Imagine a congregation where 10,000 people gather each week for worship, where church budgets are $15 million a year and where thousands of people volunteer for programs weekly. Welcome to the world of megachurches. The past thirty years have seen a proliferation of these massive congregations throughout the nation. There are more than 1,600 of these congregations in the U.S., and while less than half a percent of all congregations, they attract more attention than all other religious communities in the nation combined.

This course will look at the phenomenon through readings, guest lectures, brand new national research and visits to a dozen of them throughout Atlanta, GA to understand the common characteristics of megachurches, how they function, why they are so attractive and what kind of person goes to them. The class will interact with clergy and staff of these churches as we explore their programs, projects and approaches to ministry. Additionally, we will use visits to well-known Atlanta landmarks to uncover the social dynamics that both shape and drive the megachurch model. **Most importantly, in doing this we will explore the general lessons and unique program ideas to be learned from megachurches, lessons that can be used effectively by churches of all sizes and denominational traditions.**

The course will run from Sunday morning June 21 to Sunday afternoon June 28, 2015. Students should aim to arrive the afternoon or evening of Saturday June 20th and will need to check out by mid afternoon Sunday 28th.

The course will use a classroom on the ASC campus for lectures, videos and guest speakers but the majority of the course will happen during our visits to over a dozen of the largest and most innovative megachurches in the country. We will experience a variety of worship services during the day and evenings and aim for exposure to churches with a diversity of size, race, denomination, and style. Additionally, we will visit a number of Atlanta’s historic and tourist landmarks for fun and to discuss what these suggest about the cultural reality that megachurches are addressing.

**NOTE:** The details of this course schedule are still influx at this point. It will likely change prior to, and probably during, the summer class.

The maximum number of students in the course is 15. Enrollment begins mid-March and extends for two months or until the course is full. The cost of the course tuition is $575 for auditors; Special Audit $385 and $1492 for students who want 3 hours of graduate MA or DMin credit.

The course will be held on the picturesque Agnes Scott College campus in Decatur GA, a beautiful suburb of Atlanta. Students have a choice of a single room $54.50/pp or sharing a double room for $48.50/pp. Agnes Scott College will also provide the class with three meals a day. **The expected total room and board cost per person (whether taking it for audit or credit) is approximately $1200.00 for the 8 day trip.**

*Participants are expected to make their own arrangements for travel to and from Atlanta.*

Course is taught by Scott Thumma  sthumma@hartsem.edu

B.A. (Southwestern University);  
M.Div. (Candler School of Theology of Emory University);
Scott Thumma is a professor of sociology of religion at Hartford Seminary and conducts research for the Seminary’s Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Thumma is one of the world’s leading experts on the megachurch movement, is often quoted in the press and was featured in several documentaries. He has published articles and chapters on megachurches and co-authored the book, Beyond Megachurch Myths. He has also written and taught in congregational studies, non-denominationalism, the intersection of homosexuality and Evangelicalism, contemporary conservative Christian movements and the role of the Internet in congregational life. His most recent book, The Other 80%: Turning Your Church’s Spectators into Active Disciples, Jossey-Bass 2011, is a research based analysis of how to increase member involvement and is filled with practical ministerial suggestions.

Objectives

- Describe the megachurch phenomenon as it appears in contemporary U.S. society.
- Understand the role megachurches are playing in the contemporary American religious context.
- Explore the key characteristics of these churches and how they address changes that have taken place in American society in the past few decades, which congregations of all sizes also face.
- Understand basic sociological concepts and theories relevant to the megachurch phenomenon.
- Offer suggestions and approaches to ministry derived from megachurches that will be beneficial to congregations of all sizes, denominations and in all parts of the nation.

Course Requirements (for those seeking MA or Dmin credit):

*** NOTE: This course is open to all auditors (clergy and lay leaders) and special students from other schools. I welcome auditors in this course but I expect any every participant to do the majority of the reading, to be engaged in the class discussion and to offer a class presentation.

1. Class presentation on a megachurch or aspect of the phenomenon 20 percent
2. Attendance and class discussion – active participation 35 percent
3. Reading summary 10 percent
4. 12-15 or 15-20 page paper exploring a theme 35 percent from the course - due after the course, topic and date to be determined.

Further instruction on requirements will be posted as the course date approaches. The final paper should conform to the Seminary’s “General Guidelines for a Research Paper.” The standard Seminary policies regarding plagiarism and writing style apply to this course. For more information about these policies see the Student Handbook on the Seminary’s website.

Grading Scale (MA letter grades listed below include +’s and –’s) Dmin grades are High Pass, Pass, Low Pass and Fail

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<td>A</td>
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**Expectations** - Given that this is an 8 day travel seminar course, I assume that students will not miss any class meetings, even for a few hours unless the event is optional. One absence, with a very good reason and with prior approval, will be acceptable but anyone who misses more than one day of the course may lose a full letter grade off their final grade if taking it for credit.
Please come to class well prepared by having done the readings and ready to engage in the discussion. The majority of the reading assignments for the week must be completed prior to the class meetings. You will need to read and take good notes in order to refer to them during our week of class meetings.

If anyone has any questions, suggestions, difficulties, or comments I would love to hear them and am always available by email sthumma@hartsem.edu.

