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## Megachurches and Economic Development: Pastoral Interpretations of Internal and External Expectations on Church Behavior

Ashley E. English  
Texas Christian University, a.english@tcu.edu

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### **Megachurches and Economic Development: Pastoral Interpretations of Internal and External Expectations on Church Behavior**

Based on data from the National Congregations Study, approximately 374,000 religious congregations operate in the United States (Brauer, 2017), engaging 150 million members weekly (“U.S. Membership Report,” 2010). Congregations exist primarily for spiritual purposes (Ammerman, 2001; Cnaan & Curtis, 2013), such as religious instruction and regular worship of a deity. To meet the spiritual needs of church members, congregations also offer services such as pastoral care, grief counseling, or family counseling. Providing spiritual instruction that permeates the daily lives of members is an essential aim of religious congregations. This intersection of meeting spiritual needs and providing practical guidance for implementing beliefs has led to congregational involvement beyond the walls of the church.

For example, congregations engage in service delivery for social services and sometimes partner with government entities through contractual relationships to deliver such services (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; Cnaan & Curtis, 2013). Upon studying congregations in the Philadelphia area, Cnaan, Boddie, McGrew, and Kang (2006) found that upward of 92% of congregations engaged in at least one form of social service, which is higher than numbers supported by the National Congregations Study (NCS) (59%). When considering activities that fall within social services, congregations have advocated for the socially disadvantaged or

pursued public policies consistent with their faith. Fulton (2016) analyzed trends in congregation-based social service provision and political participation by using three waves of data from the NCS, which is a nationally representative, cross-sectional survey of U.S. congregations using data from 1998, 2006-2007 and 2012. In observing national trends, Fulton found that congregational engagement in service-related activities is substantial and increasing.

Yet, one area of congregational involvement seems unexpected in some respects. Faith-based economic development (ED) has become a topic of local and intellectual interest since the late 1990s and early 2000s (Barnes, 2011; McRoberts, 2003; Owens & Smith, 2005; Reese, 2004; Reese & Shields, 2000). Congregations are engaging in and, in some cases, leading conversations about homeownership, encouraging the creation of small businesses and hosting events to provide career development, among other activities. While the notion of business creation and career development are unexpected, the subject of money and financial management are not absent in biblical text. For example, Matthew 6:21 states that “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” This verse emphasizes how one’s view of money reflects priorities. Proverbs 22:7 issues a warning about the dangers of debt: “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.” Despite these references, however, involvement in economic development activities, beyond the explaining ways to use financial resources, are still uncommon for most congregations.

One subset of congregations, megachurches, is uniquely poised to engage in ED activities. Megachurches, or congregations with 2,000 or more weekly attenders, take innovative approaches to ministry and community efforts (Ellingson, 2009; Ellingson, 2010; Martin, Bowles, Adkins & Leach, 2011; Schaller, 2000; Thumma & Bird, 2007). These congregations have the organizational capacities to become strong players in the local economy and social service delivery. Fulton (2016) noted in his study of congregational engagement in social services that congregations, especially evangelical congregations, are significantly less involved in political participation, which hinders long-term solutions to social problems. Megachurches have the ability to not only offer social programs, but these congregations also possess the human, financial, and social capital to encourage political action and champion public policies to address economic inequities well into the future. For example, Richardson, Williams, and Harris (2006) highlighted the political influence and power of predominately African-American megachurch pastors engaged in ED in the Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta areas. The article specifically detailed ways Bishop T.D. Jakes, leader of the Potter's House based in Dallas, Texas, engaged over 4,000 volunteers annually, managed a staff of 360 full-time workers, generated more than \$15 million through the congregation's annual MegaFest conference, and funded 100 charitable ministries that included debt consolidation. Yet, scholars have devoted limited

attention to systematically exploring how megachurches participate in their surrounding communities or impact the quality of life for residents.

The growth of megachurches alone warrants the attention of academic researchers to understand the community impacts of these congregations. While evidence of megachurch growth emerged as early as the 1970s, the number of megachurches in the U.S. doubled from 2000 to 2005 (Thumma, Travis & Bird, 2005). In 2005, 1,310 megachurches were operating in the United States, engaging more than 4.5 million Americans (Warf & Winsberg, 2010). Chaves (2006) attributes this growth to the reality that Americans are concentrating in larger settings coupled with the rising costs of running churches that cause smaller congregations to close their doors. Geographically, megachurches often locate in suburban areas where land is plentiful and churches can build large campuses. Urban municipalities tend to favor megachurch growth in suburban areas to leave urban land use to entities that can contribute to the tax base (Weiss & Lowell, 2002). Yet, congregations have the propensity to contribute to ED at the local level, beyond the generation of property taxes by training their members on financial management, encouraging entrepreneurship and utilizing land owned by the church as a catalyst for community development.

