church planting is just one of the ways the church hopes to grow. The senior leadership has begun to think about developing multi-site capability. Satellite churches would connect to Desert Christian through simulcast technology, but would also have their own local leader for face-to-face pastoring.

Desert Christian members are mostly working and middle class families. Although the vast majority (approximately 90%) of members appears to be White, there are visible minorities: Latino/as, African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. The popular worship pastor who plays drums on Sunday and leads the

congregation in worship and praise is African American. Occasionally the mix of race/ethnicity among the singers varies, but is frequently all White. The ages of members span the generations, from young singles and young married people with children, to empty-nesters, and seniors. At Sunday services, all ages are represented, but young families seem to be in the majority. This is also supported by attendance numbers, since weekend services typically host not only 1800 adults, but also 500 children.

Although the historical connection to the local military industrial complex is evident in the church (the executive director of the church was formerly a senior military commander at the base), the members come from a variety of occupational backgrounds. Along with military families, there are small business owners, social workers, teachers, mid-level business managers, and administrators.

### **Beliefs**

Desert Christian is a nondenominational church, affiliated with Independent Christian Churches / Churches of Christ. This loose affiliation of churches is comprised of those who broke away from the Disciples of Christ in order to avoid the process of becoming a denomination. The church mission and values include being an outward reaching church, both through evangelism and service to the community. Desert Christian believes in the importance of baptism through immersion. The church offers numerous classes to support seekers and new believers in beginning “their walk with Christ.”

The nondenominational identity at Desert Christian is mirrored by an independent spirit and culture. The senior leadership describes the culture as “permission-granting.”

They eschew rules and prohibitions, and seek to support members ideas and innovations, wanting them to ‘develop their gifts’ and use them in service of Christ. One pastor at the church described their theology as “liberal,” not in the terms of common political usage, but rather in the church’s belief in salvation through grace.

Ideas about gender in the church exhibit tension between traditional and modern ideas. Sermons include messages of equality while continuing to emphasize God-designed differences in men and women. In a sermon about the all-male elders of the church, Pastor Mike emphasized that women could do anything at Desert Christian. They pastor, they teach, they hold director positions on staff. They just could not fulfill the position of elder. Pastor Mike shrugged his shoulders as he told us he did not know why God designed things that way, but He did.

Some conservative churches expect their members not to drink alcohol. Desert Christian does not have such a rule. Sermons emphasize the biblical injunction against drunkenness versus a complete prohibition. Sermons also show the emphasis of secular and more modern ideas about drinking, identifying alcoholism as a sickness more so than a moral failure.

In terms of potential prohibitions, church leaders are apparently more concerned about gambling than drinking. One kind of games group plays a game involving dice, and each of eight players provides a modest sum (\$5) to play for the evening. The money goes either toward prizes bought by the host or into a cash pot. This game was close enough to gambling for church leadership that several meetings were held before it was approved for inclusion.

The mission of the church is explicitly evangelical and outwardly focused. The church wants to ‘love people to Jesus’ and to ‘launch passionate people to change the world.’ There is a sense of inviting people from the (secular) world into the church, and then sending them changed (saved) back out into the world. The second part of the mission has seen increasing emphasis over the last several years. The leadership speaks about not wanting the members to simply ‘sit in the pews.’ Involvement may mean volunteering for the church, leading or joining a life group, or just getting more involved in the community. This outward focus has become part of the church’s identity.

Easter Sunday is a big day in Protestant churches. They are often filled to overflowing, and church leadership wants to attract some of the once-per-year attenders to come back more regularly. I attended Easter services at Desert Christian in both 2006 and 2007. Both services emphasized action and involvement. The sermons concluded with specific steps for attenders to take to get involved by in the church.

At the same time as the leadership of Desert Christian emphasizes active involvement, they also frame the nonparticipation of some attenders in a positive way. Several people, including both pastors and lay leaders, mentioned to me that DCC is ‘a healing church.’ People who have experienced hurt in other churches come to Desert Christian and intentionally remain anonymous for a time. They want to worship without involvement as they heal. There are reportedly more than half a dozen former pastors of other churches who worship quietly at DCC while they recover from tough experiences

elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, perhaps, they will get involved. In the meantime, they can heal and worship in a community without the risk of more intense engagement.

## **Worship and Other Activities**

### *Worship*

Desert Christian holds three identical services, one on Saturday evening at 5:30, and two on Sunday morning at 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Services last about an hour and fifteen minutes, and childcare in the form of children's Sunday School is provided at all services. Sunday morning at 9:00 a.m. is the largest service, and there are typically a thousand people or so in attendance. Saturday evening is the smallest service. Usually, the movable walls of the courts are kept closed, and only floor level seating is used. This uses just the original worship space at the site before the building was expanded, and gives the service a more intimate feel. The movable walls are sometimes used during Sunday services as well. Keeping one side closed allows the church to consolidate the overflow from the floor level into just one set of bleachers, creating a more full feeling for the service. It also provides a large indoor space for food and fellowship between services.

My first visit to a Desert Christian was to the largest service time, 9:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning during the summer. The first twenty minutes were singing and praise. Most of the congregants were standing although, not all. A few scattered people raised their hands while singing. There were four women on stage singing who had their hands

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<sup>30</sup> Although I did not ask or learn about stories specific to hurting pastors, the theme of people having negative experiences with other churches came up in interviews and informal conversations during fieldwork. Some of the hurts dealt with church rejection over issues such as unwed pregnancy and divorce, either their own situations or that of their children. Others identified power struggles in church organizations that had caused rancor and hurt feelings.

raised most of the time. People streamed in fairly regularly throughout the twenty minutes of singing, fitting mostly into the bleacher section, since the floor level was quite full. I was amazed on that first visit to see some individuals carrying cups of coffee from Starbucks with them to their seats. I would later learn that this was sold on campus! As it neared 9:20, the pace of the music changed and got a bit slower. We were invited to be seated. There was solo singing by the drummer, whom I later learned is a well-loved worship pastor. His words then became more like a prayer than lyrics. During this time, the singers left the stage, followed by the other musicians. The pace wound down until it was very clearly the drummer praying, rather than singing. Then, he too left the stage. The worship hall went dark.

The large screens read “The Nominating Committee.” Five individuals, two women and three men, (one with a large cowboy hat), came onto stage and froze into poses around the table. The lights came up, and they began a skit where they played the parts of a nominating committee holding a meeting to nominate a member to be an elder. They had a list of five candidates, whom they discussed using humor and loud caricatured personalities in order to demonstrate ‘the wrong way’ to do this work. Each candidate had something in his (all the candidates, as is true for the actual elders of DCC, were men) favor, for example faithfulness to the congregation, a lot of money, charisma, or fame. These, however, were the wrong reasons to choose an elder. They completed the skit and left as the pastor came to the stage. This skit takes the form of a ‘set-up sketch,’ propagated by Willow Creek Community Church, and one of several forms of

drama described by Muncy (2002) as part of an “Explosion of Theatre in Protestant Megachurches.”

The message for the day was about ‘character,’ that character is everything, and the Bible readings were from Timothy. The pastor used positive examples from the existing group of fifteen elders for the church to discuss important aspects of character. The message appeared to be designed both to inform members about the process by which elders are chosen, and to remind everyone of the biblical importance of their own characters.

Senior Pastor Mike preached the sermon. His charisma was evident in both his preaching style and its reception. The message was interspersed with personal stories and humor. He regularly opened his arms up widely to emphasize a point. He would make this gesture as he looked toward the far reaches of the bleacher section, addressing himself directly to ‘you all in the courts.’ His arms open wide, he seemed ready to embrace the people to whom he was preaching in a giant bear hug. In fact, outside of worship service, this is exactly how he typically greets people.

When Pastor Mike opened his arms to the people in the bleachers, or pointed and made a joke toward an individual seated at floor level, the worship service had a sense of smallness and intimacy. Occasionally, however, the machinations necessary to handle a service of this size were visible at the surface. As Pastor Mike was reaching the conclusion of his sermon, a message appeared at the bottom of the large PowerPoint screen: “Ushers – please prepare for the offering.” A dozen or more men and women rose from their seats and exited out the main doors of the worship hall into the lobby.

They filed back into the worship hall and stationed themselves in various areas. They passed velvet bags with wooden handles from one side of the aisle to the other, where another usher picked them up. This went smoothly and surprisingly quickly.

The ushers exited to the church lobby and returned after several minutes.<sup>31</sup> For communion, there were instructions on the big screen:

Who may take communion? All who follow Christ.  
Take a piece of bread and a cup of juice as the tray passes.  
On the floor, put the cups in the back of the pews.  
In the courts, put them in the trash cans at the bottom of the seating area.

The ushers stationed themselves again in the same manner as they had for the offering. This time they passed round silver trays with small puffed communion wafers in the center, and several dozen tiny plastic cups in slots surrounding the wafers. As is common in Protestant churches, the cups were filled with grape juice.<sup>32</sup> A time of quiet music and prayer followed communion, and then the pastor returned to dismiss the service.

This first service was fairly representative. Skits, like the one I have described, are sometimes included in the service. Special video presentations, produced in-house and elsewhere, are more common than live skits. Muncy (2002) argues that evangelicalism's adoption of the arts in worship is an important component of the megachurch phenomenon. At Desert Christian, some sort of theatrical rendition is quite

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<sup>31</sup> Only once in several dozen worship services did I see a wrinkle in the smooth fabric of these processes. On one Saturday evening, as music played and all were in prayer after the offering, the ushers did not reappear. Minutes passed, and Senior Pastor Mike, who is consistently easy going began to look agitated. After more minutes passed, he walked back to the lobby. At the time, I imagined some hiccup in the organization of the ushers, but later realized, that it was likely that the communion trays were not ready.

<sup>32</sup> It was not until I was interviewing a group leader who is also an usher that I realized the amount of labor involved in communion preparation. She was overjoyed because the church had recently invested in a filling machine. She explained that filling these tiny cups manually as they had done for years was understandably laborious.

common, and occasionally, this reaches the level of spectacle. During a particularly dramatic sermon series that drew out a parallel between turning one's life over to Christ and the intensity and commitment of military training, pastors actually rappelled from the ceiling of the worship hall onto the stage. Another common addition to the Sunday message is the inclusion of church members, either through a pastor's description, through being featured in a video, or being called forward to join the pastor and provide personal testimony. These sermons reflect a culture of inclusion at Desert Christian, where members are held up as leaders and active participants in the activities of the church.

The rhythm of services at Desert Christian remains the same, although responsibility for delivering the message alternates between the four pastors who comprise the teaching team. Their styles are somewhat different, but they all tend toward an attitude of familiarity, albeit in varying degrees. They all use humor and stories to illustrate points based in biblical teaching.

Sunday service times are scheduled to facilitate fellowship between services. This also helps with a tight parking situation after the early service, which is frequently quite full. In good weather, a food and beverage service line along with dozens of round tables and chairs are set up on the outdoor, partially covered basketball court. Individuals and families eat, chat, and mingle in this area between the two worship services. Ministries of various sorts set up information tables nearby. These information tables are a sampling of some of the many activities of the church, including missionary work, other outreach, counseling, and life stage ministries.

### *Missionary Work*

The church is actively involved in missionary work in nearby Mexico as well as in other areas of the world, including Africa and Eastern Europe. Mexican missionary work is some of the most visible, since a large member-led life group is actively involved on an ongoing basis. The group supports evangelical protestants, mostly converts from Catholicism, who are a minority in Mexico. This life group's activities became so involved that the church assisted them in setting up their own checking account. Originating in Desert Christian, the group began regular trips to provide a variety of services, and eventually built and continues to fund a medical clinic in a city not far across the border. The life group remains connected to but independent from the church's other missionary work in Mexico. Other work includes an annual house building trip. Many members of the church participate on this annual trip along with members of other local churches.<sup>33</sup> The proximity of the Mexican border to this Southwestern city facilitates participation in Mexican missions. The church also provides funding for missionaries in various parts of the largely Roman Catholic country.

Desert Christian has major ties with two other regions globally. Executive Pastor John (who was hired as a missions pastor) was a missionary for a number of years in Eastern Europe. He has maintained ties with people there, and Desert Christian has sent him back, along with other pastors and members, to the same region. In addition, there is an Africa Missions group. This group traveled to Africa last year on a major teaching

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<sup>33</sup> This trip was started by a Presbyterian congregation affiliated with PCUSA. The idea originated with churches in San Diego and was imported to Desert Christian's region by another Presbyterian congregation. The event has become ecumenical and includes a variety of different churches.

effort. They provided resources and teaching to local missionaries in Africa, along with help and support for specific needs, such as building wells. Many of the missionary groups are visible in the church through information tables set up between services.

### *Outreach*

Desert Christian places great emphasis on being a church that reaches out to the surrounding community. A couple of events each year are an important part of this. The church designates one day each spring as ‘Serve the City’ day. The church mobilizes teams of members to actively provide service to their neighbors. Most of these are fairly symbolic gestures, such as dropping off bowls of candy at local businesses, handing out free bottles of water at a local park, or offering strangers a ‘totally free car wash.’

The church also participates in a large way in ‘Make a Difference Day,’ a national effort sponsored by USA Weekend Magazine that invites the participation of churches as well as all kinds of organizations. On one Saturday in the fall, the church mobilizes dozens of teams throughout the city on various projects. These activities are more substantial than the spring event in a material sense. Teams have provided improvements at local schools, through classroom renovation, painting buildings, and laying cement for outdoor basketball court, for example.

Other outreach efforts may come from individual life groups at Desert Christian. 26% of life groups (16 of 62) indicated that service was one of its activities. Some of these may be referring to either of the church-organized days described above. However, some life group leaders described service projects in their groups. The quilting group, for

example, provides quilts for missions trips, and a nurse in the group sews tiny baby quilts for mothers who suffer a miscarriage.

### *Individual Counseling and Celebrate Recovery*

Desert Christian Church provides space in their main office for a Christian-based counseling group. These counselors are independent from the church, but share the space as well as the services of the church receptionist. Pastors also provide spiritual and emotional counseling to members. Pastors may refer members whose needs are more extensive. Collett et al (2005) examine the likelihood of ministers referring members to religious or secular services. In the case of Desert Christian, and other megachurches, the of Christian-based counseling located on site or even on staff may be the main driving factor.

The church provides financial counseling as well as benevolence support to members in need. The financial director regularly does one-on-one counseling with members struggling financially. The church sponsors biblically-based money management classes which are put together by a U.S.-based nondenominational, evangelical Christian organization, Crown Financial Ministries™. These classes combine highly structured educational materials with small group dynamics. Class leaders, typically lay people who have completed the class themselves, lead a small group through a 12-week program. The goal is to learn biblical principles for financial management. On a practical level, the course emphasizes budgeting, getting out of debt, living within one's means, saving for the future, and principles-based financial decision-

making.<sup>34</sup> In cases of urgent need, Desert Christian provides benevolence funds to both members and non-members. The church sometimes provides temporary assistance in covering mortgage payments, paying utility bills, or other immediate needs. Frequently, financial counseling and/or a referral to the Crown Financial classes accompanies actual financial assistance.

The Stephen's Ministry is another referral option within Desert Christian. This ministry, which is led and staffed by lay members of the church, trains volunteers in listening and support skills, in order to be a resource to members in spiritual need or even spiritual crisis. The 50 hours of training is extensive, and the leaders of the program match trained volunteers to individuals referred by church staff.

On weekends, 'prayer teams' stand ready at the end of worship to pray with anyone who chooses to come forward after the end of each service. Attendees are reminded of the availability each week of these support people during the latter part of the service. These prayer team volunteers supplement the availability of the preaching pastor who remains in front and is usually surrounded both by individuals wishing to greet him and those in need of support and prayer.

Like Crown Financial Ministries™, Celebrate Recovery® is a national program, which sells structured materials to many different Christian churches. Developed at Saddleback Church in California, the founder adapted the 12 step program of Alcoholics

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<sup>34</sup> Crown Financial makes no critique of the global economic and financial system. Evangelicals are often critiqued for an individual focus on saving people through religious conversion over attempts to address societal problems at a broader level.

Anonymous (AA) to be explicitly Christian.<sup>35</sup> AA claims that it “is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution.”<sup>36</sup> However, Celebrate Recovery participants feel that members of AA go further than this stated neutrality and are actually hostile to Christians. As such, the Celebrate Recovery ministry and small groups become a safe place for Christians struggling with alcoholism, drug addiction, codependency and other problems.

Family Pastor Barry has oversight for the Celebrate Recovery ministry at Desert Christian, and Jess, Director of Celebrate Recovery, supervises lay leaders and handles much of the administration for the program. Celebrate Recovery or CR, the common designation, is highly structured with very specific rules and guidelines from the national organization. CR has workbooks for leaders and members, as well as training for leaders at different levels. Desert Christian has sent several staff and lay members to California for in-depth training on the program.

On the first night I visited the Celebrate Recovery program, dozens of people had already arrived and were taking part in the low-cost barbecue and fellowship outside the meeting hall. The elderly gentleman in a red vest who greeted me under the entrance archway was prepared to direct me to whichever of the half a dozen programs or so on campus that evening. Over the next hour, more people arrived. Many visited and chatted socially, while others sat apart in pairs seeming to be involved in more intense conversations. The church provides childcare during the evening program of Celebrate

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<sup>35</sup> During fieldwork at this program, the leaders claimed that the basis of the AA program is Christian, and that Celebrate Recovery is more true than AA to its original roots.

<sup>36</sup> From the Alcoholics Anonymous web site: [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org).

Recovery, so families arrived with children, and dropped them off at another building. The program format began with music and singing, with several musicians and singers on stage. We met in the large hall used for teen worship on the weekend. Some latecomers continued to arrive during the music and worship. More chairs were added, and the group neared almost one hundred in size.

After the worship, a member went to the stage and began inviting people to accept tokens, small coins designed to recognize periods of time without alcohol or drugs, or in recovery from other problems. About a dozen people were recognized for periods of a year or less, and a few individuals accepted tokens for five years and more.<sup>37</sup> This recognition with tokens is done monthly. During other weeks, the leader simply asks all those with one year or longer of recovery from various problems to stand and be recognized.

After recognition of members' successes, there may be teaching by the pastor, or more often, there is personal testimony. During my first visit, we watched a video of a member at Saddleback church give dramatic testimony of a difficult life from childhood onward. She described coming to Saddleback and to CR for help, and experiencing major life changes. On my second visit, a local CR participant spoke for about twenty minutes, telling a moving story of struggle since childhood with sex addiction, remaining vague about the specifics of the problem, but saying that he had been arrested as an adult because of his problem. Feeling ashamed, he approached his pastor at another church

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<sup>37</sup> The Celebrate Recovery program at Desert Christian was just two years old. It was explained to me that these individuals with long-term sobriety participated in other 12-step programs, and also became involved in CR when it was offered at the church.

who referred him to Celebrate Recovery. He spoke about support and forgiveness from both his home church, and from his wife and children who were in the audience as he gave his testimony.

Celebrate Recovery is a major program sponsored by Desert Christian. Soon after the program was started, the pastors led a sermon series on the principles involved in Celebrate Recovery, and ways that these are applicable to all Christians, not just those with severe substance and other problems. The CR program helps signal the church's openness to people from all kinds of backgrounds, wanting to bring them into a relationship with Christ through love and support, versus a more rigid and judgmental stance. While Celebrate Recovery is offered specifically for adults with various kinds of serious life problems, life stage ministries are intended for the more routine needs of people with similar age, gender, and/or marital status.

