

A Few Thoughts on Dallas, “The New Capital of Evangelicalism”

by David Fletcher

In Christianity Today, Associate Editor Edward Gilbreath presents a thesis which could serve as a cogent rationale for the selection of case-study churches. In the cover story Gilbreath writes on “*The New Capital of Evangelicalism*” and by means of an illustrative tale, he presents his thesis:

‘Reverend, I have been in cities all across the country, and in each church I have been told that this phone is a direct line to God, but everywhere else it costs \$10,000 a minute. Your sign says 25 cents a call. Why?’

The pastor, smiling proudly, replies, ‘Well, my son, you’re in Dallas now. It’s a local call from here.’

What makes this tale more than just an amusing example of ‘Don’t Mess with Texas’ bravado is the nagging suspicion that, in Dallas, it could very well be true.

Judging from the unusually large number of churches, seminaries, and parachurch organizations here, one gets the impression that God has some special arrangement with the city—the kind Disney has with Orlando, or that movie stars have with Beverly Hills. The ubiquity of Christian institutions is astounding.

And these aren’t your average-size churches, seminaries, and parachurch organizations either. In the great Texas tradition, they are big—*really* big—in both membership and clout.¹

This researcher was willing to investigate churches in various cities around the United States. However, travel was deemed unnecessary as comprehensive research could be conducted in the “capital of evangelicalism.”

In the article, Gilbreath presents a wealth of data to substantiate his thesis. An overview of Gilbreath’s data shows many megachurches and organizations in Dallas:²

Potter’s House with T.D. Jakes, which draws 23,000 each Sunday

¹ Edward Gilbreath, *The New Capital of Evangelicalism* [Archived on-line] (Christianity Today, 21 May 2002, accessed 13 July 2003); available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/006/1.38.html>.

² Ibid. (accessed).

Prestonwood Baptist with Jack Graham has 20,000 members, one of the largest in the Southern Baptist Convention, on a 140-acre campus
Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral of the Catholic diocese of Dallas, with 11,000 Hispanic worshippers
Covenant Church, a 10,000-member charismatic congregation, is regularly lauded as the most racially diverse church in the Dallas area
First Baptist Church with Mac Brunson has 5,000 active members
First United Methodist with 4,000 members
Cathedral of Hope, at 3,600 members, claims to be the world's largest gay church
Park Cities Baptist, Highland Park Presbyterian, Lovers Lane United Methodist, St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal. These churches have active memberships of 2,000 or more and many are among the largest in their denominations
On the southern edge of the city is a collection of mostly African American megachurches: Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship with Tony Evans, Concord Missionary Baptist and the Potter's House.
Evangélica Bethania is a fast growing Hispanic congregation
Temple Emanu-El in North Dallas, one of the largest synagogues in the nation
Dallas Theological Seminary
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the world's largest seminary
Perkins School of Theology, a home of moderate and liberal Christianity
Parachurch and broadcast ministries: Tony Evans, T.D. Jakes, Chuck Swindoll, James Robison, and June Hunt

The data in Gilbreath's article is not alone in showing that Dallas may be the new capital of evangelicalism.

In 2001 the Hartford Institute of Religion released the findings of its lengthy study of megachurches. They have defined the parameters of the size of the megachurch:

The most obvious characteristic of megachurches is their size. The average weekly worship attendance was 3857 persons. Roughly 50 percent of the churches had between 2000 and 4000 in attendance, with almost 15% reporting 6000 or more attenders. Interestingly almost the same percentage of churches reported worship attendance less than 2000, mostly in the 1800-1900 person range. These congregations have been left in the analysis.³

³ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, (accessed).

The findings on the megachurches are not static, as the study was updated as of May 2003. New additions to the Hartford's database require a church to have a worship attendance average of at least two thousand people.⁴

The study by Hartford Seminary seems to well represent denominational churches. However, as observed in the North Texas data, the report is lacking data on non-denominational churches, specifically Bible and Community Churches. The following churches were missing from Hartford's study: Christ Chapel Bible Church of Fort Worth; Denton Bible Church of Denton, Irving Bible Church of Irving, Northwest Bible Church of Dallas, Pantego Bible Church of Arlington, Reinhardt Bible Church of Dallas, Scofield Memorial Church of Dallas, Stonebriar Community Church of Frisco and Watermark Community Church of Dallas. If added, these churches would add a total of approximately twenty-five thousand worshippers. This increases the total number of North Texas megachurch worshippers in the Hartford report by almost twenty percent. Future research could determine if the under-reporting occurred in other areas of the country as well.

