

My Mega-Church Visit
to Fellowship Bible Church of Northwest Arkansas
by Jeff Tate

Late in 2005, Jeff Tate posted a breathless little report of his visit to a Mega-Church on the Humanist Institute on-line discussion line. The somewhat sympathetic account generated a great deal of conversation, and raised the question of whether humanists could and should be emulating this relatively new religious phenomenon. What follows are edited transcripts from the back and forth that lasted several weeks. I've tried to leave much of the informal style of this type of exchange intact – ed.

The “feel-good” theology I experienced last Sunday at the mega-church is both intellectually lazy and self-serving in helping the congregants to feel good about themselves. Anyone in the congregation—from libertarians to conservatives to liberals—could feel good about what they experienced. There was no challenge to any belief (except, implicitly, against atheism).

The mega-church’s strong suit seems to be in creating a sense of belonging to a tight, caring community. Interestingly, as I was reading to my wife from the church’s website her response was, “I wish I was looking for a church like that!”

The first thing I notice is the sign on the street saying “9:30 a.m. parking enter here”; I’m going to the 8:00 a.m. service so I drive on to the sign that says, “8 a.m. parking enter here.” (There are also a Saturday evening service and a Sunday 2 p.m. Spanish-language service.)

As I turn in I see very big parking lots and very big buildings in a modern style. I drive to the back parking lot. There are large buildings at the rear of this lot—I can’t quite tell what they’re for. There’s lots of construction going on around the perimeter. A big building with flying buttresses is under construction at the back; a sign says “Our New Chapel.” (Later, from a brochure, I learn that the new buildings include a Leadership Center, a Student Center, and a Children’s building.)

I arrive about twenty-five minutes before the start of the service. Cars are parking and people—mostly couples—are walking toward the Worship Center. Most of us walk through a building that says Children’s Annex; an attractive woman at a desk smiles and greets me and comments that there’s going to be lots of traffic through the Annex today (I think the construction is disrupting the usual flow of foot traffic).

I enter the main building, which contains the Worship Center. In the middle of the building and running its entire width is a Welcome Area, which is now filling with people. There is a large counter with about eight coffee pots, a hot chocolate dispenser and a cappuccino maker. I get a cup of coffee and look around.

I don’t see a single suit or tie. Knit shirts with slacks seem to be the standard attire, but I see plenty of shorts and tennis shoes, too. Women are wearing pants or skirts. Many groups of three to five persons talking together are spread throughout the Welcome Area.

Brochures fill a large kiosk in the center. I pick up one of each of them. Another kiosk is filled with books for sale: *The Overload Syndrome*; *Good Women Get Angry*; *Raising Sons*; *The Power of One* [about implementing the Golden Rule in daily life]; *The Four Things that Matter Most* [relationships are more important than things]; *What Are Old People For?* [improving the role of senior citizens in society]. About half the books are written by physicians. I don't see any titles that seem to be mystical, political, or seriously theological.

I hear music coming from the Worship Center, so I go in. There are no pews; rather very comfortable upholstered chairs (later I find out the seating capacity is 1208). Up front there is a stage. There is no pulpit; no baptismal font visible; no cross in sight. There are no hymnals or Bibles visible. This could be any modern auditorium.

On the stage is a four-piece band: keyboard, drummer, bass guitar, and lead guitar (also the lead singer), and three additional singers. They are singing, "I will worship you, Lord ..." They sound really good. The words are projected onto a large screen above the stage. There is lots of colored stage lighting. Later I see that there is a stylized cross pattern within the masonry work at the front of the auditorium—this could very easily be missed.

I pick a seat in the back row, hoping I can take notes unobtrusively. The Worship Center is about three-quarters full. A high-level Wal-Mart executive (with whom I'm acquainted) and his family sit down in the row in front of me. People are drinking their coffee all the way through the service.

We're told to rise, and the band strikes up "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus." Again, the words are projected onto the screen, and the performance is very good.

