

News

Some are swapping mega-churches for tiny ones

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On a Sunday morning in a Forestville industrial district, the parking lots are full of cars and well-dressed people. Amid the industrial shells built for tire stores and carpet-cleaning businesses, they are here to worship the Lord.

Along Cryden Way, one can find Amazing Grace Baptist Church, Abundant Harvest International Church, By the Spirit Christian Church and Covenant Life Ministries. Along a three-block stretch, there are more than a dozen in all, including Goshen Worship Center, a windowless warehouse that announces itself with a large banner over the door.

Eight years ago, Simeon L. Corum was associate minister of the District's Scripture Cathedral, where he ministered to thousands every week. Today, after leaving the large church with his wife to start over, he is the elder of Goshen, whose membership is north of 60 but south of 100.

"I feel the spirit of the Lord in this place," Corum preached last week in a booming baritone that matches a torso seemingly more fit for the offensive line on a Sunday afternoon.

In moving from a large church to a much smaller one, Corum is far from alone, although no one keeps track of the number of people who make such a change. Preachers and parishioners who have swapped a "big-box" church for a tiny one said they sought a more intimate bond and a pastor who knew their name. Others yearned to return to a church like the one they attended long ago.

Greg Smith, who teaches at Hodges University in Tampa and studies church attendance patterns, said the largest churches often get more attention but often "have a revolving door."

Across the country, churches of 100 people or fewer are still the most popular niche, Smith said. Prince George's County has an estimated 800 churches, and most are in that size category.

"It's awesome," Corum said of Goshen, where the walls are painted bright yellow and industrial pipes are plainly visible overhead. "The people here are all on one accord, and I am not so busy where I can't get back to them. In a megachurch, people often never get a chance to talk to the pastor."

Midgett Parker, a development lawyer who helped clear the way for several megachurches in the region, attended a few of them over the years.

But after moving across the Bay Bridge, he now can be found on Sundays at the Community Baptist Church in Barclay, Md., which has about 50 members. It feels like home, and in January, he was ordained as a deacon.

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“In a small church, everyone gets to know each other,” Parker said.

“We all come from humble beginnings,” he added. “I am not saying anything bad about large churches, but there is a psychological feeling in getting back to your roots.”

Megachurches are not threatened by those who leave, and some “restless” churchgoers have always moved to other places of worship, said Alton Pollard III, dean of Howard University’s divinity school.

“We live in an age where big matters,” Pollard said. “Megachurches will continue to grow, but it will not be at the expense of smaller churches. With all the things the megachurches do, they can’t provide the intimacy of the smaller churches.”

But they try. Officials at megachurches, commonly defined as having at least 2,000 members, often encourage congregants to join one of their ministries, relatively small groups on a broad range of topics, such as liturgical dance or domestic violence.

“Although we have a large church, when you get connected to one of our 106 ministries is when you start to believe that you’re not a number and that you’re part of a family,” said Iris Skinner, spokeswoman for First Baptist Church of Glenarden. In an average week, 10,000 people are in the pews, with 6,000 more online.

Andrea Williams’s spiritual journey has led her from a megachurch to a small one — and back again. A former project manager for the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, she loved singing in the choir at Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church in Fort Washington, which has nearly 10,000 members.

The church is a venue for music directors who have gone on to climb the gospel charts — including Byron Cage and Earnest Pugh, both celebrated gospel singers. But in 2009, Williams started attending a church of about 150 after she moved to Waldorf.

“Smaller churches give you an opportunity to use your gifts, as opposed to megachurches, where everything is already established,” she said.

But although Williams enjoyed her new church, she recently returned to Ebenezer, even though it means a 30-minute commute. “I missed the dynamic music department at the church,” she said. “I had to think about, ‘How best do I serve the Lord?’ ”

Back in Forestville, just off of Cryden Way, Shirley Berkley can be seen on Sundays playing hymns on the piano at the Maryland Family Christian Center, which has about 100 members. But Berkley, 83, is still a member of First Baptist, where she used to be the minister of music.

The Rev. Jerome Bell, the worship center’s pastor, said smaller churches hold a permanent space in the hearts of many. “People are coming to smaller churches because they want a relationship with the Lord and their pastor,” Bell said. “In a megachurch, it’s hard for a pastor to shake 8,000 hands.”