

WHAT IS MULTI-SITE MINISTRY?

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In recent years, a new strategy has emerged in church ministry, allowing one church to meet at multiple locations. These **Multi-Site churches** have discovered a new way to expand demographically and geographically beyond traditional boundaries. They are developing new models and understandings of leadership, stewardship, and the use of property. **Multi-Sites** offer alternative venues such as digital church, extension sites, video-café congregations, multiple campuses, satellite ministries, or other variations that go beyond your main worship area or main campus.

The Multi-Site Church

Some of the strengths of this new life form.

by Dave Ferguson

The multi-site church is a phenomenon that you will no doubt be hearing about in the future. An estimated 100 to 200 churches nationwide are experimenting with this concept: one church (meaning one staff, one board, one budget) meeting in multiple locations, usually with the various sites developing unique personalities yet sharing the same "brand identity" and DNA. One leading example: Community Christian Church, which was planted in Naperville, Illinois, in 1989. Its vision: "Helping people find their way back to God." In 1998, it launched a "south campus" twenty minutes away in a community center of a new housing development. A third site is in Carillon, a nearby "active adult lifestyle community" for those 55+.

Then in 2001, a struggling church in the town of Montgomery offered its building and five acres in hopes that by making it a fourth campus of CCC that new life would emerge. After six months of building rehab and enrolling about 100 new leaders and artists as "spiritual entrepreneurs," more than 600 people attended the inaugural celebration service there.

Combined attendance now averages over 3,000, and more sites are being considered. Dave Ferguson, lead pastor of CCC, explains why he's convinced the multi-site strategy is here to stay. Lyle Schaller describes, in his book [*Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future*](#), what a long-time resident might say while showing a guest around town.

Yesterday. "That's the First National Bank at the corner of Main and Washington, and directly across from it is First Church, where we have been members since we moved here thirty years ago. The college is up on the hill, our hospital is about a half mile to the west, and our doctor has his office in that building over there."

Today. "That's the First National Bank, but I haven't been there for years. We do all our banking at a branch supermarket where we buy groceries. We're members of First Church, but we go to their east-side campus, which is near our house. We have one congregation but three meeting places—a small one on the north side, the big one out where we live, and the old building downtown here. The old college on the hill is now a university. This is their main campus, but they also offer classes at three other locations. We're members of an HMO that has doctors in

five locations, but my primary-care physician is in a branch about a mile from where we live. I've never been in the main hospital except to visit a couple of friends."

This illustrates the direction our world is going—our institutions are growing *larger* and *smaller* simultaneously, blending the strength that size offers with the comfort and convenience of smaller, closer venues. This is one example of what Jim Collins in [*Built to Last*](#) called "the genius of the AND," the paradoxical view that allows you to pursue both A and B simultaneously.

While developing our multi-site church, we discovered eight other advantages that all demonstrate the genius of the AND.

Brand new AND trusted brand

It was a great day when Krispy Kreme doughnuts opened a store in our area. I'd heard how good they were, but I never tasted one until one of their stores opened nearby. The occasion was doubly exciting because it was brand new store opening, and it was offering a brand I knew about and wanted to try.

We've found a similar dynamic with the multi-site church. It has the upside of what used to be denominational loyalty, which was prominent in yesteryear but now is found in congregational loyalty. The particular congregation is the trusted brand, and the opening of a new site makes it brand new.

When we started our second site, we sent out 50,000 pieces of mail to announce the opening. We had 465 attendees. When we launched our second site, our south campus, the response was even better. We did similar announcements and mailings, and we had 565 attend the first celebration service. At least part of this improved response was due to the combination of our being a trusted brand while offering something brand new.

Staff with generalists

AND specialists New churches usually begin with one church planter, a generalist who has to oversee everything. If there is a team, it might include those over broad areas: a worship leader or perhaps a children's pastor.

The multi-site church, however, allows you to start a new location with the existing staff in place. Instead of hiring more generalists, you add specialists such as technical arts, administrator, or director of creative arts for children.

The big win is that now all locations have the benefit of the generalists, and the added specialists! When we added our second site, we brought on specialists like a teaching pastor, adult small groups pastor, administrator, and a director of creative arts for children. When we started a third site (at the active adult lifestyle community), we added a specialist in the area of senior's ministry, and the whole church (every location) benefited from the added expertise.