After the song we all sit, and the projector screen shows a commercial (very professionally done) for premarital counseling (required before weddings at the church). This is followed by a commercial for an upcoming weekend camp for children and their parents, with an emphasis on strengthening the parent-child relationship. Then a commercial saying that supporting the church construction project is a "Great Investment." Finally, there is a commercial advertising the upcoming "Book of Timothy" for study groups.

Next a young man welcomes the congregation, and invites visitors to register. He's dressed in a knit shirt (untucked) and khakis. He uses a hand microphone. He presents the six church members who are going to India for a mission trip; he asks that we all pray for their success and that "the Lord guide and protect them."

He gives a plug for the church's Community Groups (neighborhood groups of members who meet at homes weekly), and then asks that we greet those sitting around us (which we all do).

A lengthy commercial follows (shown on the projection screen) for the Community Groups. A husband and wife talk about how their group has strengthened their marriage and made new friends for them. The husband says he was reluctant to try the group, but is really glad he did; and that he was concerned that their house wasn't nice enough to host the group, but now he realizes that was a silly concern (this is a very moving segment). It's wonderful, they say, to have friends who really care about you and pray for you. It's also nice to get together and study the Bible.

Then a hymn: "I need righteousness, holiness, faithfulness ..." Again, the music is very moving and the band and singers are very good.

The lights are lowered and the band plays an anthem, “Lord I want to know You . . . Lord use my life for Your glory . . . I love you Lord and lift my voice to worship You . . .” This is very moving music and there is a great sense of bonding. One man in the congregation lifts his arms in a supplicating gesture. I suddenly realize that the offering plates are being passed. No mention is made of this during the service.

The senior minister appears and says a prayer, “Father we love You, give You our life . . . help us to find a life in Christ . . .” This is the only time I hear the word “Christ” used in the service. (The word “Satan” is used once; in connection with evil.)

The senior minister begins his sermon, “We Pull for Underdogs.” My notes of this include: the underdog puts his life on the line for something bigger than himself—a video clip of the scene in *Lord of the Rings* where Frodo accepts the dangerous task of returning the ring to Mordor is shown. Judges 3: 12-20. The Sin Cycle of nations: Rest → Rebellion → Retribution → Remorse → Restoration. [This is the only reference to Sin that I heard in the service. The projection screen is used throughout the sermon for A-V aides, which are very professional.] Handicapped Ehud (Jewish) defeats Eglon the Moabite with God’s inspiration. Do God’s will no matter what the danger—even if it kills you. “God can deliver those who give their life to Him.” In your crisis of faith, choose to serve God, not the idols of the world. We can’t live the Christian life on our own, but God can live it through us. The minister has been speaking about forty minutes, but it feels like much less time has passed.

We are thanked for coming, and file out with the band singing, “I will worship You, Lord . . .” once again. Back in the Welcome Area many people are socializing and drinking coffee. They seem to be having a great time.

I head for my car, walking with others. I get into my car, and a woman approaches me. She recognizes me and says that I treated her daughter eight years ago. She thanks me profusely for that and says that she prays for me and my clinic every day. I thank her and then drive toward the long line of cars snaking out of the back of the parking lot (we can only exit out the back of the lot because so many cars are coming into the front of the parking lot for the next service). Immediately a driver allows me into the line of cars.

We drive through the campus of the church. I see about five home-like buildings (one says Care and Women’s Center). There is a park with trees, benches, and a pond. Then there is what appears to be a housing development under construction with a sign that says, “Fellowship Village” and other writing that I wish I could stop to read.

I have a pleasant, slightly elated feeling. I wonder if I could enjoy attending this church regularly in spite of my atheism. Let’s see; maybe if I just redefined “God” to be the ultimate Good in life, and . . .

Later, in reviewing the church brochures I’ve taken, I learn the central theology here includes:

We Believe

- The literal truth of the scriptures
- That there is but one true God
- The divinity and virgin birth of Jesus
- Resurrection and salvation
- God directs believers to form churches

- All born-again Christians should be baptized; not infants

The following non-Sunday programs catch my attention:

Renewing and Rebuilding

Two four-month sessions “for women seeking to rebuild broken hearts, broken relationships, broken families, broken promises, broken dreams . . .”