In this study, the investigator asks the following questions: What sorts of ED activities do megachurches engage in, and what rationale do leaders give for this behavior? Since studies have shown ED is crucial to the well-being of a

community, and a congregational role in ED would appear to have little to do with its primarily spiritual mission, this type of community involvement necessitates explanation. Researchers should conceptualize the participation of megachurches in ED as an extra-role behavior (ERB), which is defined as “behavior that attempts to benefit the organization and goes beyond existing role expectations” (Organ, Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 2006, p. 33). Theories of ERB posit that individuals adopt extra-roles on the basis of self-interest (e.g., to derive organizational benefits) (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Bolino, 1999; Ferris, Bhawuk, Fedor & Judge, 1995; Schaubroeck & Ganster, 1991) or duty/obligation (e.g., to improve the welfare of others or repay debts) (Deckop, Cirka & Anderson, 2003). Do organizations adopt extra-roles for the same reasons?

Understanding the adoption of extra-roles by organizations is a salient topic in public and nonprofit administration. The problems facing communities are multifaceted, “wicked” problems, which require a collaborative approach to crafting viable and sustainable solutions (Weber & Khademian, 2008). Local governments cannot sufficiently tackle community problems in isolation, including policy areas such as economic development. Organizations rich in social capital, like congregations, can leverage their positions in communities to address issues that impact the broader community. However, that broader community impact might take organizations slightly outside of their stated mission or purpose. Investigating the rationale for why non-governmental entities engage in ERBs

elucidates how governments and nonprofits can become more fully integrated into community problem-solving.

As found in this mixed-methods study, megachurches are performing ERBs by offering ED programs and services. All of the 42 responding megachurches (100%) from Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) in this survey offer ED activities. In an online survey and follow-up telephone interviews with senior and executive megachurch pastors, the researcher asked respondents to provide explanations for their congregations' involvement in these activities to determine if motivations to engage in ED activities were in alignment with either self-interest or obligation.

This paper contains four sections. The first offers a review of the literature on ERBs and how the researcher evaluated those assumptions using megachurches and ED. The second outlines the research methods. This is followed by the findings and limitations with a discussion and conclusions based on the findings.

### **Extra-Role Behaviors, Megachurches, and Economic Development Activities**

Theoretical explanations for organizational action exist in abundance. A dominant perspective used to understand organizational behavior is resource dependency, which asserts that organizations survive by acquiring what they need from their surrounding environments (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). This explanation, while comprehensive, does not fully explain megachurch involvement in ED. Megachurches are rich in human, social, and financial capital, thus limiting

dependency on the surrounding environment. However, a perspective from the organizational citizenship behavior literature offers explanations for why organizations act in uncommon ways. These explanations also consider key stakeholders' expectations as bearing weight on an organization's prioritization of activities.

Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie (2006) define extra-role behavior as "behavior that attempts to benefit the organization and goes beyond existing role expectations" (p. 33). Studies in organizational citizenship behavior provide two competing explanations for adopting ERBs: 1) self-interest and 2) a duty or obligation. When self-interest motivates ERB, individuals seek to gain a competitive advantage over other employees (Schaubroeck & Ganster, 1991). Additionally, individuals adopt ERBs to maintain resources such as compensation, position, or employment (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Bolino, 1999; Ferris et al., 1995). By voluntarily taking on extra roles that transcend formal job requirements, individual employees derive personal and professional benefits. Additionally, employees may seek to derive benefits for the organization by engaging in activities and behaviors that go beyond those typically expected. For example, fostering new and greater social ties among internal stakeholders can contribute to greater organizational efficiency and overall productivity.

The second set of theories of ERB is based on duty or obligation where employees adopt ERBs to improve the welfare of others (duty) or to repay debts



(obligation). When a sense of obligation or duty motivates ERB, employees adopt extra-roles on the norm of reciprocity or to improve the welfare of another (Deckop et al., 2003). Duty-based or obligated behaviors, though self-imposed, may also result from the perception of outside pressure. For example, society expects congregations to be open to newcomers and provide support to those in need. These expectations create conditions under which the congregation feels an obligation to behave accordingly. Although society cannot compel a congregation to be open and comforting, failing to conform to these expectations could result in negative public perception.

Individual employees can identify ERBs by assessing their participation in tasks that transcend formal job descriptions. For organizations, ERB occurs when the organization participates in activities outside of the organizational mission, written constitution, by-laws, or pervasive societal expectations. ERBs for organizations transcend legal or bureaucratic organizational requirements.

### **Congregations and Economic Development Activities**

To conceptualize economic development as an ERB, it is important to understand the standard of community involvement for congregations. Congregational involvement in social services has captured the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines. The National Congregations Study (NCS) examined congregational involvement throughout communities in the United States (Chaves & Anderson, 2014). Originally undertaken in 1998, NCS gathered data to determine

whether or not the Charitable Choice provision that was a part of welfare reform encouraged more congregations to apply for government funding to deliver social services (Chaves & Wineberg, 2010). What came of the survey, however, was an opportunity to learn about the community-focused activities of congregations across the nation. The 2012 wave of the NCS demonstrated significant congregational involvement (52%) in food assistance programming. The survey also demonstrated some commitment, albeit less than food assistance, in employment services and housing programs. The NCS data revealed limited congregational participation in programming related to ED without offering explanations for such participation.