#### *Life Stage Ministries*

Desert Christian organizes ministries around various life stage groups: women, seniors, men, adults in mid-life, youth, and singles. As is true in many churches, the women's ministry is one of the most visible and active groups at Desert Christian. The church offers classes and Bible study groups for women twice each week. There is a morning group for women who are available during daytime hours, including many stay at home moms, as well as older women. A smaller evening group is also available and includes many women who work during the day. A monthly women's evening potluck brings together 50-100 women for food, fellowship, and an inspirational speaker. The women's ministry also organizes annual activities such as retreat weekends, craft fairs,

and attendance at regional evangelical or other Christian events. The women's ministry maintains their own web page, linked to the church site. The group publishes short newsletters with upcoming classes and events. These are posted and available in racks in the women's restroom off the church lobby. Responsibility for the women's ministry is organized under the umbrella of Susan, the busy Women's Ministries Director, who is also responsible for the seniors' ministry.

The seniors are another visible and active group at Desert Christian. Seniors get together every Friday for a potluck and Bible study. Anywhere from 30 to 60 or more senior adults attend. On the Friday I joined them, health food was nowhere to be found, but a huge dessert table looked as if it would buckle under the weight of the assembled sweets. Susan welcomed the group and made announcements which included updates on a number of seniors absent for health problems. Several lay leaders led us in traditional hymns, and we then lined up in order of our seating at the potluck tables. After eating, the usual Bible study was replaced with a presentation by a family of missionaries, dressed in native attire from Thailand where they had spent the last several years and where they would soon return. At the end of the presentation<sup>38</sup>, the offering basket went around a second time for those who wanted to support the missionaries. Barb, sitting at my table, informed me that the missionary family was related to a member of the seniors' group.

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<sup>38</sup> Although the missionaries did not have a direct link with Desert Christian, or the 'free market' philosophy for small groups, the content of their presentation showed another example of market capitalism merged with religion. The missionaries explained a new approach for missions in which the missionaries built and operate a local business, in this case a Western style health club, and use the business as the base for meeting and evangelizing locals.

As is typical, the men's ministry is less active than either the women's or seniors' ministries. However, there is a men's ministry, and there have been a number of visible activities in the church for men. During the period of my research, the church offered several men's classes on a popular Christian book. *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Eldredge 2001) describes one of several versions of masculinity portrayed in the Christian popular literature. As does most, if not all, of this genre, the book emphasizes distinct and essential differences between men and women. This version, which differentiates itself from the more well-known Promise Keeper model, highlights a risk-taking version of masculinity (Gallagher and Wood 2005). In common with the Promise Keeper model, however, the book advocates for the importance of male bonding. In doing so, the author labels small groups of men supporting one another as "bands of brothers." Desert Christian offered a book study class for men that used a large group format for teaching about the book, and then small group table discussion where men had the opportunity to speak to each other about their own personal issues. Tables remained together over the period of the 12-week course, and each table was considered to be a 'band of brothers.' Church leaders were proud to report that 70 men had participated in the first offering of this class, and some of the small groups chose to continue meeting after the class was completed. The church typically offers a class or two for men listed in the seasonal schedule of classes and life groups, although they are not normally as popular as the *Wild at Heart* class described here. The men's ministry has also organized group trips to regional Christian events, such as a Promise Keepers weekend in a nearby city. In addition, several life groups are limited to men, such as a

breakfast group focused on providing services such as house and car repairs for those in need. There are also groups attractive to, but not limited to, men, such as the high visibility motorcycle group.

A new ministry geared toward adults in mid-life is also very appealing, although again not limited, to men. Associated with a national program by the same name, the Halftime Ministry at Desert Christian is designed for adults who reach their mid-life, have often succeeded in a material way, and are reflecting on their life in a larger spiritual framework. If they have had families, these are often ‘empty-nesters.’ If they have had careers, they may have already achieved success and wonder how important these accomplishments were. They may be asking “what’s next,” or they may be at an involuntary transition point, through lay-offs and downsizing. The philosophy behind the ministry is that people in mid-life are likely to more reflective spiritually than a younger group of adults, busy with careers and families. Yet adults at age 50 are likely to have many more productive years. In secular terms, the ministry is designed to support adults through potential mid-life crises. The director of half-time ministries at Desert Christian is a case in point. After several decades in business, Eric wanted to do something more meaningful with his life. He started by leading and developing the Mexico Missions Life Group at Desert Christian, and then began developing the Halftime Ministry at the church. Now he has joined the staff to lead this ministry program. Other members facing the same kind of turning point in their lives have changed careers, or scaled back on careers in order to get more involved in missionary or ministry work through the church.

Although Desert Christian does not have an organized singles' ministry in the same way that women, men, and seniors do, the church does sponsor ten singles' groups through its life group program. 'Single' is used in an all-encompassing way to include any unmarried adults:<sup>39</sup> those who have never married, are divorced, or are widowed; and those who are not dating, are dating, or are in serious relationships but not married. Several singles groups at Desert Christian are coordinated by a male lay leader who is interested in institutionalizing a singles' ministry into the church. Under his leadership, singles have created their own web site and stay in touch through an electronic mailing list. The web site affiliates itself with Desert Christian but reaches out to other Christian singles. At a Sunday morning singles' Bible study on the church campus, several newcomers to the group indicated that they previously attended other (smaller) churches, but were either joining or considering joining Desert Christian because of greater opportunities to participate in activities geared toward single adults.

The church has an active youth ministry which includes a Sunday school program during all three worship services. The mostly volunteer Sunday school staff provides care and religious instruction for 500 children on any given weekend, from infants through elementary school age. A special teen worship service with lively music is offered for that age group in a separate building at the 11am service time. The church also facilitates small groups for youth, although these are not included in the scope of this project. In addition, several adult life groups minister to youth, such as a program to

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<sup>39</sup> Single presumes straight. It does not include gays and lesbians. The church's openness does not appear to extend to homosexuality. I found the subject to be mostly absent in my fieldwork. On a few occasions, in small groups, a parent asked for prayers for a son or daughter 'who says he has a boyfriend' or girlfriend, respectively.

provide after school tutoring, for example. As is the case with the other life stage ministries, there are linkages and overlaps with the Desert Christian Life Group program which I describe in the next section.

## **Groups**

### *Philosophy and History*

Desert Christian calls its small groups “life groups” and structures their small group program in a particular way. They call this a “free market philosophy” on small groups. Desert Christian did not invent the free market model, but rather was inspired by another, larger megachurch, New Life Church in Colorado Springs. Senior Pastor Ted Haggard of New Life wrote a book about his idea for small groups titled *Dog Training, Fly Fishing, and Sharing Christ In The 21st Century: Empowering Your Church To Build Community Through Shared Interests* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc. 2002). In the text, he tells the story of how and why his church adopted a new model for small groups, and provides guidance for other churches wishing to do the same. The premise is that small groups are best organized around interests of members, and that members will rise to the occasion and lead groups that deal with something about which they are passionate.

Senior Pastor Mike of Desert Christian describes a “visioning” trip several years back with members of his leadership team to New Life in Colorado. Outreach Pastor Steve explains that the trip coincided with the departure of the former small groups pastor. Pastor Steve was dissatisfied with the previous system for small groups management, and they went to New Life to learn more about Haggard’s system. They

were impressed with the free market approach and adapted it for themselves. A few key things characterize this approach: a hands-off approach from the church which is evident in the independence given to leaders and a minimal provision of oversight and support; a wide array of possible interests and activities around which the groups may be organized; and an openness to outsiders.

In a four hour orientation for members wanting to start new groups or become group leaders, the Pastor Steve extended the free market metaphor: ‘Life groups at Desert Christian are small groups of people living life together, developing relationships around shared interests.’<sup>40</sup> The philosophy expects that leaders will be more excited about something they themselves choose: ‘We are not recruiting you to do Desert Christian’s thing, rather we want to support you in using your interests and passions to help others move closer to God.’ He went on to explain that leaders are like small business owners, fully responsible for providing an attractive product (the group) and supporting and leading the group. Some businesses/groups will succeed and some will fail, and that is ok.

Pastor Steve contrasted this approach with a hierarchical cell group model used successfully in the largest megachurch in the world, Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea. Cell groups, the outreach pastor claimed, are successful in a different culture, a communist<sup>41</sup> culture, and the free market approach is a better fit for American culture.

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<sup>40</sup> This quote is based on notes from the small group leader orientation class. Unless otherwise specified as is the case here, quotes attributed to megachurch leaders or members are direct quotes from recorded interviews.

<sup>41</sup> Yoido Full Gospel church is located in Seoul, South Korea, which is not Communist. The orientation, group, however, did not appear to notice this and seemed convinced by the contrast posed by Pastor Steve between independent Americans and people of another (exotic) culture.

Desert Christian previously had a small groups program prior to adopting the current approach. Under the old system, a small groups pastor had oversight for a number of lay leaders who were intended to then oversee leaders of up to a dozen small groups. Church leaders described the old system as self-limiting, since one small group pastor could only provide so much support for groups. Under the old system, the church sponsored about 30 groups. Whereas, the free market life group approach has seemingly exploded, and the leadership estimate that more than 150 groups are now active.

*How Many, How Big, and What Kinds of Groups*

The leadership estimates the number of life groups since there is not an up to date listing of all groups and leaders. A seasonal handbook listed 61 groups in spring 2006. However, groups that no longer accept new members do not list themselves in the church handbook. In addition, there is not a clear cut definition of a life group. While many life groups are listed as such in church publications, in sermons, pastors sometimes refer to all kinds of groups as life groups. In one example, the pastor referred to the elders, given that they meet and discuss and pray together, as a kind of a life group. Worship teams, who work together each week to prepare for weekend services, are a life group. Some groups link to church ministries, such as the Celebrate Recovery ministry. As described above, this group meets together in a large meeting, but then branches off into small groups, both on the night of the large meeting and on other days during the weeks. These small, intensive, support groups match the Desert Christian's idea of a life group, and in fact are considered a life group. However, because they are closed groups, they are not listed in the church handbook.

**Table 3.1: Types of Groups at Desert Christian (N=62)**

Type of Group	# of Groups	Valid %
Study	14	22.6
Activity	13	21.0
Support	11	17.7
Bible	10	16.1
Social	5	8.1
Prayer	4	6.5
Other	3	4.8
Service	1	1.6
Missing	1	--
Total	62	100

**Table 3.2: Activities Reported by Groups at Desert Christian (N=62)**

Activity	# of Groups	Valid %
Socialize	52	83.9
Pray	51	82.3
Eat	39	62.9
Read from Bible	36	58.1
Read other religious material	34	54.8
Service activity	16	25.8 <sup>42</sup>
Other activity	14	22.6
Sing	12	19.4

Life groups at Desert Christian span the variety of types documented by other researchers: Bible studies; other religious study groups; fellowship / social groups;

<sup>42</sup> Preliminary data from Harbor Baptist supports my claim that Desert Christian is more outwardly focused, including service work. Only 11% of (4 of 37) medium-sized and small groups at HB report service activity, and at least 1 and possibly 2 of these 4 report service directed at current or former group members who are ill, rather than to the larger society.

support groups; craft and hobby groups; recreation groups; service groups; evangelism and mission groups; and groups for specific life stages, such as singles or seniors. While many groups have a primary function, often these overlap, and Bible studies often have a social or fellowship time, for example. A craft or hobby group may do service projects several times a year.

### *Leadership of Groups*

Life groups at Desert Christian are led by volunteer lay leaders who are members or regular attenders at the church. Church members are encouraged to consider starting a group organized around an activity or topic about which they are passionate. Based on survey data, the majority of leaders at Desert Christian are women (65%), white (93%), and married (71%). The mean age of leaders is 48 years old. Table 3.3 provides more details on leader characteristics, as well as how they became leader of a group, and whether or not they report communication with a member of the church staff over the past several months.

Most life group leaders attend a short orientation to the life group system, while some in ministry-linked groups have more extensive training. Individuals who want to start their own life group attend a three hour orientation with Outreach Pastor Steve that is typically split into two sessions. The orientation involves an overview of the church philosophy on life groups, strategies for successfully marketing and leading a life group, and basic expectations of the church related to life group leadership, including administrative procedures. As one might expect with the 'free market' philosophy, the use of a business model in Desert Christian's life group orientation was explicit. We

discussed ‘marketing’ and ‘advertising’ of groups, as well as provision of a ‘product’ that would attract and keep ‘customers.’

**Table 3.3: Life Group Leaders at Desert Christian (N=62)**

<u>Leader Characteristics</u>	<u># Groups</u>	<u>% Groups</u>
<u>Gender</u>		
Women	40	64.5
Men	22	35.5
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>		
White	56	93.3
Latina/o	2	3.3
African American	1	1.6
“Beige”	1	1.6
<u>Marital Status</u>		
Married	43	70.5
Single	8	12.9
Divorced/Separated	7	11.5
Widowed	2	3.3
<u>Income</u>		
Less than 20,000	--	--
20,000 to 34,999	5	8.1
35,000 to 49,999	9	15.3
50,000 to 99,999	36	58.1
100,000 and above	9	15.3
<u>How became group leader?</u>		
Started group	34	57.6
Asked by church	10	16.9
Previous leader no longer available	7	11.9
<u>Communicated with staff last 3 months?</u>		
Yes	45	73
No	17	27

Leaders of member-started life groups use skills and talents they have developed often outside the church setting to help them in leading their groups. They frequently talk about their jobs or professions, and some mention community involvement outside of church. Ginny who co-leads the motorcycle life group with Sam, mentions both kinds of experience as she explains how her background has helped her in her leadership role, specifically supporting the group getting involved in community service:

I actually started a neighborhood association. I have been very community involved. I have done marketing and public relations as part of my background, so I already have that. So when we talked about doing a community work, I was like: 'Okay I know how to finagle through the city; I know how to make or find people by my previous community service involvement.'

Those who mention religious background typically do so in the context of biblical knowledge for Bible studies, and/or teaching skills from leading other studies in the past.

Some group leaders who are linked to a church program or ministry may receive more extensive training than the short life group leader orientation. Crown Financial group leaders, for example, first must participate in a Crown group as a member, then as a co-leader or leader in training, before they may act as a primary leader in the group. Leader manuals are as structured and detailed as member workbooks, so while Crown leaders may bring interpersonal and other skills to their role, the content of group activities is completely directed by the materials.

Celebrate Recovery group leaders must meet certain requirements and complete training before they are allowed to lead CR small groups. With the exception of the paid staff who train group leaders but do not lead small groups, all CR group leaders are

individuals who have dealt successfully with one or more of the problems which CR addresses. To become a group leader, an individual must be in successful recovery from their problem or addiction for a period of at least a year. They must also attend training and participate in regular meetings with the Director of the Celebrate Recovery program.

#### *Staff Responsibility for Groups*

Outreach Pastor Steve who teaches life group leader orientation is often thought of as ‘the go-to guy’ for life groups. However, he and other leaders are quick to point out that Desert Christian no longer has a ‘life group pastor.’ Rather, the entrepreneurial system is intended to free up leaders to seek resources from the church in the way they see fit. The leaders emphasize *relationality*, both within life groups and in the structure meant to support them. As Pastor Steve explains it, life group leaders are free to seek support from any church pastor or leader with whom they have a relationship:

We said let’s just let this naturally organize along the lines of relationship... so when people have a problem in their group, what they do is they ask the people that they are in a relationship with how to deal with it. And if they have a problem, it usually ends up in some pastor’s meeting. They will meet with some pastor somewhere, but not necessarily with me because I am not the small groups guru.

The written survey includes a section listing all members of paid staff at Desert Christian, asking leaders to mark those with whom they interacted for advice, support, or coordination. Three out of four leaders reported some communication with clergy or another staff member. However, the remaining leaders (17 of 62) reported no contact with church staff, not even for basic administrative needs. Although life group leaders do show up three times a year for the Connect event (a sort of recruitment weekend for life

groups), a substantial minority of these life group leaders do not connect personally with the leadership of the church, at least not for the purpose of seeking support for their life groups.

Culturally, however, the leadership at Desert Christian places great emphasis on life groups. Sermons regularly mention life groups of various kinds. 'Life group' has become an all-encompassing term, including all kinds of groups. During one sermon, Pastor John referred to the elders of the church as a life group for him, and the executive team as another. The emphasis is on building relationships with intimacy. At the same time as the church places great emphasis on small groups, by using the free market philosophy, they are also adopting a hands-off approach.

I asked people I interviewed whether or not they worried about the risk involved in such a laissez faire policy. Pastor John replied that one must be a certain kind of spiritual leader and not feel threatened by others in order to support this model. Ultimately, the leadership describes it as a matter of faith. Pastor Steve said: "See it really has to do with this idea that we're trusting that God is doing far more incredible things in people than He does on the church staff." Larry, a small group leader who has become heavily involved in several ministries in the church said he does not worry about the risk:

I guess my thought is whose church is it? It is not Desert Christian's church, it is not Mike's [the senior pastor] church, you know, it is God's church. And ultimately [the] small group or small group leader is responsible to God.

Desert Christian places great faith in small groups – first by making them central to the church identity, and second by trusting that they will flourish as God wills it without heavy-handed control.

### *Church Resources for Groups*

In conjunction with a hands-off approach, Desert Christian is minimalist in providing resources to life groups. The church offers two primary resources to life group leaders who want to start a group. After attending a short orientation, leaders may have their groups listed in a professionally presented catalog published three times a year. This is free advertising or marketing for the group to a substantial audience of local adults. Second, groups may use space on the very large church campus (if they can find a room on the day or evening needed).

In general, life group leaders and members themselves provide the materials for their groups. The church helps facilitate some study groups by making a bulk purchase of workbooks, for example, and then members pay the cost of materials to the church. Hobby group members generally bring their own crafting materials. Sometimes the leader may ask for a small donation to cover costs of items purchased for the group. One games group charges a small fee (\$5) that the weekly host uses to buy prizes for game winners. Members of groups often rotate responsibility for bringing refreshments, or the entire group brings potluck items. When groups are closely linked to a church ministry, such as Celebrate Recovery or Crown Financial described above, the church provides leaders with their materials, but individual group members pay the church for the cost of their own books.

In general, the church does not provide childcare services for life groups.

Childcare is available on weekends during worship services, so the few groups that meet on campus at that time do have the option of taking advantage of the care. A singles' Bible study that meets on Sunday mornings, for example, includes at least one single parent who can attend the group while her child is in Sunday School. The church makes childcare available during the weekday women's Bible study and classes, however, the group is expected to cover the costs through a childcare offering taken during the large group portion of the meeting. Childcare includes both paid staff as well as some volunteer group members who rotate through providing care instead of attending the study when the paid staff is not sufficient to cover the childcare needs. The number of children fluctuates weekly, and occasionally this becomes a problem, either with the group's ability to cover the cost through the offering, or with the staff's ability to handle the care needs.

Debbie, a life group leader who started a women's exercise group and Bible study, attempted to schedule the exercise group in conjunction with the women's ministry Bible study. The church, however, in keeping with its usual policy, declined to provide childcare for the group. The church did agree to schedule childcare workers which the exercise group would need to pay each week. However, the exercise group which had initially more than two dozen members, dwindled to five or six, and eventually was cancelled as group donations did not cover the costs of the care.

Childcare is a major resource from the perspective of parents (especially mothers) wanting to participate in activities. Childcare is provided on two additional evenings on

the church campus for the women's evening Bible study and the main Celebrate Recovery program. In some cases, groups that are scheduled during these times may also use the childcare services, depending on how linked the group is to church ministry. In general, independent groups, such as a member-led crafts group, do not use childcare, while a divorce recovery group which is loosely linked to the Celebrate Recovery program does use childcare.