**Reading summary** – Bring to the first class, a 2-4 page review/comparison of 2 articles you choose from those listed as required reading. Briefly summarize each of the two articles, evaluate their arguments and content, and then compare the findings and ideas within the two articles.

**Class Presentations - (all course students are expected to do this assignment)**
1) present on one of the 10-12 tour churches – the presentation should cover a bit of its history/facts, its appeal and your perceptions
2) present a 10 min. reflection on Friday & Saturday... what innovative idea you discovered about these megachurches’ approach – how and why it is essential in contemporary society – how it might be incorporated into your congregation?

**Research project** - Each student taking the course for a grade will choose either a megachurch to research or an aspect of the phenomenon to explore across several megachurches. The student will gather information about this aspect of the phenomenon or church for brief informal presentation to the class on the last day of the course. The purpose of this presentation is twofold: 1) to uncover primary sources related to this phenomenon, and 2) to introduce more information about the phenomenon or congregation to the class. The primary source might include a church’s confessional statements, published materials from the organization, sermons, videos, news reports, web material and other items that furnish information about the church or phenomenon.

Students will use this material, plus other scholarly sources, to write a 12-15 page for MA, 15-20 page for DMin research paper on a topic related to this phenomenon or an exploration of one megachurch, its history, growth, breadth of ministry and leadership. This paper must explore information about the phenomenon in relation to larger patterns of culture and societal changes that have taken place in America in the past decades and relevance for the future of religion in the US. Please be prepared to have a preliminary idea of your final paper written as a thesis paragraph by the end of the course.

**Schedule of Topics and Readings**

**NOTE:** the REQUIRED readings for this course **MUST BE read before the first meeting date.** Please come to our first class prepared to discuss the readings.

**Pre-Readings**

**Required:**

*Books*

Thumma, Scott and Travis, Dave

Thumma, Scott
Dissertation about one Atlanta megachurch, Chapel Hill Harvester Church/Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, and its
senior pastor Earl Paulk. The dissertation traces the rise, growth and decline of one, atypical for sure, megachurch in great detail. 

**Online articles – These, and other articles, will be available on the course website.**


**Other articles will be assigned and available online.**

**Class Schedule –**

Fly in Saturday evening June 20, 2015

**Sunday June 21**
Breakfast meeting - introductions

Worship service at church 1
Worship service at church 2

Afternoon lecture 2pm-5pm

*Introduction to the Megachurch, basic characteristics and how this phenomenon fits into American society.*

Introduction to course: process our first visits, discuss the overview of Atlanta’s megachurches, history, culture, etc. Discuss preconceptions of megachurches and students’ ministry contexts.

Evening service at church 3
Visit Stone Mt. laser show

**Monday 22nd**
Lecture 9am-12: How They Grow and Succeed
Continue the overview of the megachurch phenomenon: The number and location of megachurches across the
United States, common characteristics, and how they function - based on the 2015, 2010, 2008, 2005 and 2000 national studies as well as other research. Discuss their Mission/Vision

Lecture or Guest Visit 1pm-3pm
afternoon visit to church 4

Evening -- debrief, *The Alpha and the Mega* movie

**Tuesday 23rd**
Informal lecture: Image is everything? Attractional Recruitment strategies
Visit to CNN and Coke Museum - Olympic Park

afternoon visit to church 5

Missional efforts.... Informal lecture: What megachurches do, and how they do it.
Worship
Ministry
Politics

Evening debrief, *The Apostle* movie

**Wednesday 24th**
Lecture 9am-12
Megachurch Leadership
Organization & Structure

Afternoon visit to church 6

Evening visit to church 7

**Thursday 25th**
Morning visit to church 8

Lecture 1pm-5pm
Megachurch Attenders – Commitment and Participation in the Megachurch
Where do they come from?
What attracts them?
Why do they stay – or go?
Integration of members

**Friday 26th**
Morning visit to Lenox Mall

Morning visit to church 9
Visit large Mosque Friday prayer

Lecture 2pm-5pm
Visit with special guest
Presentations
Critiques
Denominational affiliations
New Forms and Functions
Community Interactions
Diversity
Evening visit to church 10

**Saturday 27th**
free morning --- optional visit to Carter Center or MLK memorial

Lecture 1pm-5pm
What to take away – lessons learned
Presentations
What can their success teach us?
Can our congregations also reach people in these ways?
Challenges, New Trends & Implications

Evening visit to church 11

**Sunday 28th**
Morning visit to church 12
Concluding Lecture 1pm-3pm

**The Churches we hope to visit:** (depending on their schedule and availability)

- **New Birth** - Eddie Long
- **Passion City** - Louie Giglio
- **First Baptist Woodstock** - Johnny Hunt
- **12 Stone** - Kevin Myers
- **Northpointe** - Andy Stanley  Buckhead campus  buckheadchurch.org
- **Church of the Apostles** - Michael Youssef
- **Korean Community Presbyterian Church** - James Jung
- **Ray of Hope Church** - Cynthia Hale
- **House of Hope/Greater Travelers Rest Baptist church** - E. Dewey Smith
- **Hebron Baptist Church** - Larry Wynn
- **Perimeter Church** - Randy Pope
- **Cascade UMC** - Marvin Moss
- **WorldChangers Church** – Creflo Dollar
- **Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam**
- **Peachtree Presbyterian** – Vic Pentz
- **First Baptist** - Charles Stanley