Women in Ministry

Four meetings a week “equipping women where they are and empowering them to go where they have never been before”

Heart to Heart Ministry gives women the opportunity to experience joy and growth in their Christian lives by participating in supporting and mentoring friendships. Each mentoring partnership is based on faith, trust, sincerity and commitment.

My Impressions

The overall emphasis in the service is on relationships to one another and to God. Mutual love and support are the major themes.

- The musical lyrics emphasize loving the Lord, worship, giving, laying down, standing up, righteousness, faithfulness, holiness, hearing the Lord, breathing with the Lord, moving with the Lord, etc., laying down all my cares and regrets before the Lord, use my life, oh Lord, take my heart.
- The lighting, music and words encourage a strong sense of bonding.
- The Community Groups are strongly promoted and are clearly designed to foster strong friendships.

There was frequent admonishment to “do God’s will,” but there was no specification as to what is God’s will. Each of us was left to interpret that in our own way. There was no mention of God’s punishment.

Most of the brochures and books offered focused on living a kind and generative life. Women appear to be the “target market” for these.

Clearly, there is an underlying fundamentalist theology, but very little of this was visible during my visit. A very liberal Christian could have been quite comfortable in this service.

In further reflecting on my experience at Fellowship Bible Church yesterday, I'm struck by the emotionally bonding power of the motif of God-the-Father whom we are all to love and obey. This motif is what dominated every minute of the service. Even sitting there as a secular Humanist, it begins to *feel* true to me.

I'm wondering if this God-the-parent image is a key part of what creates the sense of bonding among congregants as children of God and therefore as siblings of one another: that it rekindles and gratifies powerful childhood desires to be perfectly loved in a perfectly loving family. This sense of being loving children of a loving God would then

be the glue that holds together the community of the church. Unfortunately, this emotional bonding depends on the maintenance of an illusion: of there being a God-parent who makes us siblings in a literal family.

If this God-the-parent illusion is required to create that kind of emotional bonding among near-strangers, then perhaps Humanism can never create the same quality of bonding experience and of community. We eschew illusions, but perhaps nothing less than such an illusion can generate the same intensity of emotions.

A response from Ross Hamilton Henry

I live on the buckle of the bible belt in Houston Texas, where we have more mega-churches per capita than almost any other place in the country, and I have made it a point to visit several of them. I try to visit at least one church a month to keep up with what is being taught from the pulpits of America.

My experiences have not been as benign as Jeff's. I would suggest that he go back for other visits and make it a point to also go to their "adult Sunday school" or bible study classes. That is where the real theology is revealed. Making judgments based on a very small sample probably will not give you very valuable data.

One of the mega-churches I visited in the past year is Second Baptist; their minister is Ed Young, who agreed with Falwell and Robertson that it was the ACLU, the feminists, and the secular humanists who caused God to remove his protection from the US and let 9/11 happen (killing 3,000 people from at least twenty nations). The particular service I attended was a talk on atheists and why they can't handle the truth. In his sermon he assured the gathered congregants that god *hates*. He repeated that phrase several times and never said what it was that god hated but implied that it was probably Atheists and the others mentioned in Robertson's summary.

The Mega-church in my own community is "The Fellowship of The Woodlands" but is popularly known as the "non-denominational Baptist church." I have attended it several times, and sometimes the message is similar to what Jeffery experienced. Other times the prayers include phrases such as "we are thankful to our lord and savior for saving us all from hell."

I do not know of any mainline liberal Christian churches (UCC etc.) that have reached mega-church size. There may be some, but the vast majority of the mega churches are of the fundamentalist, Charismatic variety. Of course there are lots of good people who go to them, and live good ethical lives in spite of the underlying self-righteous elitist, intolerant beliefs that some of their leaders espouse.