However, previous research does provide some insight into how congregations engage in economic development. Rees and Clamp (2002) define faith-based community economic development as “the involvement of faith-based institutions in projects designed to revitalize their communities, establish sustainable ED initiatives, attract investments, build wealth, and encourage entrepreneurship” (p. 3). Other scholars have chosen to describe faith-based economic development through a list of activities to better present the concept (Reese, 2004; Reese & Shields, 2000). Some of those activities include adult education, business development, housing, investment activities, charitable activities, job training/employment services, and generalized provision of social services.

While an academic exploration of megachurch ED activities is limited, previous scholars provide insight into the types of congregations most likely to engage in these activities. Firstly, organizational capacity has some bearing on the ability of congregations to participate in ED activities. Key organizational variables that increased the likelihood of congregational participation in ED activities include larger organizations with high membership, those with higher weekly attendance and pledging units, larger clerical and lay staff members, congregations whose members come primarily from the immediate neighborhood surrounding the church, and congregations that receive a greater amount of government grants to administer ED activities (Reese, 2004). Similarly, Hackworth and Stein (2012) also note a congregation's ability to navigate local government politics strategically as a needed capacity for congregational involvement in ED activities. Additionally, scholars have studied the impact of race on congregational participation in ED. Scholars consistently acknowledge the ways predominately African-American congregations address social injustices through political participation and ED policies (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Barnes, 2011). Overall, African-American congregations are more likely to participate in economic-related activities than predominately white congregations (Littlefield, 2010).

In summary, previous research points to larger congregations, like megachurches, as likely candidates for engaging in ED activities. Additionally, ethnic minority groups, such as predominately African-American, are likely to

engage in ED activities. Organizational citizenship behavior literature indicates that megachurches might participate in ERBs, like ED, out of self-interest or obligation. Thus, the central research question guiding this study is: What sorts of ED activities do megachurches engage in, and what rationale do leaders give for this behavior?

### **Methodology**

To answer the aforementioned research question, the researcher employed a mixed-methods approach using survey and telephone interview data to gather information from megachurch leaders in the Dallas and Houston Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). Using data collected at two periods, 2013 and 2015, leaders shared details about the nature of their ED programs and offered insight about their motivations for offering these services. The survey used in this study was created in 2012 using a pre-existing database of megachurches maintained by megachurch scholar Scott Thumma to draw a sample of 134 megachurches from the Dallas-Fort Worth and the Houston-Sugarland-Baytown MSAs (Hartford Institute for Religious Studies, n.d.). The database maintained by Thumma is limited to Protestant Christian places of worship; however, scholars acknowledge the presence of other mega-size places of worship in the Muslim and Catholic faith traditions. The researcher chose the Dallas and Houston MSAs in Texas due to the high concentration of megachurches in these two areas and the proximity of these congregations to the researcher.

A total of 42 megachurch senior or executive pastors completed the survey in 2013 and 2015. Of the 42 responding congregations in this study, 45.2% were Baptist (19 out of 42), 28.6% Nondenominational (12 out of 42), 21.4% Methodist (9 out of 42), 2.4% Lutheran (1 out of 42), and 2.4% Episcopal (1 out of 42). These percentages compare with 42% Baptist, 23% Nondenominational, 16% Methodist, 1% Lutheran, and 1% Episcopal, and 17% other (Anglican, Assemblies of God, Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church of America, and Unknown) in the overall sample of 134 megachurches in the Houston and Dallas MSAs. About one-quarter of the responding congregations were predominantly African-American, meaning African-Americans constitute more than 50% of the congregational membership.

Leaders identified whether or not their congregations offered the following activities in the last 12 months using yes or no responses: 1) Stewardship/Financial Management, 2) Homeownership Classes/Program, 3) Entrepreneurship Classes/Program, 4) Job/Career/Employment Services, 5) Credit Repair/Debt Reduction Services, 6) Financial Literacy Classes for Adults and/or Youth, 7) Housing Program (Transitional/Low-Income), and 8) Short-Term Loans/Emergency Assistance. The researcher used wording and phrasing for survey questions inspired by the National Congregations Study (see Appendix A for full survey instrument). To determine if churches were solely providing a benefit to its members, or if they felt an obligation to offer ED activities for the

broader community, respondents indicated whether or not membership was a requirement to participate in church-sponsored ED activities.

The aforementioned categories for ED activities came from previous research on faith-based economic development (Reese, 2004; Reese & Shields, 2000). Financial management highlights congregation-based financial programs that teach participants the concept of generosity, which impacts the external community through increased giving and philanthropy. Homeownership classes facilitate informed home-buying strategies among program participants, and homeownership directly contributes to the local tax base. Entrepreneurship and job training programs facilitate job creation and increase wages, respectively. Credit repair and financial literacy classes help educate participants about methods to increase wealth, plan for retirement, and, understand ways to participate in the economy. Social services, like housing and emergency loan programs, are a part of economic development programs that help stabilize individuals and families during times of financial uncertainty.