Some life groups that meet in members' homes make children welcome, and provide a place for them to play, while some go as far as to hire a babysitter for members' children. The church, of course, does not fund this. Leaders pay the sitters themselves or share the cost with other parent participants. Such arrangements may make a Bible study substantially more appealing to parents. Information about such arrangements is sometimes included in group listings in the group handbook. As mentioned previously, this glossy covered handbook, published three times a year, is a primary method for communicating the availability of groups to church members.

#### *Getting Members into Groups*

The handbook is just part of an overall process intended to guide members into joining and participating in life groups. "Connect" has become a noun as well as a verb in Desert Christian culture. The noun form refers primarily to a weekend event that occurs three times a year, in conjunction with the publication of the group catalog or handbook. On "Connect Weekend," the sermon includes a promotion of life groups at Desert Christian. During one such sermon, the pastor spoke about the importance of relationships for accountability and spiritual growth. The pastor invited several life

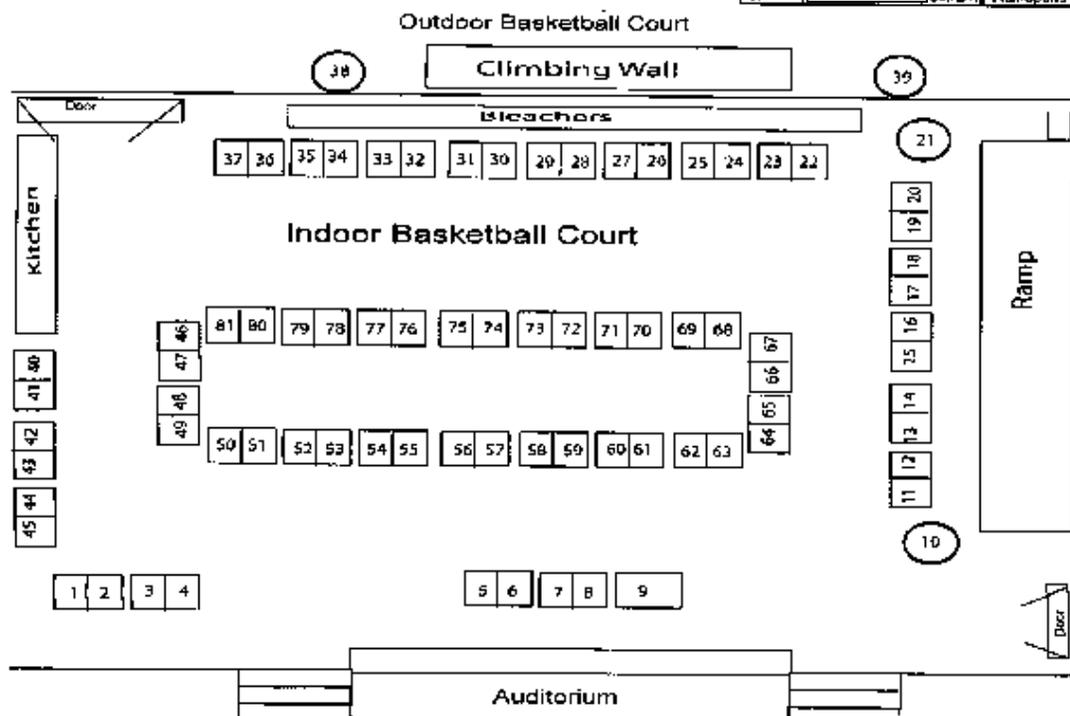
group leaders to join him to give prepared testimony. Services let out fifteen minutes earlier than usual. The congregation was invited to leave children in daycare for the extra fifteen minutes and visit one of many tables set up on one side of the worship hall and outside on the basketball court. Inside the bulletin on connect weekends is a list of all life groups that are included in the catalog, and a map of the locations for each group's table. One or more representatives from each life group staff each table. Life group leaders learn in orientation that if they want to be listed in the Desert Christian catalog, they must commit to staffing a table after all three services on Connect Weekend.

Some leaders and group representatives simply stand at their table with a sign and sign-up sheet provided by the church. Others bring their own flyers and hand-outs. Mission groups have picture boards standing on their tables. A few groups go all out. The "Bunco Babes" decorate their table with Mardi Gras beads and silly hats that they encourage inquirers to don. The motorcycle life group parks a classic cycle with an old-fashioned side-car on the basketball court. Sitting inside the side car is the group's mascot: a leather-jacketed beagle. After services, people wander among the tables.

Although there is very little oversight of life groups at Desert Christian, this weekend event involves communication with Irene, a church administrator, three times a year. She asks life group leaders to confirm their information if they wish to be included in the life group catalog, and to commit to covering their tables after all three worship services on Connect Weekend. Another administrator, Karen, handles room scheduling at the church. Just over half of groups surveyed meet on campus. In interviews with life group leaders, many indicated that Irene or Karen was the only person on staff with

Figure 3.2: Map of Tables for “Connect Weekend” at Desert Christian

64	Arts & Crafts	Security Blankets for Foster Babies
65	Arts & Crafts	Scrapbooking
66	Arts & Crafts	Tuesday Night Quilters
74	Bible Studies	Connection Center
73	Bible Studies	Cross trainers
72	Bible Studies	Senior Saints Bible Study
75	Bible Studies	Agape Life Group
76	Bible Studies	Wed Bible Study Dinner Group
78	Children	Child Evangelism
79	Children	Cub Scout Pack 774
80	Family & Parenting	Considering Adoption- A Biblical Perspective
46	Family & Parenting	Foster Care Life
01	Family & Parenting	Parish Orphan Ministry
47	Family & Parenting	Stepfamily Life Group
68	Fellowship/ Activities	Bunco Babes
89	Fellowship/ Activities	The "Alpha Course"
70	Fellowship/ Activities	Seniors Daytime Fun & Games
60	Finance	"Business By The Book" For Business Leaders
61	Finance	Sunday Morning Crown Financial Bible Study
61	Finance	Week-Night Crown Financial Bible Study
45-44	Creative Arts	Creative Arts
43	Fine Arts & Worship	Experiencing the Bible Through Theatre
41	Fine Arts & Worship	Parish Praise Outreach Ensemble
42	Fine Arts & Worship	Acting 101
42	Fine Arts & Worship	Creatively Thinking
48	Marriage	Biblical Portrait of Marriage
49	Marriage	Young Marrieds
22	Men	Serve and Be Served
21	Mentoring	Connectors
33	Missions	Africa Life Group
32	Missions	Mexico Missions
31	Missions	Missions Prayer Group
30	Missions	Ukraine Connection
29	Missions	Team THUMPH Indonesia Prayer Meeting
28	Missions	Peru
31	Missions	India Life Group
8	Prayer	Inner Healing Prayer
9	Prayer	The Prayer Rooms
3	Recovery/ Support	Celebrate Recovery
4	Recovery/ Support	"Fragments"
5	Recovery/ Support	Divorce Support
6	Recovery/ Support	Emotions Anonymous
7	Recovery/ Support	Grief Share
36	Recreation	Gardening & Landscaping
36	Recreation	International Christian Cycling Club
39	Recreation	Motorcycling
37	Recreation	Parish Walking/Running Group
35	Recreation	Outdoor Nature Photography
71	Seniors Citizens	Super Senior Saints Potluck
28	Serving Others	"The V-Team"
28	Serving Others	One -1-1
24	Serving Others	Memorial Team
23	Serving Others	Stephen Minister Training
58	Singles	One in the Spirit Newsletter
54	Singles	1st & 3rd Saturday Get-Together
55	Singles	2nd & 4th Saturday Get-Together
52	Singles	Serving Other Singles
56	Singles	Singles Worship Team
58	Singles	Single Life Groups
59	Singles	Singles Fellowship
53	Singles	Single Parent's Group
67	Singles	Standing Out Singles
53	Singles	Sunday Morning Bible Study
10	Women	Mommy's Heart Playgroup
77	Youth	Teen Chat
1-2		Care Ministries
50-51		Marriage & Parenting
62-63		Life Group Leader Resources
11-20		Women
Towne Hall		College-Age
Courtyard		Childrens
27		Faith Touch
34		Facilities, Business
Towne Hall		Students
40		Hurricane Relief
67		Camping Vail/Sports



whom they had recent contact about their group. “Connect Weekend” refers to making connections between groups and new members. In fact, however, this weekend is also the primary and in some cases the *only* connection between some groups and the church.

### **Implications and Outcomes of Small Group Organization Systems**

#### *Recruit and Host: How Life Groups Open Doors to Desert Christian*

When megachurch advocates talk about the importance of small groups, the meaning is clear: members of such large congregation find intimacy and integration with the church through small closely connected groups. The free market philosophy, however, opens up questions about whether or not small groups at least in this system are venues for integration. Because of the intentional openness of the groups, perhaps life groups at Desert Christian are a means of recruitment rather than integration.

In fact, based on survey data, more than a third of groups include non-members in their activities. In these groups, non-members range from 5% to more than 50% in one instance. Groups include people who go to different churches, those who belong to different religions, and those who aren’t religious at all. Barbara, in her early 80s, leads a games group for seniors. When I ask her if the group had any expectations of its members, she said no. She went on to explain to me that the group did not have any religious requirements:

And the other thing is, we don’t have any, you know... like Rachel is Jewish, and Libby is Catholic and you don’t have to be a member of the church or anything like that, you can be anything you want.

In this group, games are preceded by a brief prayer in a circle holding hands. Barbara speaks the prayer including requests just raised by members present, and remembering

members missing who have a variety of medical issues. Everyone seems to participate in the prayer, despite the diversity of religious beliefs among them.

Sam from the motorcycle group also speaks of welcoming anyone to ride, whether church member or Christian or not. The rides are also begun with a brief prayer, but Jim says they are careful to ensure that all feel welcome. Unlike the senior games group, the motorcycle group, however tells stories of members converted, or in their own words, brought to Christ. Incidentally they become church members, but the story they tell is about changing lives:

I think this group has been especially good at bringing, attracting the members to ride, the people to ride with us and then after they ride they get connected to the group and then they come to church. And then they come to church regularly. So it's like, being a member it seems like the camaraderie of the fellowship of the group eventually pulls them...

Sam's passion as he tells this story and others is palpable. His friends have told me proudly how Jim used to be a "pew-sitter." He and his wife were faithful but uninvolved church attenders for 20 years. The motorcycle group changed all that. It was started initially by a pastor who had always wanted to have a Christian motorcycle group, however, when it was time for him to step aside, Sam rose to the challenge. Under his leadership, the group has flourished to 50 or so members, not all of whom ride every other weekend. The group has its own web site that proudly describes frequent service projects in the community. Core group members describe each other as family, and they remain connected between bi-weekly rides.

Lyle Schaller (1992) argues that small groups in megachurches offer multiple entry points to the church in a way that small groups in other churches do not. Although this project does not include a survey of the entire membership, there is much anecdotal evidence to support this point. Jean, now one of the leaders of a craft group, moved to town two years ago. She tells the story of how she and her husband began attending

Desert Christian:

We knew a pastor of this church from 20 years ago probably and we contacted him that we were going to move here and he offered to have his small group come and help us unload our truck... so they did and so we thought ok, we knew it was clear across town but ok we'll go one Sunday. That's the right thing to do. And we never left after that.

In fact, when faced with some career and location decisions, she and her husband decided to relocate to the side of town where the church is.

Stories like these become important to Desert Christian's identity as a church pushing to move beyond its own walls – to reach out to the community and invite the community in. Irene, describes a shift that she's witnessed in conjunction with the free market philosophy:

It wasn't this way when I originally started... their goal is to not – you don't come here to sit in church and walk out the door and leave. That is not your purpose... God didn't build you to just sit in a pew and then leave and say I attended church... They really don't want us to stay in our walls, and they really kind of push to be outside those walls and to just be a normal person out in the every day, day to day world.

The openness does not make every member happy. Sarah said she did not attend for several months out of frustration with the direction of the some of the leadership.

Specifically, she heard it said that the church campus should be become “like a community center.” This angered her and others and caused friction. Others worry about the openness connecting the church to things that were inappropriate. As discussed previously, however, the leadership of the church sees these things as a matter of faith. Life groups open doors to Desert Christian Church. Sometimes those who walk through become converted or join the church, and other times the church simply keeps those doors propped open, making their space available to the community without pressure to join.

The openness of life groups has implications for questions of integration and strictness. I find that life group leaders are strongly committed to the church, and I discuss this further below. They do not, however, expect that same kind of commitment from participants in their groups. When asked what they expected from group members and what members expected from them, most leaders were at a loss for a response. Many said things like “nothing really.” Sarah, however, who was the leader for a seven-week study group did have expectations and was disappointed as a result:

I think I’ve learned not to have expectations, or that’s my goal, as [it’s] part of human nature to have expectations. Like, I expected people who made a seven-week commitment to show up, and they don’t.

Small groups in this system are many things, but based on my observations and interviews, one thing they are clearly *not* is strict.

*Integrate? Life Group Leaders and Commitment to Desert Christian*

Because life groups at Desert Christian encompass so many non-members, the groups do not appear to integrate members into the larger church in terms of bringing them to services and spreading expectations for belief and behavior. There does, however, appear to be a strong connection between leaders and the church, despite network data saying they do not communicate directly with the church leadership. Other interview and survey data indicate that these leaders are a committed group.

Not surprisingly, they are self-starters. The majority of leaders (57%) say they became a leader by starting a new group, compared with 18% who say the church asked them to lead. Kathy, the craft group leader, recalls clearly the sermon soon after construction of new buildings in which the senior pastor called upon the congregation to pray and ask God how they might use the blessing of the new space available on campus. Kathy thought her love for this craft and organizational skills could come together in a life group, and she followed through on this as a calling. Robert started a breakfast group for men and his story is typical:

No the group didn't exist, I started it because the only men's breakfast group here ... was a group of men that met at 6 o'clock in the morning... so they could do it before they go to work. And the guys that come to our group are mostly, well all of them are over, in their 50s or most of them are retired. Almost all of them are retired, and there is no way they are going to get up at six o'clock, so we meet at nine o'clock.

Like many group leaders I interviewed, Robert decided to start a group based on his own interests and needs and by doing so through the church, he was able to attract members and these members have become a small close-knit group that has lasted several years.

The group includes both church members and non-members. Like many other Desert Christian life group leaders I interviewed, Robert explained both he and other group members brought neighbors or friends from their former workplace.

One hundred percent of leaders say they attend Desert Christian “every week” or “nearly every week.” Several in the latter category felt it necessary to write a comment onto the survey such as “I’m in church unless I am out of town.” Through interviews, I heard many instance of small group leaders using the language and ideas of senior leadership in the church. Betty, who coordinates several games groups, used to co-lead a very active missions group with her husband. In describing the transition away from leading the group, she unselfconsciously used language that sounds very similar to the language of Desert Christian’s mission when she spoke about training her replacements:

Until about three months ago we were life group co-leaders of that group too. And now we have *launched* another couple who we were co-leading with there. They’re the full leaders. [emphasis added]

Desert Christian’s mission consists of two parts, the first about loving people in an evangelistic way, and the second about “launching” people to make a difference in the world. Pam’s use of this language is an indicator of integration into the culture and values of the church, and this example is typical of what I found in many life group leader interviews.

These committed leaders are not coming from the large ranks of what megachurch and other religious people like to call the “unchurched.” Usually, they come from smaller churches, where they sometimes find their talents and enthusiasms reap fewer rewards. Robert and Dana’s story illustrates this:

Well the Desert Bible Church was real small and we were missing the things from a large church. When we started over there, we started, well, I started the men's group there for breakfast and they had it at the house once a week... Dana started a woman's luncheon once a month, and they wanted me to be a deacon, so I became a deacon and we did all of this for three years. And after three years, the church was just like it was when we started.

I understood the last part of this comment to mean that their efforts were not making a difference in the church, that the church was not growing, for example. Robert and Dana explained that they maintain ties to their previous church and many activities they started are still going. However, they felt called to Desert Christian, and have started a major program there called Stephen's Ministries. This is in addition to the men's breakfast life group, about which I interviewed Robert. Desert Christian is fortunate to receive the benefits of the commitment and enthusiasm of leaders like Robert, Dana, and others. They give many hours to the church.

*Conclusion: Big Faith in Small Groups?*

Churches need both the financial and time contributions of their members. Chaves (2006) argues, in fact, that one reason for the increasing concentration of people in very large churches since the 1970s is rising costs. Despite steadily rises financial contributions to churches – Americans are famously generous to their religious congregations – he finds that contributions have not kept pace with the rising cost of providing quality programming.

Highly integrated and committed small group leaders, like those I've described at Desert Christian, provide a ready pool of inexpensive labor, helping create quality programming at low cost. Minimal oversight, which is part of the free market model,

also keeps costs low. The lack of control inherent in this system is framed as a matter of faith.

Is Desert Christian's faith in its life groups warranted? Perhaps not for the reason conventional wisdom would have us think. At Desert Christian, where small groups are organized in a particular way that they call free market philosophy, their small group program does not pull the membership together into a highly integrated and committed whole. Desert Christian life groups do, however, integrate leaders of these groups into the church (more so than participants). In doing so, the church creates a highly committed group of leaders available at minimal cost to the church able to provide additional quality programming to the membership. In fact, although not for the reasons one might have expected, Desert Christian's big faith in small groups may well be justified.

**CHAPTER FOUR: BIG, MEDIUM, THEN SMALL:  
NESTED GROUPS AND SUNDAY MORNING FIRST AT HARBOR BAPTIST**

Harbor Baptist, the second research site, is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. This chapter details its setting, people, beliefs, activities, and its system for organizing groups. They describe their identity as a ‘Sunday School Church,’ and recently decided to ‘return to their roots’ by focusing all of their resources on ‘the Sunday morning experience.’ This includes the large worship services as well as Adult Bible Fellowships (aka, Sunday School). Leaders report that the church experimented for several years with a ‘stand-alone’ small group program. During those years, in addition to Adult Bible Fellowships, the church supported a small group ministry with two full-time pastors and one additional staff member. The former small group pastor reports that, at its peak, the ministry supported more than 300 small groups in the church. However, the leadership also frames this as a time when the large and growing church branched off in too many directions. Several years ago, the church pulled back, and refocused. As part of this strategic new direction, the church intentionally dismantled the centralized ministry for ‘stand-alone’ small groups, and allowed small groups created under that system to ‘die natural deaths.’ The former small group staff members moved to other areas in the church, and the entire church staff was reorganized around the ‘Sunday morning experience.’ Under this new focus, small groups remain part of the church’s vision. However, the philosophy is that small groups in the church ought to

branch out primarily if not solely through the medium-sized Adult Bible Fellowship groups.

### **Setting**

The drive from the center of town is a long one. Like many megachurches in sunbelt cities, Harbor Baptist Church sits on the far outskirts of a major metropolitan area. After passing the already developed areas in the first half of the 30 minute drive, I see new subdivisions under construction and sales signs: 'Models Open.' For the last ten minutes or so, there is not much but desert. The four lane road narrows to two, and traffic signals are replaced by stop signs at several intersections. In the last mile before reaching the Harbor Baptist, several churches appear by the side of the road.