We could probably learn a lot from their methods and practices. However, we have a message that is superior to theirs. We have a lot of work and rethinking to do before we can begin to build Humanist Cathedrals. But I am encouraged that the tide may be turning.

I was sitting in the local Barnes and Noble just last week when a young man noticed that I was reading Jennifer Michael Hecht's book entitled *Doubt*, and engaged me in conversation, revealing that he was an adult Sunday school teacher at another local mega-church. I told him that I was a Humanist minister. He began to talk to me about the bible, and I, as I always do, listened respectfully and asked him if he believed

that non-Christians such as myself who try to live a good life will end up in hell, as many Christians believe. He was a bit hesitant about answering and qualified his answer with Billy Graham's line that Hell was created for Lucifer and his angels, not for men. But, he believed that anyone who had heard the message of salvation and rejected it would join Lucifer in that place of eternal punishment. God is a just god and had sent his son to die for us, and it would be unjust not to punish those who rejected his sacrifice.

We talked for almost an hour without rancor, each making our points and listening to the other's arguments politely. In the end I do not know if my words had any effect on the religious memes he was operating from, but he seemed to be a reflective person, and I have hopes that he at least may have heard an approach that he had not encountered before.

Our task is to preach our own message of what Jennifer Michael Hecht calls the advantages of the Non-Theistic Graceful Life Philosophy that sustained the huge followings of charismatic leaders like Epicurus, Siddhartha Gautama, Marcus Aurelius, Ashoka, Lucretius, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Socrates/Plato, John Dewey, Corliss Lamont, Robert Ingersoll and many others who got us started down the right path.

Response from Diana W Gross

What struck me about (this) experience was that so much of what this church does is minister to address human needs—for solace, companionship, comfort, community, caring—in an easily accessible way. Pamphlets with demographically targeted jargon-free titles, enjoyable catchy music, comfy chairs, lack of formality in clerical garb. The sermon did not seem very much different from many I have heard. Can this unspoken religious message be—"See how well we take care of your human needs? Therefore you can rest easy in the belief that God will take care of all the rest—sin, salvation, worry, fear."

I wonder if there is a message for Humanists who are part of congregations? These Christians seem to have met human needs in an egalitarian manner with religious dogma, attracting the modern suburban Christian. Do we Humanists fall into the trap of our "dogma" first, comfy chairs later? Some of us are so happy to find a group that reflects our beliefs where we can be comfortable intellectually, that perhaps we don't notice how bad those folding chairs really are. A positive message for us to send could be—See how happy we are and how caring and nurturing is this rational, Humanist community ...

The human family is more than a biological fact. If we only see or present it that way we are off again into making our rationalist "dogma" more important than our human need for comfort, for an antidote to aloneness in this impersonal universe. Our human family has psychological and emotional ties that, when named and nurtured, will cause us to love and care for one another, encourage empathy and compassion, and *that* is what will teach people to cooperate. Otherwise there is no percentage in cooperation if you are one of the "haves"—why not have an attitude of "I've got mine, Jack, pull up the ladder?"

Theists who derive comfort and satisfaction from a mega-church experience can choose to reject this selfish stance because they see themselves as children of a Father/god with a reward in heaven. We on the other hand can choose to reject it because

we know, through centuries of human experience, what it takes to survive on this lonely planet with Mother Earth as our all in all. I maintain that without all those “C” words—caring, compassion, comfort, community, companionship—we will not make community bonds, we will not make a movement attractive to the general public and we will not move towards becoming an inviting home for the many who are not mega-churched or churched at all.

Response from Bette Chambers

Jeff has certainly described the “cement” that holds the group together. The intense desire reflected in these mega-church sermons that tell people they’re “loved” and cherished by God-the-Father, etc., seems to work amazingly well as “cement.” Did you get any hint of Hell and damnation, any hint of traditional Christian doctrine? If this is being left out, and if people are flocking to these churches to get “good feelings,” then expect them to increase in size and numbers.