All survey respondents had an opportunity to participate in follow-up telephone interviews. Respondents received at least three reminders via email, phone calls, and voice messages to encourage participation. Having multiple points of contact and a consistently worded reiteration of the study's purpose are proven methods to increase response rates among participants in qualitative research (Sheehan, 2001).

Leaders from 23 megachurches participated in semi-structured, telephone interviews to expound upon their online survey responses. Thirteen of the congregations were from the Houston MSA, and 10 were from the Dallas MSA. Interviews with the 23 participants lasted an average of 21 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting 15 minutes and the longest 32 minutes. Eighteen of the 23 follow-up interviews took place between April and May of 2013. The second round of interviews occurred in February of 2015, which included five interviews. In both interview phases, respondents answered the same questions by the same interviewer. Upon answering all interview questions, respondents had an opportunity to share additional insights with the researcher.

The interviewer took shorthand notes during the interviews and summarized the data immediately following the conclusion of the interviews to prevent tampering of data or loss of information. The researcher analyzed the interview data by using the method of constant comparison analysis to highlight the respondents' unique feedback, reactions, or places of emphasis (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). This process involved reviewing the data and identifying codes, grouping data into categories by the codes, and developing themes.

### **Findings**

All 42 of the megachurches in this sample (100%) offered at least one of the eight ED activities outlined in this study (Table 1).

Forty-one out of 42 (97.6%) congregations offered Stewardship/Financial Management classes, and 25 of 42 (59.5%) of responding congregations offered programming related to employment services. Of the 13 pastors who specifically mentioned using a curriculum to offer stewardship classes, 11 of them used curriculum developed by Dave Ramsey, financial expert and creator of Financial Peace University. Additionally, 25 of 42 (59.5%) of congregations offered emergency assistance. Programming offered the least among responding megachurches were homeownership (7 out of 42, or 16.7%) and entrepreneurship (8 out of 42, or 19%) classes. Megachurch membership was not a requirement to participate in ED programming, outside of short-term loans/emergency assistance programming for one congregation. Thus, the broader community had an opportunity to engage in these services to improve their quality of life.



**Table 1: Economic Development Activities Offered by Megachurches**

<b>Economic Development Activities</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Percent Offering</b>
Stewardship/Financial Management Classes	Teach the fundamentals of budgeting and establishing financial goals and priorities.	98%
Jobs/Career Development Ministry	Identify employment opportunities, training programs, and skills to increase hirability.	60%
Credit or Debt Repair Services	Improve overall financial opportunities by reducing debt and increasing credit scores.	52%
Financial Literacy Classes	Help participants understand investment opportunities, credit, retirement, insurance, and other issues that impact personal finances.	60%
Homeownership Classes	Help participants understand home financing, home maintenance, budgeting, all aspects of the home buying process.	17%
Entrepreneurship Classes	Encourage small business development, writing a business plan, understanding risks and financing.	19%
Transitional Living/Housing Program	Provide temporary housing for those experiencing economic hardship to create opportunities for economic stability and to move individuals/families toward long-term housing.	29%
Short-Term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Support individuals or families in crisis with economic resources to maintain stability, housing, and employment and avoid predatory lending options.	60%

N = 42

Twenty-two of the 42 responding congregations (52.4%) were located in suburban communities, and 20 of the 42 were located in urban settings (47.6%).

This spatial distribution was consistent with the geographic locations of

megachurches nationally (Warf & Winsberg, 2010). Responding congregations offered four ED programs, on average. Two megachurches offered all eight ED activities, and four congregations offered one activity. Of the eight megachurches that offered six or more ED activities, 37.5% (3 out of 8) were predominately African-American congregations, and 62.5% (5 out of 8) were predominately white. Additionally, of the eight megachurches that offered six or more ED activities, five (62.5%) were located in the city versus three (37.5%) congregations located in suburban areas.

One purpose of this study was to determine pastoral interpretations about why megachurches offer ED activities. Evidence shows that ERB theories of both self-interest and obligation provide explanations for congregational involvement in this service area. To fulfill this purpose of the study, the researcher conducted semi-structured telephone interviews. Table 2 summarizes organizational characteristics for the 23 participants taking part in the telephone interviews. Of the 42 congregation leaders who completed the online survey, 54.8% of the church leaders (23 respondents) completed telephone interviews.