The church has been at its current site for eight years. Previously, it was located (literally) just down the road about five miles. The church's street number, but not its name, changed with the move. The church grew past the capacity of the old site. On Sundays, they had to use overflow parking at a nearby mall, with shuttle buses to bring people to the church. Adult Bible Fellowships simply could not fit into the classroom space available. The old site was situated on a location that has become a busy commercial intersection. As such, when sold, the church was torn down and a drugstore sits on its old corner.

The sign for Harbor Baptist Church is etched onto a large boulder by the side of the road. It is fairly unobtrusive.<sup>43</sup> It reads simply "Harbor." Members report that they noticed the removal of the "Baptist" and "Church" from signage and Sunday bulletins

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<sup>43</sup> A larger sign with service times has been constructed in 2007.

coincided with their move to the current site. Some interpreted this as meaning that the church is no longer affiliated with a denomination, although, in fact, Harbor remains tied to the Southern Baptist Convention.

The sprawling campus sits well back from the road, beyond the vast sea of parking. The main buildings are constructed from materials that blend with the surrounding landscape. Along with the large worship hall, there is a smaller hall used for teen worship, women's ministry, and other groups numbering 100 or so. There are two two-story education buildings with several dozen classrooms. During the week, these are the main buildings for Harbor Christian School, a primary school as well as nursery school run by an arm of the church. On Sundays, the education buildings are full of Adult Bible Fellowship groups, as are several other one-story buildings that house meeting areas. Space is at a premium on Sundays, and Adult Bible Fellowship groups sometimes have to move to new locations as groups grow, shrink, merge and start new. The offices for the church are housed in two large modular buildings that sit in the parking lot behind the worship hall. In the center of the complex, outside the church lobby, is a patio courtyard with tables and chairs, as well as a large playground area. On Sundays, there is a serving line on the patio, with beverages as well as cold and hot food for sale. This area stays busy with families and groups of people starting with the second morning service through the end of the third service.

## **People**

### *Leadership and Organizational Structure*

Like Desert Christian, and as is often true of megachurches more generally (Thumma 1996), Harbor has a charismatic and enormously popular senior pastor. The senior pastor at Harbor, however, has been with the church for most of its history. The church experienced essentially all of its growth under his leadership. A long-time church member recalls being on the search committee that called Pastor Robert, about 30 years ago. She gets tears in her eyes as she remembers feeling that this person was exactly right for their church which numbered about 100 members. Today, the paid staff is larger than the total membership at that time.

Harbor Baptist employs a large full time staff of more than 150 people. Of these, about 80 are primarily involved in Harbor Christian School. Directly under the senior pastor is Senior Associate Pastor Gary. Considerably younger than the senior pastor, Gary is presumed to be Pastor Robert's successor. Under the senior associate pastor, but also reporting to the senior pastor is an executive pastor who provides oversight to the staff under the leadership of the senior and senior associate pastors. The full executive team includes these three leaders, and six associate pastors: three associate pastors for church ministries; one associate pastor for administration; one associate pastor for worship; and one associate pastor for the Christian school. The three associate pastors for church ministries connect with Adult Bible Fellowships and small groups at Harbor, two in a direct supervisory way, and the third in a supportive role of providing church-wide curricula. The leadership team members are white and male, ranging in age from 30s to 60s. They have dedicated or shared administrative assistants as support staff. The administrative support staff members are white and female. Many staff members were

hired from the church membership, and there are several husband and wife pairs on staff, as well as a few parents and adult children.

The responsibilities of the two associate pastors with direct responsibility for Adult Bible Fellowships are organized by demographic or life stage. Pastor Hal has responsibility for families including preschool (Sunday School, not the weekday Christian school), children, students, and married couples. Pastor Andy's responsibilities encompass members who are young adults, single adults, senior adults, as well as the women's ministry. Pastor Hal described to me the organizational structure as it extended from paid staff to lay leaders. Reporting to pastors are lay leader division directors who have oversight responsibility for several different departments.

Each Adult Bible Fellowship group is its own department. Thus, department director and ABF director refer to the same position. Pastor Andy's team includes an additional layer of pastors involved in the ABF structure. Michael, the pastor for singles and young adults reports to him, as well as Rick, the senior adult pastor. Division directors, followed by department directors then report to this layer of pastors. I have outlined the top leadership, as well as parts of the organizational structure most relevant to small and medium-sized groups, in figure 4.1.

At the start of my research, Pastor Vicki was responsible for single ABFs. However, partway through the research, the church reorganized and moved Vicki's ABF responsibilities to Pastor Michael. Now the paid staff directly involved in leadership of ABFs is all male. However, the next level of lay leadership, division directors, is a mixture of men and women, as well as couples.

**Figure 4.1: Harbor Baptist Abbreviated Organization Chart<sup>44</sup>**

<u>Pastoral Staff (12)</u>					
Senior Pastor Robert					
Senior Assoc Pastor Gary					
Executive Pastor Matt*					
Assoc Pastor <u>Admin</u> Joe	Assoc Pastor <u>Ch. Min.</u> Hal*	Assoc Pastor <u>Ch. Min.</u> Andy*	Assoc Pastor <u>Ch Min.</u> Barry*	Assoc Pastor <u>Worship</u> George	Assoc Pastor <u>HCS (School)</u> Dan
Projects Assistant: Debbie					
Executive Assistant: Jessica					
Administrative Assistant: Sharisse					
Associate Pastor Administration: Joe			Staff (24)		
Associate Pastor of Church Ministries: Hal*			Staff (19)		
Preschool, Children, Student, Married Couples					
Preschool Director					
Children's Pastor					
High School Pastor / Team Leader					
Associate Pastor of Church Ministries: Andy*			Staff (11)		
Young Adult, Single Adult, Senior Adult, Women's Ministry					
Admin Assistant: Jennifer*					
Women's Ministries Director: Sheryle*					
Young Adult Pastor: Michael*					
Singles' Ministries Pastor (former): Vicki*					
Minister of Guest Relations: Tom*					
Senior Adult Pastor: Rick*					
Associate Pastor of Church Ministries: Barry*			Staff (13)		
Pastoral Svcs /Global Outreach Team / Teacher & Curriculum Development					
Associate Pastor Worship: George			Staff (14)		
Worship Team					
Associate Pastor Harbor Christian School & Preschool			Staff (78)		

<sup>44</sup> Asteriks (\*) indicate staff members interviewed.

At the start of my research, Pastor Vicki was responsible for single ABFs. However, partway through the research, the church reorganized and moved Vicki's ABF responsibilities to Pastor Michael. Previously, Vicki was the only woman pastor with ABF responsibility, so now the paid staff directly involved in leadership of ABFs is all male. However, the next level of lay leadership, division directors, is a mixture of men and women, as well as couples.

### *Membership*

From the 100 members who welcomed Senior Pastor Robert in the early 1970s, the church has grown to almost 3000.<sup>45</sup> attenders on any given Sunday. The sea of people on Sundays appears to span the generations, with plenty of older adults as well as young families with children. Neither the older nor the younger generation appears to predominate. The majority appear White, although there are small minorities of Latino, African-American, and Asian-American individuals and families. People appear to be mostly and solidly middle class. The cars that fill the parking lot on Sunday include mini-vans, sedans, and trucks. They are in good condition but are not luxury models. During fieldwork, I met teachers and social workers, homemakers, administrators, and small business owners.

Attendance figures differ significantly from membership figures. While in some churches, membership rolls are larger than the number of people who show up on Sunday, in megachurches, this pattern is typically reversed. The size of megachurches creates an easy means for minimal participation. Unlike smaller churches who suffer

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<sup>45</sup> In interviews, most leaders talked about attendance as 'about 3000.' When I followed up and asked for an official figure, I was informed that average Sunday attendance in 2006 was 2800.

from free riders who take resources without giving back, megachurches may benefit from the Sunday ‘visitor.’ The large size of the congregation may make the church attractive to newcomers and contribute to church growth.

### **Beliefs**

The header on the flyer reads “Bible Fellowships at Harbor” in large print. If a visitor to the church walks through the door under the large “Welcome Center” sign, they will quickly be offered one of these colorful flyers. The version published in summer 2006 has small print on the bottom of the flyer that includes a street address and phone number, along with the longer version of its name: “Safe Harbor Baptist Church.” Harbor continues to be affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, and its shortened name does not represent an official disaffiliation, although some members with whom I spoke imagined that to be the case. The name shortening is certainly about more than convenience, however. Like many megachurches, Harbor is establishing a recognizable identity in a process similar to corporate branding (Twitchell 2004). A short, easy to remember name is a key part of successful branding. Church leadership at Harbor never spoke of brand or marketing. However, they spoke regularly of church identity, and of the ‘DNA’ of the organization. Becoming “Harbor” versus “Safe Harbor Baptist Church” also signals the relationship of the church to the SBC national organization. Thumma (1996) has argued that even affiliated megachurches are ‘functionally nondenominational.’ While this appears to be true at Harbor, leaders at the church frame this as an important part of being inviting to newcomers, to nonbelievers and fallen away Christians.

This distance from the national denomination is part of a larger anti-institutional sentiment at Harbor. On Easter Sunday 2007, during a service that is clearly designed to attract once a year visitors to come back next week, Senior Associate Pastor Gary talked about the “religious treadmill” as a trap that people may have experienced in the past. He invited all into a personal relationship with Jesus as means of rejecting ‘chalkboard religion,’ an idea that we tally about our wrongs and rights on a chalkboard of the soul, and the sum represents God’s likely judgment. Another indicator that Easter was geared toward the inactive believer or nonbeliever was that the sermon included only two Bible verses, compared to a more typical ten or twelve. As Gary read the first scripture (John 3:3) about the necessity of being born again, he told the gathered that they may have heard this so many times that they have missed its meaning. What we need to do, said young Pastor Gary, is to ‘de-churchify it.’ This phrase was scattered several times throughout his sermon. In this way, Harbor is reaching out to those they sense are anti-religion, suggesting as is common of megachurches that they are not only different, but better than other churches. (Thumma 1996:489)

The mission of the church is to “close the gap” for its members, helping them to realize the promises of God’s Kingdom. The church signals its openness to the troubles people face in contemporary society by adopting language from the Christian-based Celebrate Recovery Program started at Saddleback. The church bulletin says people will be welcomed “as they are,” complete with their “hurts, habits, and hang-ups.”<sup>46</sup> The

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<sup>46</sup> This language is identical to that of the national Celebrate Recovery program, per its web site [www.CelebrateRecovery.com](http://www.CelebrateRecovery.com).

church emphasizes Bible teaching as well as support and fellowship in order to help its member achieve this.

## **Worship and Other Activities**

### *Worship*

Three Sunday services at 7:50, 9:15, and 10:45 last an hour and 15 minutes each. Lines begin to form in the lobby for the second and third service, while the prior service finishes and lets out. Ushers cordon off the lobby doorways to the worship hall, so that those wanting to enter wait for the earlier service to exit. The worship service schedule is paralleled by the ABF schedule. The short time between services and classes seems designed not for fellowship, but rather for efficiency. Fifteen minutes between services is just enough time for a restroom stop, which for women will involve lines, and then getting from one building to another, from the worship hall to a classroom building or vice versa. It seems that Sunday fellowship is meant to occur primarily inside ABFs rather than in the church lobby or on the patio.

The services are essentially identical, and the basic format remains the same from week to week. The first twenty minutes or so are praise and worship, led by a worship pastor who sings and/or plays guitar. Typically, this involves three to six singers, and the same number of musicians, playing guitar, drums and keyboard. The music is generally upbeat and contemporary. Words are displayed on large screens above the stage. The word displays often include graphics to accompany the songs, for example, nature scenes, biblical scenes, or a contemporary person with arms raised in praise. Most of the congregation stands for praise and worship as they participate in the singing. Scattered

throughout the crowd, a person here or there raises one hand or both in an upward or forward gesture of praise. Like the singers and musicians on the stage, many people move to the music, swaying, tapping their feet, clapping hands. Toward the end of the twenty minutes, the tempo of the songs slows, and the worship pastor may ask people to bow their heads and pray or reflect. As the singers and musicians exit, stagehands swiftly place a stool, table, microphone, and if the senior pastor is teaching, a laptop, in the front center portion of the stage.

Most sermons are preached by either the senior or senior associate pastor, although occasionally another pastor will preach. Both have a laid back and friendly style, and both use PowerPoint projected on the large screens. Senior Pastor Robert uses a laptop for his teaching, and actually ‘writes’ on his laptop while he speaks. He circles and underlines for emphasis and handwrites short jotted notes. His writing appears on the large screens as he works. Pastor Robert has a Ph.D. and his preaching style is intellectual and friendly. Younger Pastor Gary also uses Powerpoint, but controls it with a remote. He does not use a laptop. Sermons are typically introduced with a problem, a question, and more often than not, a funny story or joke. Soon thereafter, we are instructed to “open your Bibles.” Sermons are considered Bible teaching, and the lessons include both historical context and contemporary relevance. Sometimes a video presentation is included during or toward the end of a sermon. An outline of the Sunday sermon is often included inside the church bulletin.

After the sermon, once a month, the church celebrates communion. A small army of ushers enter the worship hall carrying silver trays with holders for miniature plastic

cups of grape juice and space in the center for very small puffed wafers. Ushers work together to pass the communion trays down one aisle and up the next. After monthly communion, or following the sermon on other weeks, the ushers use the same process to pass shallow silver offering trays. Offering envelopes are available in seat back holders throughout the worship hall. There is often music during communion and/or the offering time. The pastor says a few more words and tells the congregation “The service is dismissed.”

### *Christian Education*

Christian education is clearly the main priority of the church, after corporate worship. The centrality of Adult Bible Fellowships is evident in the idea of the “Sunday Morning Experience” which includes both worship with the larger church, and teaching and fellowship in an Adult Bible Fellowship. Associate Pastor Hal, when describing the organizational structure of pastors at his level, described the three pastors directly associated with ABFs as “Christian Ed.” The church places great value on Christian education at all levels and ages. There is a Christian primary school and preschool on-site, which is part of the church. On Sundays, Bible teaching starts with the youngest children, through teens, and adults of all life stages.

### *Missionary Work*

Despite the apparent emphasis on church as home and its own membership as family, Harbor Church has an active global missionary program. Once a year, they hold a street fair, with ethnic foods and displays from around the world. This is also a major fundraising effort for the church’s global missionary efforts around the world. Sunday

bulletins regularly include mention of missionary work. While some missionary efforts are sponsored by the church as a whole, there are also numerous instances of Adult Bible Fellowships sponsoring missionary efforts. Missionaries may have come from the ABF, may have a parent or other relative in the ABF, or are unrelated except that the ABF has chosen to help missionary efforts. Missionaries abroad regularly return to the states to stay connected and to conduct fundraising. When sponsored by an ABF, they may write letters to the class, and make a presentation about their work when they are in the states. In some instances, ABF members have opened their homes to host missionaries back from their work.

### *Social Services*

Like many churches, there are many efforts often quietly done which care for members. The Harbor has a benevolence program to assist members in financial need. In addition, one staff member coordinates home and hospital visitation as well as funerals for the church. ABF members often provide various kinds of care for one another. In one senior adults ABF, members drive to nursing homes to pick up other members who are not able to drive. An ABF comprised of young married couples organizes meals for a family whose mother was facing serious health problems.

The emphasis on social services for non-members, except that which is included in global missionary work, appears to be light. The church does help sponsor a feeding program. The description in the church bulletin reads: “Feeding the homeless with dignity, the spiritually and physically hungry.” While there is recognition in the statement of material problems (‘homeless’ and ‘hungry’), this framing ensures that the

missionary component of the social service action is also emphasized. In addition, the actual feeding is done by a sister church in another city. Harbor members are encouraged to donate goods or money, but do not participate in the feeding program itself.

#### *Individual Counseling and Celebrate Recovery*

The church lives up to its promise to welcome members complete with all of their “hurts, habits, and hang-ups.” There are four pastoral counselors on staff who provide counseling to members and to the community.

One program offered by the church is geared toward both members and non-members. Harbor Baptist sponsors Celebrate Recovery, the same national program described in the previous chapter. The guidelines for Celebrate Recovery are quite structured, and are therefore very similar at any church who sponsors a program. The format includes a large group meeting for fellowship (often dinner), praise and worship (music and singing), and testimony (personal stories of recovery from addiction or other problems). After the large group meeting, people break out into small groups for more intensive and person discussion. In addition, Celebrate Recovery small groups meet during the week to study and complete the reading and writing associated with the steps of the program. These small groups are not associated with ABFs at the church, and in fact, unlike most small groups at Harbor, Celebrate Recovery groups are likely to include non-members. Only a few churches in the larger metropolitan area sponsor Celebrate Recovery programs, and some of those who participate travel to two or more of those churches to be involved.

*Life Stage Ministries*

The church sponsors a variety of specialized ministries that may or may not connect to Adult Bible Fellowships. Like Desert Christian, an active women's ministry program sponsors two Bible studies weekly, one in the daytime and one in the evening, as well as retreats and other activities. The Women's Bible study groups use a format that involves a large group teaching followed by small group discussion. The daytime group numbers more than 60 on any given week, and the evening group is about 40. Small group discussion occurs in the same large room, but focuses on those at the table. Participants remain at the same table each week over the course of a season, but may rearrange from one season to the next. Discussion questions are typically suggested for small group discussion by the teacher for the study. The evening group is more likely to use an educational video and supporting workbook. The women's ministry is largely self-supporting through an annual resale event that has grown massive over the years, generating thousands of dollars in one weekend. The women's ministry is separate from the women's ABFs organizationally. Sheryle, the director reports to Barry, the associate pastor who develops curricula for ABFs but does not supervise them directly. (The women's ABFs are overseen by Associate Pastor Andy.) However, there is much informal connection as the women's ministry director keeps the ABFs informed, and the women's ABFs announce upcoming activities of the women's ministry.

Although the focus of this study is groups of adults, the church does have an extensive youth ministry that includes small groups for teens facilitated by trained adults.

Along with weekend worship designed specifically for them, Harbor teens have many activities available throughout the week.

Unlike the women's ministry, the ministry for senior adults is directed by the same pastor who is responsible for senior adult ABFs, Pastor Rick who reports to Pastor Andy. Senior Adult ABFs announce a variety of regular activities to which all seniors are invited such as barbecues and socials. Because Harbor has become increasingly contemporary in worship style, seniors are a group that are at risk for leaving the church over unhappiness with things like music style and volume. The pastor for seniors has gone to great lengths to compensate for these difficulties, offering an alternate music segment for the early morning service, for example. Seniors, and anyone else preferring traditional music, could meet for twenty minutes of traditional hymns in one of the classroom buildings, and a shuttle would then take them to the worship hall in time for the sermon. While the idea did not appear to take off, leaders of senior groups express that they feel cared for by Pastor Rick.

There is a men's ministry at Harbor, although it is significantly smaller and less active than either the women's or senior's ministry. At one time, there were two weekly men's Bible studies that were open to all, but these groups are no longer meeting. Pastor Rick has responsibility for both the men's ministry and the one small men's ABF. Unlike other ABFs, the men's ABF could qualify for what most people consider a small group. In the next section, I detail Harbor's system of groups, including their focus on groups of different size.

## **Groups**

### *Philosophy and History*

Harbor Baptist's focus is on 'Sunday Morning First' or the "Sunday Morning Experience." While the leadership of the church recognizes the importance of small groups, they have decided to focus their efforts first on medium-sized groups in the form of Adult Bible Fellowships or Sunday School Classes. These groups are meant to range in size from 30-60, and ideally every member of the church would affiliate with an ABF. In reality, however, the church reports that 30% of members are involved, which is similar to other estimates of involvement at megachurches. The church goal for ABF involvement is to surpass 50%, and Executive Pastor Matt believes that is achievable. There is increasing emphasis on ABFs in Sunday bulletins and in sermons.