It looks like ... from your reports ... that the mega church pastors avoid controversy, even of a religious kind. If “feel-good” religion is the fare, then listening to that week after week would be like trying to live on a diet of treacle. (Parishioners might all come down with spiritual diabetes.) Their success will soon, if not already, bring howls of anger from the literalists. And it will look much like the dispute between fundamentalists and “modernists” of a century ago ... one which continues.

I do not feel that Humanism fails in this regard. My question is whether a Humanist’s personal reflections can be offered as an emotional equivalent. Here are mine: First, the “God the Father” as Jeff summarizes that service is certainly not always kind, benevolent, and peaceable. All too often it’s the nasty tribal God of the Old Testament. Just witness the bloodstained sands of history. And look around today!

What can Humanism offer? When I confront this question, I am obliged to conclude: If there is an eternity, it has no beginning and no end. We were born into it. Since nothing bad happened to us before we were born, why would anything bad happen when we’re dead? Why must anything happen? I find much comfort in Carl Sagan’s view that we’re star-stuff. Every element, atom and molecule, of what we are has always been and always will be. We’re made of this star stuff ... how can anything “bad” happen to us once we’re dead? We just change.

“Why” are we? I simply do not know. The universe is not hostile. It is not benevolent. It simply is. Someone said that humans may be the way the universe has of looking back upon itself. This is sometimes offered as an answer to “why we’re here.” I dislike the anthropomorphism in the idea that we are the eyes the universe uses to look upon itself. But if people seem to need a myth, or even something plausible, this would do. It’s an improvement over the God the Father who sends non-believers to Hell (including unbaptized children) and the whole package of Christian and Islamic literalism.

We do not need comforting myths. The universe just is. It cares nothing. It neither inflicts pain nor insures happiness. If there’s an eternity, we’ll all meet again ... in the same place. Meanwhile, humans themselves shape their own destiny, their own morals, their own values, creeds and myths. Humans can (and have) made terrible choices, but they have also seen a way to improve the conditions of life if we but heed

what we can know with reasonable certainty (never absolute) from science. If there is a God, he/she's as uncaring as the universe itself. Therefore, work to oppose dehumanizing creeds, and fashion humane laws and social systems, that our lives may be better and those living long after us will inherit our wisdom.

Live like this is the only life you are going to have. Make something of it that's worthy of your progeny and future generations. There's so much work to do. Shed the old beliefs that bring suffering and misery and warfare. If that is "God's plan," reinvent your god. Such a god isn't worthy of a human being's aspirations. Do we need another Robert Green Ingersoll, who in his own way, created a sort of mega-church?

Jeff Tate replies:

No, I got no hint of a threatening God during the service. Yes, fundamentalists might not like that, although I've not read anything about this actually being voiced.

I doubt that anything in your personal reflections as a Humanist can generate the same emotional bonding as I described among we congregants at the mega church. I summarize your points below:

- There's nothing after death, so don't worry about it.
- We have no idea why we exist.
- The universe is totally uncaring about you.
- Face the existential anxieties without illusions.
- Work for the overall betterment of humankind, without any assurance of permanent success.

I agree with all of the above, but perhaps we'll be building a micro-church instead of a mega-church!

I agree with Ross that my "n" of one is much too small to make any conclusions about mega-churches, including the one I visited.

It is interesting, nonetheless, that at a time when many religiously loaded issues are in the air—stem cell research, Supreme Court nominees, terrorist attack in London, intelligent design, clash of civilizations, public display of Ten Commandments, etc.—I heard not one word, saw not one pamphlet or book about any of this. Just "God loves us; we love God; do God's will; join together with one another."

There seems to be no adult Sunday school class. Since the weekly adult study groups are organized by neighborhood, I'd guess that they differ from one another by income and educational level. I wonder if that means they also differ significantly in the theology expressed—some more liberal, some more conservative?

I certainly agree that the "feel-good" theology I experienced last Sunday at the mega-church is both intellectually lazy and self-serving in helping the congregants to feel good about themselves. Anyone in the congregation—from libertarians to conservatives to liberals—could feel good about what they experienced. There was no challenge to any belief (except, implicitly, against atheism).