**Table 2 – Overview of Telephone Interview Participants**

Respondent	Congregation Size	Denomination	Economic Development Services Offered	Location (City or Suburban Area)
23	16000	United Methodist Church	Stewardship Classes Home Ownership Classes Credit/Debt Repair Jobs/Career Development Entrepreneurship Classes Financial Literacy Housing/Transitional Living Program Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	City
5	11000	Southern Baptist Convention	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Credit/Debt Repair Jobs/Career Development Program Entrepreneurship Classes Financial Literacy Classes Housing Repair/Development Program Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	City
15	8500	Nondenominational	Stewardship Classes Credit/Debt Repair Services Jobs/Career Ministries Financial Literacy Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	City
11	8000	United Methodist Church	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Job/Career Development Housing Development/Repair Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	City
14	5000	Southern Baptist Convention	Stewardship Classes Credit/Debt Repair Services Jobs/Career Development Entrepreneurship Classes Financial Literacy Housing/Transitional Living Program Short-Term Loans/Emergency Assistance	City

19	3128	Southern Baptist Convention	Housing/Transitional Living Program	City
1	2900	United Methodist Church	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Credit/Debt Repair Entrepreneurship Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	City
12	1800	Lutheran	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Jobs/Career Development Financial Literacy Counseling Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	City
16	9765	Nondenominational	Stewardship Classes Jobs/Career Development Financial Literacy	Suburban
4	5000	Nondenominational	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Jobs/Career Development Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Suburban
13	4000	Nondenominational	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes	Suburban
21	3911	Nondenominational	Stewardship Classes Credit/Debt Repair Services Jobs/Career Development Financial Literacy Housing/Transitional Living Program	Suburban
20	3500	United Methodist Church	Stewardship Classes Credit/Debt Repair Jobs/Career Development	Suburban
9	2200	Nondenominational	Stewardship Classes Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Suburban
10	2200	Southern Baptist Convention	Stewardship Classes Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Suburban
3	2200	Southern Baptist Convention	Stewardship/Financial Management Housing Program Assistance Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Suburban
22	2000	Nondenominational	Stewardship Classes Credit/Debt Repair Services Jobs/Career Ministries Financial Literacy	Suburban

			Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	
17	2000	Nondenominational	Stewardship Classes Financial Literacy	Suburban
2	2000	United Methodist Church	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Credit/Debt Repair Job/Career Development Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Suburban
7	2000	Southern Baptist Convention	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Housing Development/Repair Program	Suburban
8	1900	United Methodist Church	Stewardship/Financial Management Classes Job/Career Development Housing Development/Repair Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Suburban
18	1800	Southern Baptist Convention	Stewardship Classes Credit/Debt Repair Services Entrepreneurship Classes Financial Literacy	Suburban
6	1800	Southern Baptist Convention	Stewardship/Financial Management Short-term Loans/Emergency Assistance	Suburban

The average weekly attendance of congregations for those taking part in telephone interviews was 4,461 members, indicating that responding megachurches were slightly larger than most megachurches that typically sustain memberships closer to 2,000 attendees. Nine of the 23 interview respondents were from the Baptist (39.13%), seven megachurches were Nondenominational (30.43%), six were from the Methodist (26.09%), and one congregation was Lutheran (4.35%).

### **Self-Interest – Meeting community expectations**

Overall, the findings lend some support for the idea that megachurches offer ED activities for self-interested reasons, including to serve and retain members. Of the responding congregations, for example, 74% (17 out of 23) believed their members expected them to offer ED programs. Thus, megachurch leaders viewed participation in this type of programming as a way to meet member expectations, which they saw as a way to serve members or motivate consistent attendance. However, pastors perceived that members expected the church to participate in community engagement in general, rather than ED specifically:

Respondent #19 – “I think the members have a very general understanding of what we do. I think they do expect us to have a relationship with the community and contribute to those in need. But the specifics about how we do that is really left up to us.”

By responding to these expectations for community involvement, megachurches appeared to act in ways consistent with self-interest (to respond to the wishes of members and to retain them). Megachurch leaders also noted the perceived evolution of membership expectations for church behavior, which largely depended on a member’s tenure with the congregation and spiritual maturity:

Respondent #12 – “If someone has been a member of... [our church]... for 10 or 20 years, they would expect us to offer these services because they have history with our church....A person new to the church might actually be surprised that we offer the services. They may say, ‘I just came for a song and a message, and you want to help me with my finances?’ They may be shocked to know we do those things.”

These responses aligned with role theory in that expectations can evolve (Katz & Kahn, 1966). This finding also demonstrated how a transition from an extra-role to an in-role behavior may develop as it relates to the offering of ED activities. This finding has implications for those concerned with government and megachurch collaborations in activities such as ED, as discussed later.

While some respondents noted their decisions to offer ED activities was to align with members' expectations, megachurch leaders did not articulate that ED activities were solely undertaken as a means of retaining members or garnering other self-interested resources. For example, when asked whether ED activities increased giving, 48% (11 out of 23) responded in the negative. Instead, church leaders offered financial management classes to educate members and non-members about financial stewardship. Respondents were not oblivious to the possible impact classes could have on church giving, however. Three interview respondents mentioned an increase in giving was a "by-product" of the classes, but none affirmed an increase in giving as the goal or motivation for offering the service.