Small groups are also important, and some pastors encourage formation of small groups as an outgrowth of the ABFs. This is the vision for small groups under the present system as described by senior leadership. Small groups are more intimate than ABFs, and can provide a different level of accountability and support. Small groups are where members can really get 'transparent.' Associate Pastor Barry explained why he believes small groups are important:

The purpose of that small group is to really build a more intimate connection with people. You can do that with 6-8-10-12 folks much easier than you can do that with 30--60 people.

They are especially important for ABFs that grow very large. In actual practice, about half of ABFs (17 of 33) list small groups as one of their activities on the flyer that

publicizes their group. Survey data to be collected in the next phase of this project will provide more details on this.

The current emphasis on the Sunday morning experience is several years old. Prior to that, Harbor tried a different philosophy on small groups. In addition to the adult Sunday School program, Harbor had a specific Small Groups ministry. Starting in 1997-1998, this was led by a Small Groups Pastor (Barry) with a dedicated staff of three. Over a period of four years, the church initiated more than 300 small groups, mostly home-based. The program was extensive, and based on involvement, very successful. However, the church was also undergoing many changes at this time, including the major upheaval to the new site. As the pastoral leadership as well as lay leadership describe it, the church became involved in too many things. After some reflection, the leadership decided to reorganize the staff and the structures available for member participation in the church. 'Stand-alone' small groups, as those that were started under the small groups ministry were called, were intentionally allowed to die off. Staff was organized around life stage groups with responsibility for Adult Bible Fellowships. All of the senior leadership explained that small groups are still part of the Harbor vision. The problem, Pastor Barry explained, was that the church had a "dual infrastructure," meaning that the church was organized around both small and medium-sized groups which were not integrated together. The new design solves that problem:

Now we're building a small group network again, but those small groups are all affiliated with the mid-sized group. Instead of competing infrastructure, they're part of the same infrastructure. And that then adds an element to community that you don't get in just the mid-sized group.

The plan is for small groups to branch off from each mid-sized ABF, so that these small groups are part of the overall structure of the church.

Pastor Barry continues to have a central role in the activities of groups at Harbor. He develops ABF curricula for approximately half of the Sundays each year. ABFs are free to choose their own curricula for the remaining weeks. Pastor Barry still believes passionately in the value of small groups, and hopes that they will continue to be formed in the new system which calls for small groups to grow out of ABFs. He himself belongs to a group that has been together for eleven years. He tells me about this group, and the way they have supported each other through births and deaths.

We've cried together, we've celebrated together. We've encouraged each other. We've literally become family. And that, **that** is what small group is about.

He undoubtedly remains a champion within the leadership team for the importance of small groups.

#### *How Many, How Big, and What Kinds of Groups*

Pastor Barry described how Harbor's philosophy differentiates between and recognizes the importance of groups of different size:

The small group provides a place of intimacy. The mid-sized group provides a place of belonging, and the larger congregational experience then is really a place of affiliation.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will report on ABFs as a smaller (although medium-sized) group in the very large megachurch. In summer 2006, Harbor listed 31 ABFs on its flyer summarizing the groups. These were organized into eight life stage

groups. The groups are in flux. New ones are started; old ones dissolve; and sometimes groups merge or split. Six months after the summer flyer was published, there were 33 ABFs, with two new groups for young adults, one more for middle-aged couples, and one less for senior adults. All but three ABFs are defined by some combination of age, marital status, and gender. One of the three is arguably defined by age, albeit an inclusive version. They call themselves “Intergenerational.” The other two ABFs not defined by life stage emphasize service and missions respectively. All but three ABFs include women and men. The gender-specific ABFs include two large women’s ABFs and one very small men’s ABF. This parallels the active and less active women’s and men’s ministries respectively. It also reflects an established research finding in the sociology of religion that women tend to be more religiously active than men (Batson et al. 1993; Bensen et al. 1989; Cornwall 1989; Glock et al. 1967; Moberg 1962). It partially contradicts, however, at least one scholar’s argument that megachurches are successful in part because they better cater to the needs of men (Twitchell 2004). While this may be true, and in fact, there may be more than the usual amount of men actively involved in mixed-gender ABFs, it is not reflected in the size of the Men’s ABF at Harbor. The men’s ABF considers itself a solid, if small, group, and eight men regularly attend on Sundays. It is the only established ABF with fewer than 20 adults in regular attendance. Average weekly ABF attendance based on church publications is 31 and ranges from a low of 15 to a high of 90-100.

### *Leadership of Groups*

ABFs leaders are called Directors: ABF Directors, Class Directors, or more formally, Department Directors. The title “Department Director” reflects an organizational structure that comes from the larger Southern Baptist Convention. The Christian Education website for the SBC<sup>47</sup> explains the roles of department (class) directors, and the intermediate division directors.

Some classes are led by individuals, while two-thirds are co-directed by married couples or teams of two married couples. In interviews, ABF directors report that they were asked to consider taking their leadership role, either by a pastor in the church, or by former ABF directors. They are responsible for the overall direction and functioning of their class. Their actual activities vary based on the size of the group and the extent to which the group has organized additional leaders to handle various functions. Some ABF directors of large groups report that along with a teacher or a teaching team, they also delegate responsibilities to leaders for activities such as greeting members and newcomers, making coffee, setting up furniture, and taking attendance. Sherry, ABF Director of a large and organized group, holds a monthly meeting of ABF leaders in her home where they discuss upcoming teaching agendas, as well as all of the other activities and concerns of the ABF. Several ABF Directors indicate that they meet with leaders in their ABF quickly at the end of the class time on some regular basis. Still other ABF directors handle most everything themselves, from making the coffee, to room set up, announcements, and email updates. One thing directors do not do, however, is that they

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<sup>47</sup> See the denomination’s web site, [www.sbc.net](http://www.sbc.net).

do not teach. The Class Teacher is a clearly differentiated role, and the flyers which describe the groups list Class Director and Class Teacher separately.

On any given Sunday, ABF directors will complete a number of tasks in fulfilling their responsibilities. They will pick up attendance forms and announcements from centrally located mailboxes. They may either set up their room or check up on the set up handled by other members. After fellowship time, which ranges from a few to as many as 30 minutes, depending on the group, the Class Director or someone designated will open in prayer. There may be a time of praise and prayer requests, where members report on things for which they are thankful or concerned. One seniors group sings traditional religious hymns during the opening of their class time. Usually the Director makes announcements, and then turns the class over to the teacher for the day. The teacher may close and dismiss the class, or may return the class to the Director to close. The ABF Director typically takes attendance (unobtrusively) during the class time, using a computer generated list of affiliated members. The director returns the attendance form to the church mailbox after class is over. The director or someone from the class puts away coffee makers or cleans up food items as appropriate, readying the room for the next class.

#### *Staff Responsibility for Groups*

A clear line of authority begins with the senior pastor of the church, through several levels of pastors, to lay leaders called Division Directors with responsibility for several classes, to Department or ABF Directors who are responsible for a single class. All ABF Directors I interviewed were clear about which pastor was responsible for their

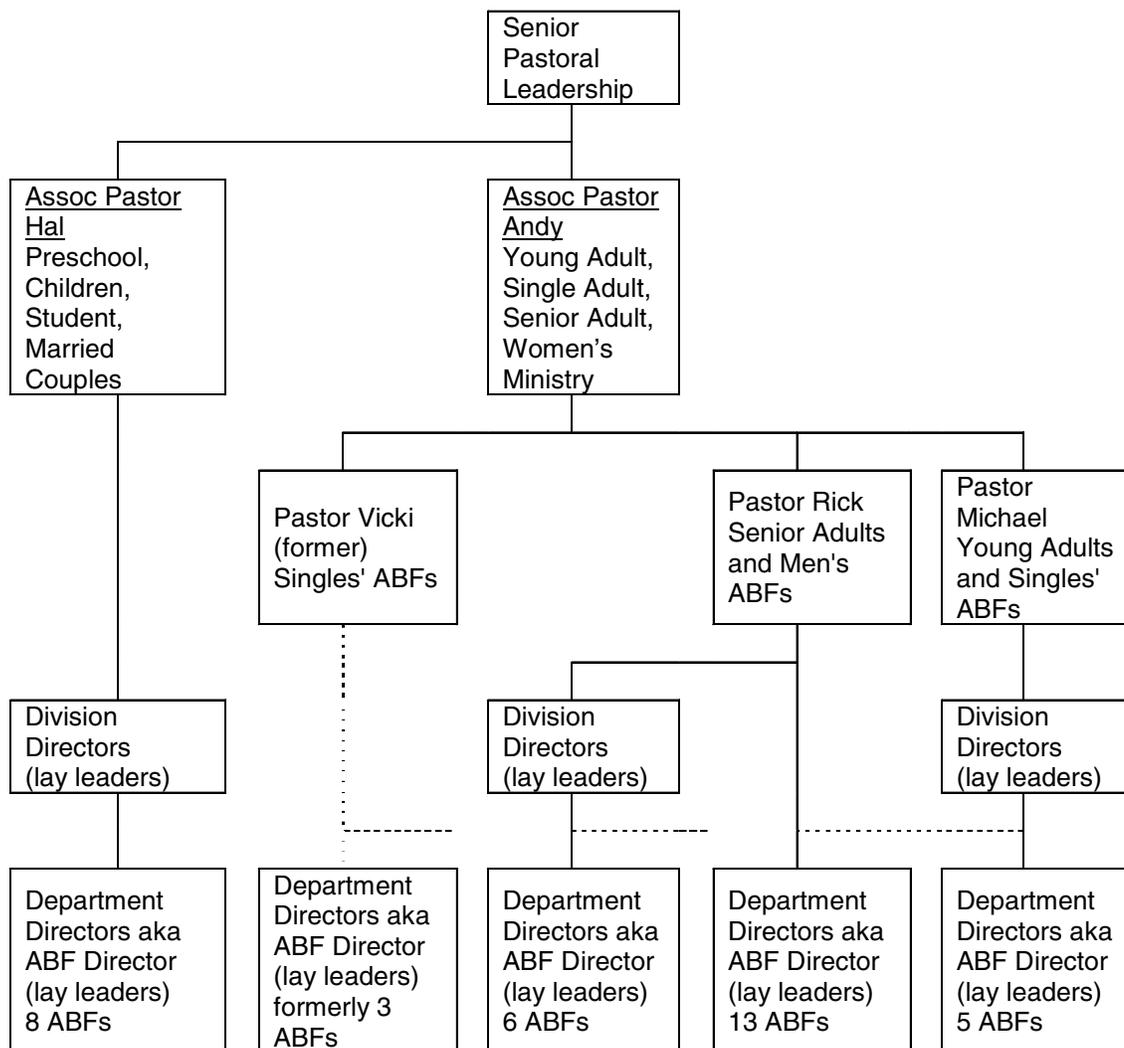
group. They identified Division Directors less consistently, and referred to them by name and not title.

Two associate pastors, Hal and Andy, oversee all of the ABFs operating at Harbor. While Pastor Hal has a large team with several pastors, they are children's, middle and high school pastors. None of them oversee ABFS. Hal himself has direct oversight for his Division Directors and ABF Directors. Pastor Andy (young adults, singles, and seniors), on the other hand, has pastors on his team with oversight responsibility for each of these three groups. There is an extra level of pastoral oversight provided. Figure 4.2 illustrates the organizational structure of ABF leadership as it links to the paid staff organization.

Pastors keep in touch with Division and Department Directors in various ways. Some have formal monthly meetings for Division and Department Directors. The pastors are quite visible in ABFs on Sundays. As I visited ABFs during my field research, I noticed pastors visiting classes at various times, often checking in during fellowship time or announcements, but also stopping in during teaching or at the end of classes. Depending on which pastor had oversight responsibility, ABF Directors reported they stayed in touch mostly by email, through regular meetings, or in person on Sundays.

Associate Pastor Barry is responsible for developing curriculum for ABFs. The church provides extensive teaching materials for about half of the Sundays during the year. This associate pastor's team also provides teacher training for Class Teachers. The church holds a leadership meeting each quarter for all leaders in the church. The senior leadership makes presentations on the direction and planned activities of the church.

**Figure 4.2: Harbor Baptist ABF Organizational Support Structure**



Then the group breaks out. Teachers go with the associate pastor for education to study the curriculum and teaching plans in more depth; directors go with the other associate pastors and senior leadership to discuss ABFs further. Many ABF directors reported that

they felt the church did a good job of keeping them informed, and referred to these meetings as informative.

### *Church Resources for Groups*

ABFs meet in classrooms used for the Christian school during the week, as well as some larger all purpose rooms. Many of the classrooms have movable wall dividers, so a class of 50, for example, may use two classrooms. In addition to space, the church provides training and support, as described in the section on staff responsibility above. The church also provides teaching materials when the classes do things other than basic Bible study. A singles' class I visited, for example, showed a video about "the languages of love," and each of us received a glossy workbook to use in conjunction with the video and discussion. These were purchased for the class by the church. Materials are not always provided. A class for married couples decided to study a book on Christian marriage. In this case, the couples purchased the books for themselves.

Although the church does provide substantial material and support resources to ABFs, they are also in some ways self-supporting. Most ABFs take a collection, and these funds are used in various ways. Larger ABFs may support missionary work. They do this separately from the larger church, although the church may help them facilitate their contributions, by setting up a special account for an ABF, for example. Most groups have refreshments that are brought by members. Some organize this with rotating responsibility for providing them.

### *Getting Members into Groups*

On the corner of the massive wall of the worship center that is closest to visitor parking is a small door with “Welcome Center” above it. On the day I enter it, the welcome center is staffed by two volunteers. They are behind a counter which has multi-colored flyers with ABFs listed on them, a different color for singles’ groups, young married groups, men’s groups, etc. I explain that I am a researcher and would like to pick up some materials. They are friendly but more interested in the next gentleman who is a ‘real’ first timer. They talk to him about different Adult Bible Fellowships as the way to get involved. They describe some of the differences in ABFs as they seek to find one to guide him toward.

One wall of the church main lobby is filled with these colorful flyers, and the same materials can be found in the welcome tent that stands out in the courtyard near the food court patio. The welcome tent is also staffed by two volunteers who are not pushy but happy to talk about Adult Bible Fellowships. As a newcomer to the church, one cannot help but notice the flurry of activity between services, as people stream not only in or out of church, but also in and out of education buildings.

One morning I searched futilely for a particular ABF, that I would later learn had moved. I was helped by a friendly man standing in the hallway. It was getting late and rather than keep seeking the ABF of my original plan, I decided I would just visit another one that seemed available. He asked if I was looking for something, and I explained that I was a researcher visiting ABFs. He helpfully described a class on one side of the hall, said I was a bit young for the other side of the hall, but that the latter class was going to

have a great teacher. He said this with a twinkle in his eye, and when I chose classroom #2, he confessed that he would be teaching that day. In fact, this was Pastor Rick, whom I had hoped to meet. He walked me into the class, introduced me to one of the class directors who gave me a name tag, a visitor/attendance form, and walked me to a table and introduced me to the table. About half the classes I visited had a greeter posted near the door who followed some process like this, often with a little less thoroughness, but nevertheless followed through on guiding a newcomer into the class.

Almost all classes I visited asked me to fill out a visitor card. This is a 3-part form a little larger than a large index card. The form asks for name, age, gender, marital status, address, phone, and comments. On each visit, I completed the forms and wrote that I was a student researcher in the comments section. I received several mailings after completing the cards. In some cases, these were general from a particular ministry. For example, after visiting a singles' ABF, I received a few notices of singles activities and events in the church. A few groups sent a standard welcome letter from their class. In one case, I received a short and friendly handwritten note, thanking me for my visit and hoping I would return. Some ABFs, then, do use the information collected from visitor cards to encourage visitors to return.

Along with the welcome centers and visible flyers in various places, church members are encouraged to join ABFs several times a year through the main worship service. Pastor Barry explained that during these times the sermon series and ABF teaching curriculum would be integrated, and the topics designed to attract people's interest to want to learn more. A sermon teaching on how to be a better spiritual parent,

for example, was accompanied by encouragement for people to join an ABF to learn more.

During my fieldwork, on one Sunday in early spring, the church sponsored an ABF fellowship day when ABFs did not meet in regular classrooms, but were organized into groups around the various outdoor areas of the church campus. Thus, there was an area for all of the senior ABFs, and for all of the singles' ABFs for example. This served in part to bring ABFs from the same Division together. However, it also made ABFs very visible to the portion of the congregation which does not participate. Although outdoors in wide open spaces, each separate area was enclosed with signs indicating which ABFs belonged there. There were barbecue lines inside the enclosed area. While it does not seem likely barbecue servers would question whether or not a person belonged to an appropriate ABF, one might feel funny going in without already being a part of an ABF. One class did use the opportunity to promote their ABF by staffing a table on the edge of their enclosure with flyers about them. The Director of the class stood at the table and spoke to folks wandering by. This director was unusual, however. There was not much overt recruiting taking place in general. This seemed to be mostly about fellowship between ABFs in the same "departments," and about making the ABFs visible to those not yet involved.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: REACHING OUT AND REINING IN: THE FOCUS OF SMALL GROUPS IN TWO MEGACHURCH SETTINGS**

In this chapter, I compare Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist, noting similarities among the two churches, and highlighting key differences between them. I also describe the cyclical movement outward and back inward reported by leaders at both sites. On the question of strictness, I find that neither church is particularly strict. I find evidence, however, of slightly more strictness at Harbor Baptist, and argue that this difference relates to the oversight and control of groups rather than differing beliefs. In addition, I compare the outward emphasis of the small group program at Desert Christian versus the focus of groups and the structure supporting it at Harbor Baptist which is more inward toward church members and group participants. Both churches report, however, and in the case of Desert Christian I was able to directly observe, a process of extending outward and having a very loose connection with groups, followed by a period of pulling groups back inward, striving to integrate groups together into the larger umbrella organization.

### **Two Megachurches and One Recognizable Institutional Form**

The settings of these two churches are remarkably similar. They each are situated on different outskirts of the same medium-sized southwestern city. Their campuses, buildings, and worship halls bear striking similarities. They both fall into what Thumma has cataloged as modern in style (Thumma 1996). The people of each church also appear to be largely similar. The congregations are mostly white, and appear to be lower-middle

to upper-middle class, with the vast majority appearing to be solidly middle class. Both churches span age groups from young families to senior adults. Desert Christian appears to have more younger families, while Harbor Baptist seems to be spread evenly across generations.

A major difference in the staff organizations is a much larger paid staff at Harbor Baptist. Harbor Baptist's staff is just over 100 for its 2800 regular attenders, whereas Desert Christian has just 34 paid staff for its 2000 regular attenders. Both churches are led by all male pastoral teams at the top level of leadership, including senior and associate pastors, as well as a group of all male elders. Desert Christian has proportionally more women at the next level of leadership as both pastors and directors. Harbor Baptist has a church council with oversight authority for the church in addition to the elders, and this leadership group has included at least one woman since the church's earliest days.