The mega-church's strong suit seems to be in creating a sense of belonging to a tight, caring community. Interestingly, as I was reading to my wife from the church's website her response was, "I wish I was looking for a church like that!"

To repeat myself, it's an open question whether a non-theistic organization can create such a tight, caring community. It seems to have been tried (IHEC, UU), but I can't tell that it's ever succeeded for large numbers over long periods of time.

Response from Lisa Smith

I took Jeff's summary of Bette's four points and added my thoughts to them as to how they might be affected by at least my own Humanism: I put it in mini-sermon style. I don't necessarily see that Humanism needs to be shared in this manner, but thought it might be interesting to compare it to the type of mega-church styling.

There's nothing after death, so don't worry about it. But we do have the here and now, so celebrate it. It is yours to live, to share and embrace. Every day is new and every evening is there to be experienced and enjoyed. Our celebration is to reflect on days past and enjoy thoughts of days to come and simply to enjoy the here and now.

We have no idea why we exist. And yet, we do exist. We have the ability to share our thoughts, our burdens, our joys and cares. We can lighten each other's existence and share the existence of children and their children and see the cycle of existence continue on out beyond us. Existence was there before and will be there long after us so we can enjoy this moment we have and see it all.

The universe is totally uncaring about you, but you can care for the universe. You can be a caregiver to the people you encounter, to the animals and the plants and the earth itself. And you can find a great fulfillment in doing this, perhaps no greater fulfillment than in sharing your gifts with others and with the world.

Face the existential anxieties without illusions, but with the support of others and with the strength that you find in that union. The human experience is both beautiful and tragic, and we must experience it all to truly have the fullness and richness of being human. The interdependence of our lives leads us to find others who share our hopes and concerns, and we share the good and bad times with them in honesty and with strength, and we move through the sorrows and celebrate the joys.

Work for the overall betterment of humankind, without any assurance of permanent success, but with the hope that we see in the progress of man, and the love we find in caring for others. We believe that man will move toward the best, and we will struggle to work toward that goal. We can see the vision of humanity achieving its highest ideals and will always strive for that vision, knowing that while all success is fleeting, that each success moves us ever forward.

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Response from Bette Chambers

I want to cheer Diana's thoughts here. I also want to cheer this whole exchange. By summing up thoughts that might reflect "the negation and despair" of humans in an uncaring universe, I think we've touched on the elements that can "ignite an affirming

flame.” All these exchanges are worthy of reexamination and much thought, and the “sermon” was about the best I’ve seen.

I believe we now are approaching an outline, a distillation, a core analysis. And I am very enthusiastic.

Response from Bob Tapp. (Moderator of the Humanist Institute Discussion)

It is much harder—intellectually, psychologically, sociologically—to join a humanist community (than a mega-church). The values are more intense—and more marginal in much of present US culture. They include changing ourselves *and* our world in ways that benefit all humans.

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Response from Diana Gross.

Well said, Bob. You describe our challenge. I agree that Humanists really do not want a “mega-church” - type community. But larger groups than we already have would have definite advantages. But what do you mean by “joining a humanist community?” Are you referring to a chapter? An online community? People join congregations, clubs, associations, lobbying groups, for many different reasons and act differently in each situation. One can send checks to Planned Parenthood and PETA, but these organizations don’t care about you when you get sick. A congregation does.

What kinds of communities or congregations can we offer, and how does one come to join a Humanist community? Folks who come to our Ethical Society most often come for the religious/moral education of their children. Most families join after a time, sometimes as long as several years, during which they just come to platforms, make friends and participate in Sunday school events.

Meanwhile they are able to begin to “give over”—adjust their identities in terms of their current and perhaps newly discovered stance as Humanists, begin to see that being out of the mainstream is an okay thing for them, begin to see that we Ethical Culturalists (and UUs? *ed.*) are not weird—I am not joking!) and realize that they have found a place to call home. Embracing a congregation is a process.