While 70% (16 out of 23) megachurch leaders did not view ED activities as a way to attract or retain members, one senior pastor of a megachurch in an affluent suburban area in the DFW MSA stated ED activities helped the church remain relevant and attractive to a younger demographic:

Respondent #2 – “What I have observed is that people born after 1982 are interested in making a difference, and they are drawn to organizations and causes that enable them to do so. More and more, the church has to put legs to what is being preached on a weekly basis. People, specifically the millennial generation, want to see action.”

These perspectives are consistent with Thumma and Travis’ (2007) research on the practical nature of biblical teaching that occurs in most American megachurches. The outreach efforts of these congregations and their clear presentation of scripture, coupled with a congregational commitment to their surrounding communities, contribute to the growth of megachurches (Thumma & Travis, 2007, chapter 5).

Finally, megachurch leadership commented on whether or not offering ED activities enhanced the prestige of their churches or standing in the community. Nineteen out of 23 leaders (83%) responded in the affirmative, which supports the ERB assumption of self-interest because ED activities enhance the brand or reputation of the organization. The senior pastor for a megachurch in an affluent suburban community in the DFW MSA specifically mentioned the term *brand*:

Respondent #2 – “However, if you talk to anyone in the area, even today, they will tell you that [our church] is the church of the community. In fact, I would say that our brand is more recognized in the area than any other brand.”

Similarly, the senior pastor of a predominately African-American congregation located in the city of Houston also noted the integral role of branding and its connection to attracting new members:

Respondent #11 – “Branding of a congregation is important, and branding consists of communicating about your organization in a way that sets you



apart; it communicates your value. And people make attendance decisions based on that brand.”

Megachurch leaders were sensitive to community perceptions about their congregations and routinely monitored how external audiences interpreted megachurch programs/services.

In summary, interview data support theories of self-interest as explanations for megachurch involvement in ED activities. Primarily, megachurches adopted ERBs due to members’ expectations and as a means of gaining prestige and enhancing the appearance of the organization. However, research findings did not support the assumption that megachurches offer ED activities to increase financial giving.

### **Obligation/Sense of Responsibility**

This study also explored theoretical explanations for ERB that suggest megachurches adopt extra-roles for the following reasons: 1) obligation (reciprocity—to repay a debt) and/or 2) duty (to improve the welfare of others). Under these ERB assumptions, a megachurch participates in ED to reciprocate support from the community/partnering organizations (obligation), or to help others (duty). While 96% of interview respondents agreed the community had been supportive of their congregations in the past, only 33% (7 out of 21) indicated that such support created an obligation to return the favor.

Most megachurch leaders identified collaborative arrangements to offer ED activities as a strategic decision based on overall goals rather than simply an act of reciprocity. For example, a senior pastor in the Houston area emphasized the shift toward a strategic approach to ministry:

Respondent #1 – “In the past, our relationships were built primarily through members of our church who served on boards for these organizations who had connections.... Now we ask ourselves, does it make sense to partner with [organization A]? Yes, it does because economic development is important to us because it helps the members of the community and it keeps students actively engaged. In the past it was based on connections, now we have a more strategic approach to partnerships.”

The reciprocity assumption of ERB seemed secondary to an emphasis on strategic decision-making. Few leaders replied that they felt any obligation to provide support to other organizations that have given to them in the past.

Interview findings suggested that improving the welfare of others was the obligation or sense of responsibility that drove a megachurch to offer ED services. However, the obligation varies by congregation. Many megachurches delineated between benevolence and stewardship activities or economic services. Benevolence programs benefited the poor; whereas, stewardship ministries educated members and non-members about biblically-focused management of financial resources. Some respondents felt a greater sense of obligation to the poor than to offer financial management classes. The executive pastor for a 2,200 member megachurch in Galveston County highlighted these differences:

Respondent #9 – “On the financial training, I do believe we have a responsibility to help the congregation be good stewards of their finances in a way that aligns with the Bible. However, I have not found anywhere in the Bible that we have a biblical mandate to do the same for the community. We are not mandated to help the community manage their finances in a godly manner. We do have a responsibility to evangelize but not an obligation or responsibility to help train people in their finances who are outside of the church.”

Seventeen out of 23 (74%) of respondents believed they had an obligation to offer ED activities for those struggling in their finances, and fourteen out of 22 (64%) believed the church (broadly defined) was responsible for offering these programs. While some respondents agreed the church should offer ED activities, others agreed that the level of responsibility varies. Essentially, megachurches in high poverty areas with greater resources should engage in ED activities. For example, an executive pastor of a relatively diverse megachurch in Houston highlighted how community needs shaped ED priorities:

Respondent #12 – “I don’t think every church has to tackle economic development issues. It depends on the context of the church. If you are a Country Club church...in a wealthy neighborhood, then maybe you can focus your attention on local or world missions. Our church is contextually in a position where we should tackle these issues....”