The churches have many beliefs in common. Both are evangelical in orientation, emphasizing the necessity of committing one's life to Christ, and being born again. Both espouse a doctrine of grace, emphasizing that salvation is a gift freely given to those ready to accept it, rather than earned through good works. Humans are sinners, but are saved by Christ's death and resurrection. There is a strong anti-institutional sentiment at both churches. Desert Christian emphasizes their non-denominational identity, while Harbor Baptist de-emphasizes their ties to the national Southern Baptist Convention. Preaching at both churches has included 'religion' as a straw man for negative associations with traditional church and religious organizations. These megachurches

position themselves as a sort of religious alternative to religion, emphasizing spirituality and relationship with Christ over religious rules or institutions.

Political beliefs at both churches also appear quite similar. While there is a sense of political conservatism as evidenced by bumper stickers in the parking lot on Sundays, there is very little, if any, overt political activity at either church. Moreover, perhaps because of their size or because of a broader backlash against the alignment of evangelical Christians with the Republican Party, there has been intentional distancing between both churches and any political party. At Desert Christian, during the weeks prior to the contentious national mid-term elections of 2006, the senior leadership devoted a weekly newsletter to the topic that Christ was neither Republican nor Democrat. At Harbor Baptist, an Adult Bible Fellowship Director described an incident in which one of the class teachers taught a lesson which suggested voting Republican was a necessary moral choice for Christians. The director explained that the leaders of the class called everyone in the class personally to apologize during the week after this lesson.

Overall, worship and other activities at both churches bear more similarities than differences. The general format and tenor of the services, starting with praise music for the first twenty minutes are quite similar. A visitor from one church would quickly feel at home in the other. While both churches make a point of allowing for casual dress, a bit more formality seems to characterize Harbor Baptist. Attendees at both churches wear a full range of clothing, from shorts and sandals to dresses and dress shirts. However, the range is more evenly spread at Harbor Baptist, whereas Desert Christian leans more

toward casual. Harbor Baptist attendees are also more likely to be carrying their own Bibles, although Bibles are available in seatback holders at both churches. This cultural difference is likely related, of course, to the emphasis on Adult Bible Fellowships which run concurrently with worship services at Harbor Baptist, whereas very few of the Desert Christian Bible study groups are scheduled on Sundays on the church campus. The informal air at Desert Christian includes the norm that it is acceptable for people to bring coffee, water bottles, and other beverages in the church service. This does not seem to be common for those seated in the floor section in the pews, but is somewhat common for those seated in the upper bleacher sections. Traditional church services include coffee *after*, not during, services. The new norm of beverages during worship at megachurches is visible at Harbor Baptist in a different way. As one enters the worship hall through the church lobby, small signs posted by each door read: “No food or beverage in worship hall.” This signage is not something your typical church finds it necessary to post. Harbor Baptist, however, is responding to a new norm for very large churches.<sup>48</sup>

The difference in the beverage norm is a minor one. A major difference in the culture of these two churches is an outward versus inward focus. One way this is manifested is in the mission statements of each church. The Harbor Baptist mission statement emphasizes disciple-making and bringing its members into the “promises of God’s Kingdom”. The emphasis in Desert Christian’s mission statement is twofold: evangelism by “loving people to Jesus” and social action by empowering these Christians

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<sup>48</sup> Another surprise greets a new visitor, not used to megachurches, at the door to Harbor Baptist’s worship hall. Small baskets labeled “Ear plugs” sit next to stacks of Sunday bulletins. These are a small but concrete reminder of a sometimes painful conflict at Harbor Baptist, mostly between older members and the leadership along with younger members, over the loud and contemporary music program that has replaced more traditional hymns.

to make a difference in the world. These mission statements subtly shift the attention of each church differently— at Harbor Baptist, inward toward its own members, and at Desert Christian, outward toward society and the world. While many aspects of these two churches are quite similar, both to each other and to megachurches more generally, I find this difference in mission manifested in the structure and philosophy of their programs for small and medium-sized groups. I describe these differences in greater detail in the sections below.

### **Launching and Shepherding: Small Group Organization at Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist**

One of the most striking differences between these two churches is the organization of small and medium-sized groups inside the larger church. In this section, I highlight key differences. The first and most obvious difference in the groups I studied at these two churches is size. Desert Christian has a large and active *small* groups program. These groups range widely in size, from less than ten to more than fifty attenders. Based on survey data, the mean group size is eleven and median group size is eight adults. Harbor Baptist, on the other hand, places its focus on Adult Bible Fellowship and considers these to be *medium-sized* groups. The median size of these groups is 35, as reported on group flyers (whose data comes from attendance records maintained by the church). Harbor Baptist supports small groups as well.<sup>49</sup> However, these are expected to be subsets of the ABF group structure, and at least at this time, there are not centralized lists or records of these groups.

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<sup>49</sup> I am presently collecting data on these smaller groups via a survey at Harbor Baptist, and will report on those findings in future work.

More important than size is a difference in the philosophy behind and the resulting oversight of groups at Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist. The two churches are on opposite ends of a spectrum of control and oversight when it comes to how they manage their groups. Desert Christian is intentionally hands-off. The groups are member-initiated and member-led. The church provides some minimal training, some basic administrative support, and virtually no oversight whatsoever. At Harbor Baptist on the other hand, the church is highly involved in ABF groups. The groups are defined by the church in terms of membership specifications (usually demographic of attendees) and leadership. Although the ‘front-line’ leadership in ABFs consists entirely of lay leaders, these leaders report to a clearly defined ‘chain of command.’ ABF leaders have a designated ‘middle manager’ lay leader who then reports to a church pastor. Sometimes the lay leader reports directly to one of two associate pastors of church ministries who are on the senior leadership team of the church, and in other cases, lay leaders may report to one of two other pastors, who then report to one of the associate pastors. In interviews, some ABF directors spoke of the lay leader (called division director) in their connection with church leaders while others did not. All ABF directors, whom I interviewed however, were very clear on “their pastor,” that is, the pastor with oversight responsibility for their group.

Along with differences in size, philosophy, and oversight, groups at the two churches are dramatically different in terms of *content*. Desert Christian Life Groups are interest-based groups that span a wide spectrum of possibilities. Some groups are organized around talking about or studying the Bible and other religious materials. Some

get together to practice crafts and hobbies or to play games, while others participate in athletic activities, and even motorcycling. Many groups open with a prayer, but some do not. Groups meet on all seven days of the week, at different times, and in different places. The groups are designed to be short-term, and leaders are encouraged to use start and end dates, or to at least to take breaks, during the summer months, for example.

In contrast, Harbor Baptist groups are organized almost exclusively around life stages. Various combinations of age, gender, and marital status define each of the thirty-four groups. Adult Bible Fellowships all meet on Sunday, on the church campus, at one of three possible times, in conjunction with worship service times.

The primary content of Adult Bible Fellowships is by definition Christian education. These are adult Sunday School classes, renamed both to avoid possible negative connotations ideas about more didactic versions of Sunday School, and to include the social and supportive aspect of ‘fellowship.’<sup>50</sup> The content of ABFs at Harbor Baptist has some variation across classes. A class for young married couples, for example, may read and study lessons from a book written by a popular Christian author on healthy marriages, while a class for singles may watch a video on dating and communication. During a substantial portion of the year, however, most classes follow the same curriculum. The church develops lessons for approximately 20 weeks per year. Comprehensive lesson plans and supporting materials are distributed during quarterly teacher-director meetings with the church leadership. Even when class content varies,

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<sup>50</sup> Two different members laughingly reported to me that they heard the name “Adult Bible Fellowship” was the result of someone realizing that “Adult Sunday School” made for a problematic acronym. Many members as well as leaders still refer to ABFs as classes.

most groups follow a very similar format during their Sunday meetings. A fellowship time of varying length is followed by an opening prayer and announcements. Some groups ask for input on prayer or praise requests. The director turns the group over to a teacher who provides the lesson for the day, usually using some kind of interactive format. There may be additional announcements at the end of class time, and most classes end in a prayer. There are variations. One seniors group includes traditional hymns with piano and accordion accompaniment, for example. However, the rhythm and format as well as the content of ABFs at Harbor Baptist are quite similar across groups.

The church sees these groups as medium-sized communities where members can learn together and support one another. The leadership recognizes that these groups are too large to foster intimacy in the group setting, but hope that members will make connections and/or form smaller groups from these communities in order to achieve the next level of relationship.

The two churches differ in terms of who participates in their groups. Their different philosophies are in alignment with the outward and inward focus discussed previously. A substantial proportion of Desert Christian Life Groups include non-church members among their participants. 45% of groups reported at least one non-member, and the average percentage of non-members participating in Life Groups is 14%. At Harbor Baptist, on the other hand, only rarely did an ABF Director report a non-member in his or her Adult Bible Fellowship.<sup>51</sup> This is by design. ABFs are intended to be the next level

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<sup>51</sup> I found one notable exception to this. Some leaders of senior ABFs believe that a substantial minority of their members have stopped attending worship at Harbor over dissatisfaction with the volume and type of music. I do not have data on this, and some suggested it is more a rumor than reality. Either way, this type

of participation for those who come for worship on Sunday. While at Desert Christian, some people may participate in a Life Group first, then decide to try out the church, this is not the case at Harbor Baptist.

The different philosophies, size, support structure and content of small and medium-sized groups at Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist come together to make radically different group experiences. Desert Christian is “*launching*” empowered member leaders into the world, hoping that they will find success in connecting and developing relationships with other Christians, and simultaneously invite new potential members into Christianity and the church. As an extreme example of the outward focus at Desert Christian, in a recent follow up visit to the church, I encountered the outreach pastor who reported a new and ambitious vision for small groups that would involve life groups “planting” new churches. Harbor Baptist, on the other hand, is striving to *shepherd* its existing membership. The church is pleased that 30% of members currently participate in ABFs, and the leadership believes that it will be able to attain a goal of 50% or more participation over the next few years. By shepherding its members, the church hopes to facilitate member participation in supportive communities with a biblical focus. In the next section, I discuss whether or to what extent these two models of group organization help make the churches more strict.

### **Following the Rules? Strictness and Small Groups in Two Megachurch Settings**

Small and medium-sized groups have numerous functions, and provide important benefits to participants in a megachurch setting. What small groups do not accomplish, at

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of non-member participation is a very different phenomenon than an openness to outsiders which characterizes groups at Desert Christian.

least in these two research sites, is a great deal of strictness, or more generally social control. While I find slightly more strictness at the hierarchical Harbor Baptist than the loosely connected Desert Christian, I argue that neither church nor its groups are very strict. I will illustrate the differences in social control and an overall lack of strictness through examples dealing with two common areas of religious strictness: prohibitions against drinking alcohol and against cohabitation for unmarried adults. In addition, I will discuss differences in practices of authority at the churches.

#### *Rules about Alcohol*

Some religious groups have strict rules against drinking. Mormons, Muslims, and some conservative Protestants prohibit the use of alcohol. Both churches in this study hold more moderate views, and examining how these views play out in practice is an opportunity to see strictness and lack thereof in action. Harbor Baptist, with its comprehensive system of group oversight through a hierarchical management structure, does have some sense of strictness in the relation of the church with its medium-sized Adult Bible Fellowships. For example, a leader from an Adult Bible Fellowship for singles described an intervention (after the fact) with partygoers, asking that they not drink at social events advertised on the church-sponsored Christian singles' web site. The leader described the intervention as low key. He did not have an expectation that church members refrained from drinking entirely, but rather that the church not be associated with drinking-related events. Desert Christian, on the other hand, has actually allowed alcohol at life group activities, although its presence is fairly unusual. During a life group orientation, for example, the outreach pastor described a football watching life

group who listed ‘beer will be present’ in the catalog of groups. This listed ‘caution’ is an acknowledgment by the church that alcohol might be disconcerting for some church members if they decided to attend the group. A leader of several games groups noted that wine was available to participants at the groups which included non-church members. The leader considered these to be “outreach groups”. The official position of both churches, as evidenced by sermons, is that alcohol in moderation is acceptable, but that members should be wary of the dangers of excess. These similar, if not identical, official positions on alcohol play out more conservatively through the more tightly organized Harbor Baptist, and more liberally at the loosely connected Desert Christian.

#### *Rules about Cohabitation*

Another hallmark of conservative religious groups is strict rules about sex. Public discourse in recent years has tended to focus on the fight over the legitimation or rejection of homosexuality. However, religious groups are also interested in the regulation of, or less cynically, the support of appropriate heterosexual relations.<sup>52</sup> The usual and basic rule is that sex is acceptable only inside marriage. Premarital sex and cohabitation are unacceptable. Both Harbor Baptist and Desert Christian espouse this belief, as is evidenced by sermons on the subject. The belief about cohabitation, however, plays out differently in these two church settings.

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<sup>52</sup> In fact, during my fieldwork, the debate on gay marriage was a major national topic, with various kinds of legislation on many state ballots. I noted a distinct lack of discourse inside these churches on the topic of gay marriage. However, the topic of marriage was constant. Sermons dealt with healthy relations in marriage. Older small group members requested prayers for their children’s marriage struggles; singles studied how to make correct choices as they considered marriage; and young couples signed up for classes to help them save marriages. It is my contention that the views of those in support of gay marriage who imagine their opposition as gay-hating evangelicals are mistaken. While many evangelicals may believe that homosexuality is wrong, their impact at the polls may have more to do with successful spin by those against gay marriage. Gay marriage opponents who use slogans such as “Save Marriage” are speaking to real fears and concerns of people who may not think much about gays.

An ABF Director described a problem with a man in the group who was living together with 'his lady friend,' a widow. This older couple made the decision not to marry for financial and health reasons, since it would cause the woman to lose needed medical benefits from her former husband. The director was concerned about this, especially since the man in question held a leadership role as a teacher within the group. The director wished that this member would simply be quiet and low key about the arrangement, but he was apparently quite open and spoke about his relationship and living arrangement quite frequently. Eventually, the director went to his pastor (who had oversight authority for the group). The pastor told the director that since living together is against the beliefs of the church, this individual must step down from his leadership position. Although the director reported that his communication with the member was amicable, the process was awkward for the group, and the member decided to leave both the group and the church. A key part of this situation was the leadership role of the member in question. In an interview with a local paper, the senior pastor of Harbor Baptist explained to a newspaper reporter that the church opens its doors to all. Even gays would be welcome to worship at the church, although they would not be permitted to hold a staff or leadership position. Harbor Baptist manages to balance between the openness that seems to accompany its very large size and a certain level of strictness around beliefs and practices by differentiating members or attenders and those who lead. Lay leaders are held to a higher standard than members and attenders who simply attend services and participate in groups.

Recognition of the church authority structure and the importance of authority more generally are evident with the group leaders I interviewed at Harbor Baptist. In one example, the director of a large and very active Adult Bible Fellowship delayed before responding to my request for an interview. When she replied to my email, she explained that she wanted to first check with her pastor. Fortunately, the pastor's administrative assistant vouched for my legitimacy. A director of a singles' group told me a story in which he asserted the authority of his own position. In a case of minor conflict within the group, a member considered going directly to a pastor for support. The ABF Director corrected the member, telling him the situation fell within his scope of authority. A Director of a very large and highly organized women's ABF made an interesting characterization of another leader within her group. She praised this woman, who is widely and enormously respected as a matriarch in the church, first, for her knowledge as a teacher: "We are so blessed by the quality of women, those Godly women that lead us, the knowledge that they have..." She then went on to praise the lead teach for her submissiveness. The director mentioned this more than once, and this value placed on submission to authority was shared by the woman she described.<sup>53</sup> In praising this leader, the director's point was twofold. On the one hand, she was praising this woman, who is a major leader in her own right, for staying clearly in her own role as lead teacher, allowing the director to assert her own leadership of the class. At the same time, she was

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<sup>53</sup> When I interviewed with this lead teacher, she also brought up the importance of authority and submission, without my prompting it. She spoke about 'covering' a religious concept that protects the actions of humans who are working in a religious authority structure.

expressing more generally, a religious ideal of Godly and biblical authority and its human practice in oversight, authority, and submission.

The scenario above contrasts with my findings at Desert Christian. At my request, Robert, who leads a life group for seniors walked me through the demographics of members who most recently attended the group, specifying their age, gender, and marital status. When he reached one member, he laughed when he told me about his marital status:

Robert: He is in his 70s. He is not married, but he is living with somebody, but don't tell anybody. [chuckle] He comes to this church and he is in other groups.

I laughed as well, but after I followed up about this member's church attendance and participation in other groups, I asked Robert to say more about his "don't tell" comment:

Nancy: I wanted to ask you because we were laughing because he is not married 'but don't tell.' Does he really not tell?

Robert: No he really tells people.

Robert replied with a smile that he was just kidding, and that the man is quite open about his living arrangement with his girlfriend. The comment "don't tell" is a nod to the formal teaching of the church, and his chuckle is an expression of the church's tolerance for deviance. In another example, I found this same tolerance in groups that are more closely managed by the church. Crown Financial groups are structured specifically for singles and engaged or married couples. I asked about unmarried couples and learned that they will not be turned away from participating. Although unmarried couples are generally considered to be 'premarital, at least one cohabiting couple was taking a class

at the time of the interview. I should note that the individuals who spoke to me about unmarried couples at Desert Christian were expressing a tolerance rather than acceptance.

Once again, the two churches hold identical formal policies about premarital sex and living together. Specifically, both churches believe couples must be married. However, the differing organizational structures along with different cultures create less and more tolerance for unmarried couples living together.

*Strictness and Structure: Lines of Authority and Relations for Christ*

The examples above describe how differing organizational structures seem to be associated with slightly more and less strictness at these two megachurch sites. In this section, I discuss the organizational structures and cultures in more depth. Groups at Harbor Baptist are connected through clearly delineated lines of authority, resulting in a greater sense of strictness. Desert Christian leadership, on the other hand, emphasizes relationality. Life group leaders are free to connect with whichever pastor with whom they feel most comfortable.

This difference is visible in church publications. At Harbor Baptist, a newcomer may pick up a flyer which lists all 34 Adult Bible Fellowships. These are grouped into divisions, part of the organizational structure of ministries in the church. To the member or prospective member, however, the color-coded groupings represent life stages: singles, young marrieds, empty nesters, seniors, etc. This very brief listing includes only lay leaders, both directors and class teachers. However, longer descriptions are also available in packets by division or life stage. These flyers, printed on colored paper which matches the division colors on the summary listing, provide more information

about the group: their typical attendance, their outside activities, and, for each ABF, the pastor responsible for their group. The Desert Christian Handbook, on the other hand, lists brief Life Group descriptions along with contact information, usually a lay leader, for the group. Life group listings are organized into a combination of categories, both interest-based and life stage. Some groups are cross-referenced under two categories. A craft group that only includes women, for example, is listed under both crafts and hobbies as well as under women's groups. While Desert Christian *does* have a pastor with oversight for women's ministries, and there is in fact an informal connection between this particular life group leader and the pastor, there is no formal link, nor is such a connection visible in church publications.

Although Desert Christian did not have a published organizational chart, the structure was explained to me by several staff members at different levels. Desert Christian employs a team approach. The executive team included the outgoing and incoming senior pastors, two additional teaching pastors, and one executive director. Except for the senior pastor(s), each member of the executive team is responsible for his own team as well, including outreach, church ministries, and administration. The leadership described a reorganization several years previously in which the church organization moved from a 'silo structure (functionally differentiated) to the 'team approach' which they report both creates and requires more cooperation throughout the entire operation. This description of church reorganization could have just have easily been describing a corporate or manufacturing reorganization to a 'team approach.'