Hartford's data on megachurches can be compiled into a table, supplemented with Dallas area churches not included in Hartford's analysis, compared to population from the United States Census 2000,⁵ and sorted by the quantity of megachurches:

⁴ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, *Database of Megachurches in the U.S.* [On-line] (Hartford Seminary, 2001, accessed 20 October 2003); available from http://hrr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_database.html#sort.

⁵ Department of Commerce United States Census Bureau, *United States Census 2000* [On-line] (2000, accessed 20 October 2003); available from <http://www.census.gov/>.

<i>Area</i>	<i>Population (p)</i>	<i>Number of Megachurches</i>	<i>Megachurch Worshipers (w)</i>	<i>Density (p:w)</i>
United States	281,421,906	723	2,309,493	122:1
California	33,871,648	111	473,012	72:1
Texas	20,851,820	107	312,141	67:1
Dallas/Ft. Worth ⁶	4,632,849	53	135,232	34:1
City of Dallas	1,188,580	22	58,754	20:1
City of Los Angeles	3,692,820	16	93,654	39:1

On a state level, California has the greatest number of megachurches, with a more than fifty percent higher number of worshippers. Yet, when looking at the density of population (p) to megachurch worshipper (w), Texas has a higher ratio of 67:1 (p:w). This means that one out of every sixty-seven residents in California and Texas worship in a megachurch.

Looking at two cities in each state, Dallas (385 square miles) has seventy-five percent of the land of Los Angeles (498 square miles), yet Los Angeles has more than three times the resident population. Thus, in terms of the number of megachurches, population density is not necessarily a significant factor. Los Angeles has a population to megachurch worshipper ratio of 39:1, while Dallas has 20:1. In other words, one resident out of every twenty in the city of Dallas attends a megachurch. It can be concluded that Dallas has a high percentage of citizens attending a megachurch.

Not only is Dallas the home of many megachurches, but some of these were “instant megachurches.” This again solidifies Dallas’ standing as a new capital of evangelicalism:

⁶ North Texas Council of Governments, *Population Estimates by City and County* [On-line] (North Texas Council of Governments, 2003, accessed 15 October 2003); available from <http://www.dfwinfo.com/ris/population/pop2003.xls>. The North Texas Council of Governments compiled data from the United States Census 2000 census for sixteen counties in North Texas.

In addition to the growth of existing churches, a number of itinerant ministers have found Dallas to be fertile soil for growing big churches from scratch. Just ask T. D. Jakes and Chuck Swindoll, two high-profile preachers who planted ‘instant’ megachurches.

‘I think there’s a demographic shift going on that explains some of the activity,’ says Dallas Baptist University’s Michael Williams. ‘The proximity of the DFW Airport and a couple of major Interstate arteries make Dallas an important location in terms of commerce, and an outgrowth of that is the relocation of a lot of businesses—and people—to this area in the last 30 years. That’s been a real benefit to the churches.’

‘There’s a dramatic religious variety here. It’s really unlike any other place in the country,’ says Darrell L. Bock, professor of spiritual development and culture at Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). ‘You’ve got a microcosm of evangelicalism here in a lot of ways—the big megachurches, the average-size churches. But whereas most communities have one or two places like that, Dallas has tons.’⁷

Bock concludes that “I think Dallas is a stealth capital of evangelicalism.”⁸ On the basis of this evidence, it will be accepted that Dallas is the new capital of evangelicalism. The term *Dallas* will be used in Gilbreath’s sense of the Dallas/Fort Worth region.

As Dallas is the new capital of evangelicalism, it was found unnecessary for this researcher to travel to another part of the United States to conduct case-studies on the churches. Rather, by containing the case-studies to churches in one region, potential distorting factors of regional influence could be eliminated. Data from churches in other regions is introduced as both helpful and needed, making this study focused on the Dallas region but not exclusive to it.

In one way, the focus of megachurches is helpful for a study of Executive Pastors. Megachurches were the early adopters of the role of Executive Pastors. Northwest Bible Church used the role briefly in the late 1980’s and then resurrected the

⁷ Gilbreath, (accessed).

⁸ Ibid. (accessed).

position after a church crisis in 1998. Some churches with less than two thousand in worship, to use the Hartford's baseline number, have adopted the Executive Pastor position.