A sense of social justice for marginalized groups also motivated megachurch leaders to participate in ED activities. Some leaders believed the church had a responsibility to improve the quality of life for community residents by improving their financial condition. For example, the senior pastor of a predominately African-

American, 11,000-member congregation in the Houston area emphasized a commitment to marginalized groups:

Respondent #5 – “Oh yes, it is our responsibility to elevate the people around us. When we do so, it actually enhances the value for the entire community. Unfortunately, too many churches today are more concerned with trying to impress than to impact. We have to be impactful, and if we are not, what is the point in doing it? What we do should make a real difference in the lives of those around us.”

Similarly, the senior pastor of a growing congregation near the Tarrant County area of North Texas highlighted this responsibility as well:

Respondent #8 – “If we can have an influence by increasing the standard of living of those in our community while also using our congregation to connect people to God, then that is what we should do. The church broadly has not done a very good job of that in the past, but we are doing what we can in that area.”

In summary, findings in this study did not support the assumption that reciprocity motivates an organization to take on ERBs. While megachurch leaders unanimously acknowledged the support they received from the community-at-large, they did not feel pressured to offer ED programs in response to that support.

On the other hand, megachurch leaders did view participation in ED activities as a means of improving the welfare of others. Specifically, that responsibility varies based on the geographic location of the church and the type of ED service offered. Additionally, leaders perceived a greater responsibility to offer benevolence, or giving to the poor, rather than financial management training to the surrounding community.

### **Limitations**

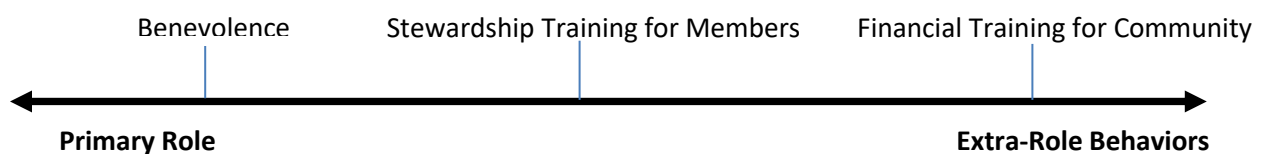
One limitation of telephone interviews is the inability to discern the social cues of the respondent (Opdenakker, 2006). While the researcher could notice changes in the respondent's tone of voice or changes in speech patterns, the interviewer could not fully observe body language that could have influenced the interpretation of responses. To address this limitation, the interviewer noted when respondents had difficulty in addressing questions and posed probing questions to try to understand their perspective with more completion. This study has offered new insight into the activities of megachurches, but its sample size was limited. The researched focused on two metropolitan areas in the state of Texas. Megachurches in rural areas or different regions of the United States might have different priorities and rationales for engaging in economic development activities. A larger national or international sample could provide more generalizable findings. Finally, the delay between data collection periods is a limitation. However, no significant policy changes regarding congregations and community involvement in economic development activities occurred between data collection phases. And, the same sample that received the survey initially received an invitation to participate in the second wave by using the same recruitment messages, survey and interview questions.

## Discussion

This study examined megachurch participation in ED activities and factors that influenced their adoption of ERBs. Two themes emerged. Megachurches did offer ED activities, and both self-interest (e.g., to gain a competitive edge and meet expectations of members) and a sense of obligation (e.g., to help improve the financial conditions of others) motivated these ERBs.

First, all of the responding megachurches were involved in ED activities. Stewardship and financial management comprised the bulk of congregation involvement, but megachurches also offered job and career development, financial literacy programs, and assistance with transitional housing. Pastors lacked consensus on whether or not offering ED activities was an extra-role behavior. Thus, rather than statically viewing ERBs, these behaviors can exist on a continuum (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – Extra-Role Behavior Continuum for Megachurch Economic Development Activities**



Many congregations viewed assisting the poor as benevolence, which aligns with religious doctrine. However, megachurch leaders did not consistently define ED activities such as training non-members in financial stewardship or offering

homeownership or entrepreneurship classes as a primary role of the church. A need exists to conduct additional research related to whether or not these extra roles become primary ones over time and how this process occurs if it takes place.

Second, megachurches performed ERB for reasons aligned with both self-interest and a sense of obligation/responsibility. This study provides support for the assumption that congregations offered ED services because members expected them to do so. Church leaders also recognized the benefits of improved community perception and prestige associated with offering these services, which helped enhance the congregation's brand image.

Likewise, megachurch leaders also felt an obligation to offer ED services. This obligation came from a responsibility derived from doctrine or spiritual principles, however, rather than from community pressure. The sense of responsibility among megachurch leaders to improve the condition of community residents struggling in their finances was largely reported as a "biblical mandate." Megachurch leaders frequently commented on the priority Jesus placed on stewardship as a reflection of one's priorities, and the desire to help others avoid the "bondage" of financial mismanagement. However, that obligation to help became more or less pronounced based on the location of the congregation. Megachurch leaders surrounded by communities in need sensed a higher level of obligation to meet the financial needs of residents than leaders located in more affluent areas.