On my first formal visit to Harbor Baptist, the executive pastor provided me with the organization chart for the paid staff organization at the church. The organization chart was a traditional one, with clear lines of supervisory authority from the senior to lower levels. This same type of organization extends through the organization of Adult Bible Fellowships. Sunday School is, of course, an important aspect of the Baptist tradition. I should note that the organizational names used at Harbor Baptist, “divisions” and “departments,” are those used by the Christian Education arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>54</sup>

Cultural differences in the two churches were evident in my interviews with leaders on staff. A favorite phrase of the outgoing senior pastor at Desert Christian captured an important part of the culture: ‘We are a *permission granting* church.’ He emphasized this point as he answered questions during an orientation of new Life Group leaders who asked questions about how they would or should run their newly formed groups. The focus of this senior pastor’s leadership is empowerment, and his charisma helped make this an effective leadership strategy for him.

While working closely with this senior pastor, I had an opportunity to observe his charisma in action. Late on a Friday afternoon, a planning group realized that while most things were in place for rolling out a new program in conjunction with worship services that weekend, there was not a large sign for the lobby table where new leaders would pick up materials after the service. I followed the senior pastor as we walked through several offices on the church campus, many empty at this late hour on a Friday afternoon.

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<sup>54</sup> [www.sbc.net](http://www.sbc.net).

We did find a number of people working. The pastor explained our predicament and asked if they might be able to help us out. An hour later, three different people, whose responsibility this would not normally be, had dropped their projects and were (seemingly happily) putting together professional looking signage. Two of the three were not actually on the Desert Christian staff. They were members of the recently started church plant in a nearby town whose staff use office space on the campus. The two had been preparing materials for their own worship services that weekend. To be clear, the Desert Christian does have a structured organization with identified sets of responsibilities for staff members. Much of the church business operates in a straightforward, ongoing routine. However, this is also a church that is continually trying new things, and this small example illustrates how a culture of empowerment may successfully rely on charisma in its leadership.

Several individuals at Harbor Baptist mentioned there were different ways of doing things, and then there is “the Harbor way.” This was not spoken with an air of superiority, but rather with the confidence born of being a very large and successful church. Interestingly, I perceived an ironic tension in this statement. On the one hand, the church asserts a bit of independence from outside authority (most notably, the Southern Baptist Convention), while on the other hand, it implies that those under the umbrella of the Harbor should conform to a very specific way of doing things.

At Harbor Baptist, there is a great emphasis on clear lines of authority. As such, the church maintains substantial oversight capability for groups and members, along with an (albeit mild) sense of strictness. Desert Christian, on the other hand, is loosely

connected, emphasizing relationship building, whether that is between members and pastors or the members' choosing, or between staff members working together in teams to get things done. This loose sense of structure, along with emphasis on relationships helps create an atmosphere not characterized at all by strictness.

While the two churches differed in the oversight and control exerted over small groups, they report variation in this over time. Over time, each of the two churches has experienced a sense of loosening outward, followed by a period of contraction, or pulling in. I will describe examples of these in the next section.

### **Reaching Out and Reining In: a Cyclical Process at Both Churches**

Harbor Baptist Church, as recently as three years ago, supported several hundred of what the leaders now refer to as 'stand-alone' small groups. Unlike the current plan for small groups, these groups were led by small group leaders with the support of several small group pastors, but with no explicit ties to the ABF or Sunday School Program. For several years, both of these styles of groups co-existed in the church. As part of a larger refocusing effort at the church, this program of stand-alone small groups was dismantled, and groups were allowed to "die natural deaths." Leaders cited several reasons for this change. The primary reason most frequently offered was a return to the roots of the church. 'We are a Sunday School Church' and 'It is in our DNA as a church' are the kinds of things more than one leader told me. The leaders describe a moment in the growth process of the church where there were just too many things going on, too many separately functioning ministries 'all over the place' and no central focus of the church.

To overstate the point that several leaders made: the church became like a diversifying corporation. The organization began to do many things, and none of them well.

The senior pastor reorganized the leadership structure of the church, and placed primary emphasis on what he believed the church does best: “the Sunday morning experience.” This Sunday morning experience includes both worship and Sunday School, or Adult Bible Fellowships. While the change in group programming was just one part of a larger shift in the church, there was a sense of pulling back or *reining in* as the leaders told me this story.

The former small group pastor, who now plays an important role supporting ABFs, is somewhat nostalgic for the earlier program. He believes in the truly small (12 or less) group as a special place where Christians can be transparent, intimate, and accountable. Yet he acknowledges that small groups were difficult to monitor, given their success in starting close to 300 hundred groups, and given that a paid staff of just four people was attempting to supervise these groups. Even the label ‘stand-alone small groups,’ which leaders now use to refer to groups started under the old program, gives a sense that the groups were too independent for the church culture. One staff member, in discussing whether or not there were a few of these types of groups still meeting, laughingly referred to them as ‘renegade groups,’ then said she belonged to one!

The vision of senior leadership is that small groups will once again become an important part of the culture of Harbor Baptist, but these small groups will *not* be ‘stand-alone.’ Instead, small groups are currently being supported and eventually will be fostered and encouraged to grow out of the existing structure of church ministries which

links pastoral leadership through lay leadership to Adult Bible Fellowship groups, organized around life stages. The idea of small groups has been modified at Harbor Baptist through an experience of loosening up to experiment with a different system followed by a reining in to return to a more traditional structure. I characterize this Harbor Baptist philosophy for groups as ‘big, medium, *then* small.’ Although they maintain that their vision is to incorporate small groups, it remains to be seen if they can accomplish this while focusing their efforts on medium-sized groups.

Desert Christian, with its enormously independent life groups, has also experienced a pulling back of sorts. Early in 2006, the leadership began including information in sermons about a planned challenge for the Easter season. The sermon series leading up to Easter was designed to challenge members to higher participation levels, in church, in society, or both. The leadership announced plans to launch 50 new life groups starting the week after Easter. The hope was both to increase the attendance at church, to add new members, and to increase the involvement of the existing attenders. These were the goals at the member-level. This plan was consistent with, if not an exaggerated version of the church’s usual emphasis on *reaching out*.

At a cultural level, however, the 50 life groups that would form as the result of this challenge would all participate in the same 7-week, church-wide study. Participants had reading to do each week (from an abridged version of the widely popular *Purpose Driven Life*, authored by Saddleback Pastor Rick Warren).<sup>55</sup> The reading would relate to each Sunday sermon over the course of seven weeks, and group materials would include

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<sup>55</sup> Warren, Rick. 2002. *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here for?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

discussion questions for the group to use as a guide when meeting. Moreover, this was not just intended for the 50 new groups. The church leadership hoped that existing life groups would take time out from their usual activities to participate in the study as well. At this cultural level, the challenge effort seemed more about *reining in*, about pulling the usually independent and outwardly directed church membership together for a time, focused on the same materials and principles.

To support this effort, the church provided all of the study materials for both leaders and participants. In addition, there were refreshments, and importantly, child care, for those groups that chose to meet on campus during two designated times. This was a far higher resource level than what is normally offered to life groups.

The effort was partially successful. The church *did* launch, somewhat remarkably<sup>56</sup>, fifty-one new life groups. Most of the groups met on the church campus, either on Sunday afternoons or on a designated weekday evening. However, more than a dozen new groups met in members' homes. Those on the church campus enjoyed the familiarity of the church campus, free refreshments, and childcare. In addition, a pastor would open the study session with a few quick words to the whole room. The groups would then read and discuss their study materials, sitting together at round tables.

One hope for these groups was that they would help bring new people, specifically the twice per year Easter and Christmas visitors, back to the church in the weeks following Easter. The reality, however, was that the new life groups were made up

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<sup>56</sup> During this portion of my fieldwork, I was very heavily into the participant aspect of participant observation. I ended up in a small planning committee for the effort, so I can attest to the numbers not being manufactured.

primarily of existing members or attenders at Desert Christian. There were just a handful of groups that reported having a group member who was new to the church at Easter. While church leaders were somewhat disappointed not to achieve that part of their goals for the effort, they voiced pride and pleasure at the stepped up level of new involvement of many church members and attenders. In conversations with new group leaders who participated in this program, a number of them indicated that the church training and support gave them the courage to attempt a leadership position, something they would not have done otherwise. Some group participants also said they had never participated in a group of any sort, but found the format and short timeframe of these groups to be inviting.

These 50 life groups, and the study in which they participated, were more successful in bringing the existing membership of the church together than they were at bringing new members to the church. In this process, the Desert Christian leadership discovered in a small way a lesson parallel to what I glean from the comparison of my two research sites. Church oversight and provision of generous resources, along with uniform content and format, may be a better strategy for reining in than reaching out.

### **Conclusion**

While Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist exhibit many similarities in terms of membership, beliefs, worship, and other activities, they structure their small group programs in very different ways. Desert Christian emphasizes the autonomy of groups, and I find that this encourages an openness of groups to the outside world, whereas Harbor Baptist's highly structured system of oversight brings group focus inward, to

existing church members and attenders. While neither church is strict in any substantial way, the heavier oversight at Harbor Baptist results in slightly more strictness despite very similar beliefs at both churches.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This dissertation advances our understanding of the structure of small groups inside very large organizations, specifically in two American megachurches. Research questions guiding the project are of two sorts. The first goal of the dissertation is to provide a detailed picture of the structure of groups inside two very large churches, a phenomenon about which we currently know very little. Second, in doing so, I relate the findings to important theoretical questions including the relationship between religious group size and strictness, the maintenance of local and global orders, and the manufacture of social groups.

In this chapter I will overview four main empirical findings from the two case studies and comparison. I discuss implications of these findings for researchers interested in megachurches, strictness, and small groups in all kinds of organizations. I also review implications for religious leaders interested in implementing small group programs in their own organizations. Finally, I discuss limitations of the current study and directions for future research.

### **Overview of Main Empirical Findings**

Megachurches, perhaps more than other religious groups, appear to be profoundly impacted by the diffusion of organizing models across institutional boundaries. Both sites in this study use economic models, albeit very different ones, to organize their small

group programs.<sup>57</sup> In Desert Christian, the use of a “free market philosophy” is explicit, and capitalism is used as an organizing metaphor for creating small groups inside the church. At Harbor Baptist, the reference is more subtle, in that members are organized into divisions and departments, with a hierarchical structure of supervisory directors. In this, the church is using the basic organizing terminology of the modern, rational, bureaucratic firm. Meyer and Scott’s (1983) emphasis on environment as key to understanding formal organizations is relevant to megachurches, as they import practices and language from other institutional realms. Like other kinds of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), megachurches tend to model themselves after organizations which are perceived to be more successful. Among megachurches, not surprisingly, size is a key indicator of success. The largest megachurches are viewed as the most successful. Senior pastors of extra large megachurches (i.e., Haggard 2002 from New Life in Colorado) or key members of their staff (i.e., Donahue 1996 from Willow Creek in Chicago) write books about church programming which are read and implemented in more typically sized megachurches like those I studied. Some pastors specialize in a particular type of church programming (i.e., Arnold 1992, 1997, 1998), becoming something very much like a religious management consultant. In this way, the circulation of management practices occurs through diverse carriers (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002).

I speculate that megachurches may be more influenced than other religious organizations by management fads and other practices from the economic sector, perhaps

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<sup>57</sup> The use of economic models and practices inside religious organization has been strongly criticized by some. See, for example, Kenneson and Street (1997).

in part because processes of specialization are more pronounced in these large organizations than smaller churches. Megachurch staffs are large, and staff members may have more time available to seek out the latest new idea in church programming.

Imported models and practices are selectively edited and translated into new environments (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002). Leaders make adaptations from the cultural “toolkit” available to them (Swidler 1986). “Free market philosophy,” then, may not be entirely recognizable in its imported state inside a religious organization.

Although leaders as entrepreneurs and group members as customers makes some sense, the idea of competition between groups fits only partially, for example. While groups may ‘compete’ for customers/members, in reality, they all are interested in the overall success of the church. In another adaptation, Harbor Baptist leaders explained that their structure was designed to ensure a proper span of care,<sup>58</sup> by which they are using a modification of the management concept of ‘span of control’ (Drucker 1954; Graicunas 1933; Urwick 1956, 1974). By consciously choosing this terminology, they demonstrate that rather than trying to solve a problem of social control, they are attempting to provide sufficient support, intimacy, and ministry. This emphasis on care over control relates to my second empirical finding.

Overall, I find that groups in both Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist are *not* strict. At both sites, church leadership and practices demonstrate a concern with the behavior of leaders, but very little if any expectations of group members. Time and again, when I asked group leaders what they expected of their members, they drew a

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<sup>58</sup> I was not able to determine who originated this adaptation to the term ‘span of care.’ A web search for the term yields results for religious small group organization as well as the medical field.

blank. They appeared, however, to have high expectations of themselves. Kwon et al. (1997) argue that status rewards for lay leaders is one of four key outcomes of small group ministry. These status rewards are likely related, at least in part, with both the level of responsibility invested in leaders by the church and the higher standard to which they appear to be held.

Strictness is *not* the source of success or growth in either of these two megachurches. Like Kwon et al (1997), I find that one function of small groups is providing emotional support. However, this support is not accompanied by demands and expectations. Like Tamney (2005), I argue that strictness is not a source of appeal to the churches I have studied.

To the extent that there are slight differences in strictness between the two sites, I find that the differences have more to do with the structures of oversight and control than with beliefs that are or are not strict. Specifically, I find that identical beliefs about topics like alcohol and premarital sex are visible in different implementations in the operation of groups at the two sites. Nor is strictness just about size. In fact, I find evidence of slightly more strictness at Harbor Baptist with its medium-sized groups than at Desert Christian with its (on average) smaller groups. Rather, the structure of relations between groups and the larger organization of which they are a part is key to understanding strictness or its lack.

The lack of strictness in these groups is not unexpected given national data on religious small groups more generally. Wuthnow (1994a) argues that while most attenders of small groups believe their participation has deepened their spirituality, this

spirituality tends to be both pragmatic and individualist. Small groups foster a sense of a personal God who meets daily mundane needs, and these groups tend to be unconditionally accepting rather than demanding (or strict). Small groups tend not to challenge participants to service and higher truths. In addition, while group members may faithfully attend a weekly bible study or activity night, the commitment to the specific group may be quite shallow. If conflict arises, one may simply find a new group (Wuthnow 1994a, 1994b). I find that small groups inside these two megachurches are remarkably like those Wuthnow describes.

Church oversight, whether with close monitoring or a laissez faire attitude, does not necessarily solve some of the problems identified by Wuthnow. In this, my findings differ from other research which suggests that church involvement does overcome at least some of the shortcomings of small groups more generally (Latini 2006). I do find that church oversight can be instrumental in facilitating small group participation in social service projects, although this was more evident at Desert Christian than at Harbor Baptist.<sup>59</sup>

I find that affiliation remains loose in many (although not all) instances, and that members will often leave to solve conflict rather than working through them. There is a sense in which group affiliation, especially at Desert Christian, shares characteristics with the increasingly common social relationships which occur online. Building from Granovetter's (1973; 1974) work on tie strength, Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) find that online networks tend to be large bridging networks rather than small bonding ones.

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<sup>59</sup> In preliminary survey data from Harbor Baptist, 11% (4 of 37) groups report service activity compared to 26% of groups at Desert Christian.

The fast-changing and loosely connected set of small groups at Desert Christian share some aspects of the ephemeral nature of relationships online.

The empirical finding from which Putnam (2000) coined the title, *Bowling Alone*, is that while more Americans report that they participate in bowling as a pastime, substantially less Americans participate in leagues. By bowling ‘alone,’ Putnam does not mean truly alone, but rather untethered from organizational leagues, presumably with family and/or friends. My findings suggest a different possibility— a kind of ‘bowling with strangers.’ Although Desert Christian did not have a life group for bowling listed, it would be an easy fit within the diverse set of groups. One can imagine a monthly bowling group where members come and go, sometimes developing close relationships, often not doing so. Of course, this is a different picture than the vision for life groups at Desert Christian. The point, according to leaders, is for members to develop close relationships. And this does happen in some cases. However, just as often, members float in and out of groups, not connecting in lasting ways.

In sum, in terms of strictness, I find that groups at these churches are generally not strict, and in this, they are very much like small groups in American society more generally. Groups do not make strong demands of members, and some members have a shallow commitment in return. The slight difference in strictness that I observed was not related to differences in beliefs, but to differences in structure.

Differences in structure also impact more than strictness. I find that the structure of group organization appears to have important consequences for (a) direction of group focus, and (b) the flow of new people into the church and involvement with the church.

At Harbor Baptist, new members arrive mostly through the ‘front doors,’ the weekly Sunday worship services. Involvement in groups is the next level of participation. Thus, Adult Bible Fellowships consist almost entirely of existing church members and attenders. Harbor Baptist church leaders provide an extensive amount of oversight and support for their groups. In doing so, the focus of the groups is directed inward, toward existing members of the groups.

At Desert Christian, on the other hand, while many members arrive through the ‘front doors,’ small groups become an extra (large) set of ‘side doors’ and ‘back doors.’ A substantial number of group participants at Desert Christian are not members of the church. While this sometimes results in new members for the church when group participants decide to begin attending worship, just as often these extra doors remain ‘propped open’ and the church campus becomes like a community center. In this way, Desert Christian with its blurry and permeable boundaries exemplifies Wuthnow’s concept of a “porous institution” (1998: 59), and the focus of Desert Christian is outward, across these permeable boundaries. These different directions of focus at Harbor Baptist and Desert Christian relate to the social organization of groups and group leadership.

DiMaggio (1977) links the market structure and form of organization to outcomes in terms of high and low innovation. Desert Christian’s structure of “competition” and entrepreneurial system of group leadership appears to lend itself to diversity and innovation in the creation of new groups. Harbor’s more centralized organization results in lower innovation, but perhaps, higher reliability in groups and their content. As such,

tight oversight is better suited for church attention to its existing members, while loose connections may better support evangelizing and outreach to the community.

### **Implications for Sociologists**

While the two sites studied here have many similarities, they are also different in important ways. One implication of this research is that megachurches should be studied in their diversity, and not imagined to be a single uniform phenomenon. In addition, multi-level analysis should be used whenever feasible. Wuthnow's (1994a) research on individuals involved in small groups was complemented by ethnographic case studies (1994b) of groups in action.<sup>60</sup> I have extended this line of inquiry to examine the links between small groups and their umbrella organizations, specifically in this project, megachurch organizations. If more and more Americans are experiencing their religious life in large congregations, and if we wish to understand the religious life of these Americans, we need more research on the organizational structures that connect members to large churches. Small and medium-sized groups are one important means of such connections. However, there are other types of involvement and participation that also need attention.

Previously I have argued that qualitative studies of strictness are needed to supplement questionnaire based research (Martin 2005). My point, in part, was that rules may not simply be added together. Churches may be more or less strict on different topics. I further complicate ideas about strictness in this project, by highlighting the importance of structure. Belief systems do not exist in a vacuum. In order to understand

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<sup>60</sup> Denzin (1995), in an otherwise positive review of the first volume, suggested that the research was actually about individuals and not groups.

strictness, we must examine the social relations in which beliefs are embedded.

Sociologists interested in strictness should include research questions about social organization of church leaders and members along with questions about beliefs. Ideas about strictness connect with questions of social control more broadly, and thinking about strictness as social control leads us to seek out mechanisms by which such control is exercised.