Future research exploring the extra-role behavior of congregations could test the following propositions, based on the findings from this study. In the case of a congregation, the mission of the organization is its “job description” and tending to spiritual needs is its “essential job function.” Based on findings from this study, offering ED activities is not an essential job function for most congregations. However, if members, potential members, or the community-at-large expect a congregation to do so, leaders may engage in these activities for the self-interest of the organization. By strategically engaging in activities that accommodate expectations of key stakeholders (e.g., potential members or the surrounding community), congregations can gain a competitive edge over similar institutions:

Proposition 1a: An organization will adopt ERBs as a strategic means of differentiating itself among similar organizations to add or appear to show its value at the community level.

Proposition 1b: An organization will adopt ERBs in response to expressed or perceived expectations from the community regarding a program or set of services.

Conversely, an organization may take on ERBs out of a sense of obligation to return favors and then will take this attitude into collaborations with other organizations (Boris & Steuerle, 2012; O’Leary & Bingham, 2009). The norm of reciprocity is the glue that holds collaborative arrangements together (Ostrom, 1998). Thus, as a means of demonstrating support and solidarity with partnering organizations, an organization may choose to adopt ERBs:



Proposition 2a: An organization will adopt ERBs to demonstrate support to an organization or entity that has been supportive of its efforts in the past.

Additionally, an organization may engage in ERBs as a means of improving the economic or social welfare of others in the community. In the case of congregations, the desire to see an improvement in the social or economic status of those in their surrounding communities is motivation for taking on new responsibilities:

Proposition 2b: An organization will adopt ERBs to improve the social or financial condition of those in the community surrounding the organization.

### **Conclusion**

This study of megachurch involvement in uncommon areas begs the following question: how responsible should megachurches be to the community for activities that go beyond their doctrine? Megachurches risk mission-creep by adopting ERBs. Mission-creep for nonprofits occurs when organizations begin “expanding their programs far beyond their organizations’ original scope, skills, and core competencies – often in response to funding opportunities or staff members’ interests” (Jonker & Meehan, 2008, p. 60). Megachurches may attempt to curtail mission-creep by adhering to religious doctrine as their primary motivation for action rather than accommodating expectations from church staff, members, or the surrounding community.

Additionally, implications for public organizations interested in partnering with megachurches to deliver ED services emerged from this study. Megachurch

ED activities are not massive programs seeking to revitalize whole segments of the community. The largest program offered by a megachurch in this study (i.e., Short-Term Loans/Emergency Assistance) served 4,000 participants while the smallest programs (i.e., Stewardship/Financial Management Classes, Short-Term Loans/Emergency Assistance, and Transitional Living/Housing Program) served only 10 participants in the last 12 months. Of the 40 leaders who shared numbers regarding participants in their ED services, those congregations served an average of 150 participants in the last 12 months. Thus, while megachurches may be interested in collaborating to offer ED activities, public officials should not abandon the responsibility to ensure that needed services are available. Public officials seeking to partner with these unique congregations must also understand why megachurch leaders choose to engage in ED activities if they are to encourage greater participation among megachurches in their communities. Finally, while slightly beyond the scope of this study, megachurch leaders also mentioned a trend that has partnership implications. Megachurch leaders are opting to create separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations to effectively manage the outreach services of their congregations, including economic development services. These new institutional arrangements also serve as viable alternatives for megachurches to engage in unique service delivery without compromising spiritual priorities. Future research could examine the impact of these organizations on the quality of life for

residents in the surrounding communities. Megachurches might be engaged in unique partnerships through these institutions, yet more academic study is needed.

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**Appendix A**

**Phone Interview Questions for Texas Megachurches: Assessing Extra-Role Behavior**

<i>Follow-up interview questions based on reasons for adopting economic development activities: Self-Interest</i>	
<i>Appearance, Prestige</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you think the image of your church or the community perception of your congregation may be enhanced by offering economic development programs/services in the community?</li> </ul>
<i>Expected by Community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you believe that your members expect your church to offer economic development programs?</li> </ul>
<i>Maintain Resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you view participation in economic development activities as a way to increase giving to your church by members?</li> <li>Do you offer economic development programs as one means to help retain members? Do you believe that economic development activities offered by your church are a viable means for attracting new members to the church?</li> </ul>
<b>Follow-up interview questions based on reasons for adopting economic development activities: Obligation/Sense of Responsibility</b>	
<i>Reciprocity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you feel that the community has supported the efforts of your congregation (i.e., participation in events, financial support, or inclusion in decision-making)?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If so, does that support motivated you to offer economic development programs or services?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Are you partnering with other organizations to offer economic development services based on support these organizations may have given to you in the past?</li> </ul>
<i>Improve the Welfare of the Community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you feel obligated to offer economic development programs to community residents who are struggling in their finances?</li> <li>Do you think it is the responsibility of congregations to offer economic development programs?</li> </ul>