If strictness is not the source of success or growth at these two sites, and megachurches more generally, what is? It may be that providing an effective span of care, as opposed to span of control, is a factor in the appeal of both of these megachurch sites. If small groups are a key factor in their success (in terms of size/growth), however, will all churches who adopt small groups programs experience substantial growth? Since the majority of churches of all sizes sponsor groups of various types, we know this is not the case. A future extension of this research agenda is a comparison between small groups at megachurch sites versus those at small congregations. Wuthnow (1994a) hypothesized that small group programs may not encourage growth in established congregations, but are more likely to do so in a new or growing congregation where small groups can facilitate the involvement of newcomers. More comparative work is needed.

The groups I studied looked very much like those described by Wuthnow (1994a, 1994b). Wuthnow emphasizes the “paradox of informality and structure” in describing American small groups. The structural aspect of this paradox can be understood as the institutionalization of norms about small group operation. Small groups are (in)formal organizations in miniature, influenced by their environments in important ways just as are

their larger counterparts (Meyer and Scott 1983). Future studies of small groups should attempt to locate the groups within larger social structures of which they are a part. This situating can provide valuable insight into understanding the groups and how they function, as it did in this study.

### **Implications for Religious Leaders**

Leaders interested in supporting small groups inside their religious institutions can take several lessons from this research. First, there are a myriad of ways that small or medium-sized groups may be structured. One important dimension of variation, however, is the extent to which the church will provide oversight of and support for the groups. Based on these two case studies, it may be the case that an empowering model of small group structure tends to be more effective as a tool for evangelism and growth. More oversight and support for groups and leaders may be an effective means to increase the involvement of existing membership.

Second, either method of organizing can help solve the ‘span of care’ problem in very large churches. Members did find emotional support and community in groups at both churches. At the same time, religious leaders should be aware that the same kind of loose connections which characterize small groups in American society more generally are likely to occur in church-sponsored groups. Practitioners may want to seek creative solutions to the problem of shallow commitment to groups, and specifically to the problem of departure as a means to solve conflict. Finally, religious leaders who want to encourage a service orientation in groups they sponsor may want to consider the example of Desert Christian. By explicitly using their life group infrastructure to invite

participation in two church-wide projects, they offer a fairly simple opportunity for groups to get involved in service. This easy opportunity for service participation may open the door and plant the seed for groups to become more active in service of their own accord.

### **Future Directions**

Like all research, this study has limitations. Although I selected two megachurch sites which reflect the largest categories of megachurch affiliation, I nevertheless cannot be certain that findings from these churches are generalizable. For this reason, we need more research on the structure and details of small group organization using national surveys of all megachurches or a randomly generated sample of megachurches. The next phase of this project will be to complete such a survey. It seems likely, for example, that the structures of small group programs at Desert Christian and Harbor Baptist relate to their identities as nondenominational and Southern Baptist affiliated, respectively. However, national data on small group programs is needed to determine if this relationship can be generalized.

Once national data on small groups in megachurches is available, more qualitative and comparative work is needed. Comparisons between types of small group organization beyond the two presented here will be useful in developing more dimensions of variation beyond that of oversight. In addition, comparing the findings presented here with small group organization in small churches will further our understanding of the special role (if any) played by small groups in the very large church. Finally, work that

reframes religious strictness as one form of social control will direct our attention to the mechanisms of that control. .

What happens when a religious congregation grows beyond hundreds and into the thousands? Like those in charge of any large and growing formal organization, religious leaders seek ways to rationalize and organize members into smaller and more manageable sized groups. In the process, they use cultural tools available from other realms, looking for ways to structure an appropriate 'span of care' for leaders at different levels. How leaders structure the connections between themselves and small groups is key to determining a variety of outcomes such as strictness and direction of group focus.

How are we to make sense of the contemporary social fact of megachurches? While there is more work to be done to respond to this important question, this dissertation offers a partial answer in terms of how we should proceed. To understand the modern megachurch, we must attend the network of social relations inside it, and to the other institutional realms with which it coexists.

**APPENDIX A:**  
**SITE AUTHORIZATION LETTER**  
(Senior Pastor)

Small Groups in Big Churches:

This letter signifies my agreement to allow my congregation and staff to participate in the Small Groups in Big churches Study. I am authorizing the principal investigator, Nancy Martin, to be on-site at our congregation for worship services, for social activities before and/or after services; to participate in classes and orientation programs of the congregation, and to participate in church-sponsored small groups. I understand that she will participate in and observe these activities in order to gather information for the Small Groups in Big churches Study.

I understand that she will approach selected clergy, staff, and members of the congregation who are small group leaders, asking them to participate in one-hour interviews, and that their participation is completely voluntary. During these interviews, she may also ask to see databases and records related to small groups (for example, listings of small groups with topics and leaders). This access may be limited in any way or denied as determined by you or your staff.

I also understand that she will ask small group leaders to complete a written survey. She will distribute this survey either in person, by mail, or both.

I have read and understand the Small Groups in Big churches Study Consent Forms for clergy /staff and small group leaders, as well as the Disclaimer Form for small group participants. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I may withdraw my support for this authorization at any time by notifying the principal investigator, Nancy Martin, at (520)975-9744.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Title / Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Congregation

**APPENDIX B:**  
**SUBJECT'S CONSENT FORM**

**Small Groups in Big Churches:**

You are being asked to read the following material to ensure that you are informed of the nature of this research study and of how you will participate in it, if you consent to do so. Signing this form will indicate that you have been so informed and that you give your consent. Federal regulations require written informed consent prior to participation in this research study so that you can know the nature and risks of your participation and can decide to participate or not participate in a free and informed manner.

**PURPOSE**

You are being invited to participate voluntarily in the “Small Groups in Big Churches” project. The purpose of this project is to better understand how small groups operate in large churches, and especially how small groups link together with the larger congregation.

**SELECTION CRITERIA**

The Principal Investigator will discuss the requirements for participation in this study with you. To be eligible to participate, you must be 18 years or older. You should also be either a member of the clergy or staff in your congregation; or a leader of a small group associated with the congregation. A total of 30 individuals will be enrolled in this study locally. Overall, a total of 120 individuals will be enrolled at multiple study centers.

**PROCEDURES**

The following information describes your participation in this study which will last up to 1 hour: Your participation consists of answering questions about your knowledge of and participation in small groups. With your permission, the interview will be recorded. Specifically, for clergy and staff, you will be asked about your formal and informal connections to small groups associated with the congregation, and about the congregation’s philosophies and policies for small groups. For small group leaders, you will be asked about your experiences with your small groups, and about your connections to the congregation’s staff and clergy. All interview participants (clergy, staff and small group leaders) may be asked to provide the researcher with access to databases or records that list groups; who leads them; and when and where they meet.

**RISKS**

There is a small risk of breach of privacy in providing access to church records. The researcher is interested in group dynamics, not in individuals; every effort will be made to minimize this risk.

**BENEFITS**

There is no direct benefit to you from your participation. However, your participation will contribute to our broad understanding of small groups in churches.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your contact information will be maintained in a secure file separate from your interview responses. You will be identified with a pseudonym in any presentation or publication of this research.

**PARTICIPATION COSTS AND SUBJECT COMPENSATION**

There is no cost to you for participating except your time. You will not be compensated for your participation.

**CONTACTS**

You can obtain further information from the principal investigator Nancy Martin, Ph.D. Candidate, at (520) 975-9744. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may call the University of Arizona Human Subjects Protection Program office at (520) 626-6721. (If out of state use the toll-free number 1-866-278-1455.)

**AUTHORIZATION**

Before giving my consent by signing this form, the methods, inconveniences, risks, and benefits have been explained to me and my questions have been answered. I may ask questions at any time and I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without causing bad feelings. My participation in this project may be ended by the investigator for reasons that would be explained. New information developed during the course of this study which may affect my willingness to continue in this research project will be given to me as it becomes available. This consent form will be filed in an area designated by the Human Subjects Committee with access restricted by the principal investigator, Nancy Martin, Ph.D. Candidate, or authorized representative of the Sociology Department. I do not give up any of my legal rights by signing this form. A copy of this signed consent form will be given to me.

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 Subject's Signature

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 Date
**INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:**

I have carefully explained to the subject the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

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 Signature of Investigator

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 Date

**APPENDIX C:**  
**SUBJECT'S DISCLAIMER FORM**  
**(Group Participants)**

Small Groups in Big Churches:

You are being invited to voluntarily participate in the "Small Groups in Big Churches" study. The purpose of this research project is to better understand how small groups operate in large churches, and especially how small groups link together with the larger congregation. You are eligible to participate because you are 18 years or older and a participant in a small group.

If you agree to participate, your participation will involve allowing the researcher, Nancy Martin, PhD candidate to participate in and observe your small group. The researcher may also ask you questions about your participation in the group and may take notes on your answers. Your name will not be recorded with your answers.

Any questions you have will be answered and you may withdraw from the study at any time. There are no known risks from your participation and no direct benefit from your participation is expected. However, your participation will contribute to our broad understanding of small groups in churches. There is no cost to you and you will not be compensated for your participation.

Only the researcher will have access to the notes on observations from your group. In order to maintain your confidentiality, your name will not be revealed in any reports that result from this project. Observation notes will be locked in a cabinet in a secure place.

You can obtain further information from the principal investigator, Nancy Martin, Ph.D. candidate, at (520) 975-9744. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may call the University of Arizona Human Subjects Protection Program office at (520) 626-6721 or toll-free at 866-278-1455.

By allowing the researcher to observe your group, you are giving permission for the investigator to use your information and information from the group for research purposes.

Thank you.

Nancy Martin  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
University of Arizona

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Appendix D.1: Interview Questions for Clergy and Staff

Questions about small groups in this congregation:

1. How do small groups fit into the overall vision of this congregation?
2. What percentage of congregational members do you think are involved in small groups? Is small group participation encouraged? Expected?
3. How do small groups connect with the clergy and staff of the congregation? Which staff members do small group leaders talk to? About what kinds of issues or questions? Are small groups a significant part of any staff member's job responsibilities?
4. What resources does the congregation provide to small groups... such as space, equipment (i.e. computers) and supplies (paper, printing), leader training, funds, materials (books, Bibles)?
5. Does the congregation make use of resources from outside the congregation to support small group activities? (example, Crown Financial materials)
6. How has the small groups program changed or developed over time? Where do you see it going in the future?
7. Given my interest in understanding small groups in this congregation, what else do you think I should know?

Questions about the respondent:

8. What is your position in the congregation? What are your responsibilities and job duties? Do you participate in small groups? If so, how?
9. Tell me about yourself and your background:  
 Gender:  
 Age:  
 Marital status:  
 Household:  
 Religious background:  
 Prior work experience:  
 Training / education:  
 How long with the congregation:
10. Whom do you think it is important that I interview, either among clergy and staff or small group leaders?

### Appendix D.2: Interview Questions for Group Leaders

1. Tell me about your involvement as the leader of this group.
  - a. How long have you had a leadership role? Explain your role.
  - b. How did you become the leader? (Was the group already formed? Did you start it? If not, who led the group before you? How did that transition take place?)
  - c. What training or background experience prepared you to lead this group?
  
2. Tell me about your involvement leading other groups.
  - a. Have you led other groups?
  - b. If so, what kind? When?
  
3. Tell me more about this group.
  - a. Group name? How often does it meet? When and where?
  - b. What do you do when you meet? What kind of materials do you use and who provides them?
  - c. Is the group ongoing or will it end after a period of time?
  - d. What is the typical attendance? (largest – smallest)?
  - e. How many people attended your last meeting? Thinking about those people one at a time, please describe them in terms of the following characteristics:

#	Age	Gender/ Marital Status	Group Attendance	Church member? Attend Services?	Belongs to other groups?
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
8					
9					
10					

- f. If your group is all men or all women, is this specified? Has it varied?
- g. What do you expect from participants in your group? What do you think they expect from you? From each other?
- h. Has your group ever experienced conflict of some sort? If so, when? Over what? How was it resolved?

4. Tell me who you talk with about your group.
  - a. In the last six months, have you had contact with anyone on the church staff about your small group? Who? About what?
  - b. In the last six months, have you had contact with any other group leaders? Who? About what?
  - c. In the last six months, how many in your group have you talked to on the telephone outside of the group setting? How many have you spent time with outside the group? How often?
  
5. Tell me some more about yourself.
  - a. Are you a member of [Desert Christian/ Harbor Baptist]?
  - b. Did you attend services at the church last weekend? How many times in the last month? How often in the last year? How long have you been attending?
  - c. Did you belong to another church prior to [Desert Christian/ Harbor Baptist]? If so, which one? Why did you change? What is your religious background more generally (childhood through adulthood)?
  - d. May I ask your age? marital status, # of children, household composition? [note gender]
  
  - e. Given my interest in understanding groups at [Desert Christian/ Harbor Baptist], what else do you think I should know? Who else do you suggest I interview?
  
- \* May I contact you with follow-up questions or clarifications? How would it be best for me to do so (email or phone)?



8. Where does this group meet?
- a. On church campus
  - b. In member's home
  - c. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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**PART II: Information about your leadership of this small group**

9. When did you first begin leading this group?                      Month \_\_\_\_\_                      Year \_\_\_\_\_

10. Which statement best describes how you became the leader of this group?
- a. I started the group
  - b. The previous leader was no longer available to lead
  - c. Someone in the church asked me to lead
  - d. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

11. How do you communicate with group members outside of the group meetings?  
(Circle all that apply)
- a. Not applicable
  - b. Email
  - c. Telephone
  - d. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. Who do you talk to about this group? That is, who do you go to with questions about how to lead the group or solve problems with the group? Thinking about the last three months, which of the following people have you talked to about your group? [note: table truncated for appendix]

		Check (√) if you've talked about your group	What was the nature of this conversation? (Please circle all that apply)
[Team]			
[Job Titles]	[Names]		Advice Support Coordination Other
<u>Other Church Leader? (Please list name &amp;/or position)</u>			
			Advice Support Coordination Other
<u>Family Members or Friends? (Please list relationship)</u>			
			Advice Support Coordination Other
<u>Anyone else? (Please list relationship)</u>			
			Advice Support Coordination Other

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**PART III: Background Information about you**

13. Do you participate in other groups associated with [Desert Christian]? If yes, please list them and whether or not you have a leadership role:

<u>Group</u>	<u>Are you a leader in this group?</u>	
_____	Yes	No
_____	Yes	No
_____	Yes	No

14. Have you led small groups in the past? If yes, please list the most recent ones and whether or not they were associated with [Desert Christian]:

<u>Type of Group</u>	<u>Associated with [Desert Christian]?</u>	
_____	Yes	No
_____	Yes	No
_____	Yes	No

15. How often have you attended worship services at [Desert Christian Church]?  
(please circle one)

- a. Never
- b. About once or twice a year
- c. Several times a year
- d. About once per month
- e. 2-3 times a month
- f. Nearly every week
- g. Every week

If ever, when did you first attend Desert Christian Church]? Month \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_

16. Do you attend services somewhere else? (please circle one) Yes / No

a. If so, what kind of church do you attend (name or denomination)? \_\_\_\_\_

b. If so, which statement best describes your attendance at this other congregation?

- i. About once or twice a year
- ii. Several times a year
- iii. About once per month
- iv. 2-3 times a month
- v. Nearly every week
- vi. Every week

17. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Sex/gender: \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Race/ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

20. Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

21. Household:

a. How many adults? \_\_\_\_\_ How many children living at home? \_\_\_\_\_

b. Household Income (annual gross):

i. Less than 20,000

ii. 20,000-34,999

iii. 35,000-49,999

iv. 50,000-99,999

v. 100,000 and above

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**PART IV: Additional Questions**

22. Have you incorporated or are you thinking about incorporating the 40 Day Challenge into your existing small group? Please comment on why or why not.

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23. If your group no longer meets, how/why did it end?

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24. Any other comments on small groups at [Desert Christian], or small groups in churches in general?

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*Please return to Nancy Martin ~ Social Sciences 400 ~ University of Arizona ~ Tucson, AZ 85721-0027  
Thank you for your participation!*

## Appendix E.2: Original and Modified Text for Group Leader Questionnaire

### Original Introductory Text:

Dear Life Group Leader:

My name is Nancy Martin. I am a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona conducting a research study: "Small groups in Big Churches." One of the ways I hope to learn about small groups is to survey leaders of small groups here at [Desert Christian Church]. Your participation is completely voluntary, and this is an anonymous survey. Please DO NOT write your name on this form. If you are willing to participate, please answer the questions below. If you already participated, thank you, and please disregard this mailing. The purpose of these questions is to learn about the group you lead (or most recently led), as well as about your role in the group and in the church. I also ask for basic demographic data. I appreciate your assistance with my research. If you have any questions, or if you would like to hear about the study when I am done, please feel free to contact me at nmartin@email.arizona.edu or 520-621-3109. The church is aware of and supports my study; however, your participation is still completely voluntary. Thank you!

### Modified Introductory Text (key changes in bold):

Dear Life Group Leader:

My name is Nancy Martin. I am a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona conducting a research study: "Small groups in Big Churches." One of the ways I hope to learn about small groups is to survey leaders of small groups here at [Desert Christian Church]. You have been selected because you have led a group at [Desert Christian Church]. If you agree to participate, your participation will include completion of a survey. **Your participation is completely voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Survey forms will be seen only by me and a research assistant. Data from the survey will be presented in summary form, not identifying leaders of specific groups individually.** If you are willing to participate, please answer the questions below. If you already participated, thank you, and please disregard this mailing. The purpose of these questions is to learn about the group you lead (or most recently led), as well as about your role in the group and in the church. I also ask for basic demographic data. I appreciate your assistance with my research. There is no risk to you and no benefit to your participation. There is not cost to you except your time and you will not be compensated for your participation. If you have any questions, or if you would like to hear about the study when I am done, please feel free to contact me at nmartin@email.arizona.edu or 520-621-3109. If you would like to know about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program at (520) 626-6721. By participating in the research you are giving permission for the use of your data for research purposes. Thank you!

### **Appendix E.3: Cover Letter for Questionnaire Second Mailing**

Dear [Desert Christian] Small Group / Life Group Leaders,

First, I want to thank so many of you who have already returned my group leader survey. I very much appreciate your help with my research.

Also, I am enclosing a copy of the survey with a revision in the text at the top clarifying who sees the surveys, and how I will use them. The new text is in bold. If by chance you did not have time to complete a survey already, it would be great if you are willing to do so now. The more surveys I receive, the better able I am to understand the big picture of how groups operate at [Desert Christian Church].

Finally, I have one more request. In order to know how representative my survey information is, I would like to track where I did and did not receive survey responses. The enclosed postcard will help me see the big picture of responses. If you have already completed a survey (or if you complete one now), please just check that you did so and drop it in the mail. If you have not completed a survey either because you do not believe you are eligible, or simply because you prefer not to, the postcard gives you a quick way to let me know this.

Thank you again for helping me with my research project. If you have any questions or comments you may contact me at nmartin@email.arizona.edu, 621-3109 (office), or 975-9744 (cell).

Regards,

Nancy Martin

### Appendix E.4: Return Postcard for Questionnaire Second Mailing

<p>Please Check one of the following &amp; return by mail:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I submitted a group leader survey, either in person or by mail</p> <p>I did not complete a survey because...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I do not believe I am eligible to do so Reason: _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I prefer not to Reason (optional): _____</p> <p>Mailing ID: _____</p> <p><i>Please note: The Mailing ID allows me to know who completed the survey, helping me understand the summary of which groups are represented in the results.</i></p>	<p>To: Nancy Martin Small Groups in Big Churches Social Sciences, Room 400 P.O. Box 210027 Tucson, AZ 85705</p>
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