Last year at Carillon, for instance, we celebrated the baptisms of more than a dozen people, all of them more than 70 years old.

Less cost AND greater impact

Financially, a new campus is tremendously cost effective. When we started our north campus (our first) we spent lots of money on staff, equipment, and marketing.

At our first celebration service, as mentioned, we had 465 attendees. Three months later our attendance had leveled off at about 180, 80 percent of them previously unchurched.

When we started our south campus (our second site), we spent less money, added specialists to our existing staff team, and a similar marketing blitz. We had 565 at the first service, but more importantly, after three months we were averaging 360 at our south campus, again 80 percent unchurched.

Doing the math, that's 39 percent retention at our first location, and 64 percent retention at our second location. Our second campus cost less money to start, reached more people, and resulted in a greater retention. This is a result our already having staff in place—music minister, small group minister, and children's minister—who oversaw both locations. Our ministry was a lot better organized than when we did our first plant.

New church vibe AND big church punch

Lyle Schaller told us, "The most important thing you offer to this new work is your large church culture." At first I wasn't sure what he was talking about. He meant expectations and excellence. We were able to launch the second site with the same level of excellence that it took us eight years to achieve at our north campus.

When we started the north campus, we did not even have a complete worship team. The children's ministry consisted of volunteers from other churches and students from a nearby Bible college. We had 35 people involved in small groups.

When we started the second site, we had a full band, multi-media, drama, and hospitality teams, and a full children's ministry staff. We had 10 leaders waiting to start small groups—capacity for more than 100 ungrouped people.

One surprise was that excellence flows both ways. Innovations at the new campus inspired improvements at our existing campus. For example, the hospitality at south was much better than at north, so we made improvements at both.

Move there AND stay here

Growing churches and real estate have this in common: "location, location, location." Many existing churches, particularly older churches, are located in communities with little growth.

These churches look across town where new development is happening and they see the potential. Perhaps many of their members are moving there.

Faced with this, they have two major options: sell the property they have and move to the area where the growth is, or keep the site they have as well as start another site where the growth is occurring.

That's what St. Paul's Church did in Aurora, Illinois, a community of over 100,000 people. The church was located in a rapidly changing neighborhood, with a growing Hispanic population. The west side of town was where all the rapid growth was.

After looking at their options, instead abandoning their existing site to move to the booming west side, they "moved there and stayed here." They kept a campus in the downtown neighborhood with an intentional outreach to the growing Hispanic community, and they also launched a west campus in one of the faster growing areas.

More need AND more support

As we think about a new site, we lay out a matrix of about 100 blanks, representing the positions we need to fill in order for us to launch. The increased opportunities create a vacuum that challenges more people to step in to serve in voluntary leadership roles in all areas, such as children's, hospitality, and small groups.

On our very first Sunday at our new location, after the service was over, people started stacking the chairs, unprompted by any announcement. They could see the need and wanted to help. One man who helped was Bob, who had never really plugged in at the first location. Soon he agreed to be a part of the set-up and tear-down team. He clearly saw he was needed.

This, of course, is true of any new church start-up. What makes multi-site unique is that the existing church already has coaches in place who are there to support, encourage, and organize volunteers such as Bob. Having a leader to care for them and train them makes volunteers more willing to help.

More outreach AND more maturity

While people will drive long distances to join the weekly celebration service at a large church, if they live more than 20 minutes away, their ability to serve and to invite friends is diminished. Tim and Lynne were nominally involved, falling short of our goal of being "3-C Christ Followers," which we define as being faithful to celebrate (worship), connect (small group) and contribute (time and resources). When we started a new site within walking distance of their house, however, everything seemed to change. Now Tim and Lynne made our celebration services a regular part of their week. They not only connected with a small group, but they both are now leading groups. And they began to contribute financially and evangelistically in ways they never had before.

The multi-site church reaches out to make both more Christians *and* more mature Christians.

Dave Ferguson is lead pastor at Community Christian Church in Naperville, Romeoville, and Montgomery, Illinois.

For more information about their Multi-Site Church Conference, visit www.newthing.org.

Inside the Mind of a Multi-Site Pastor

Follow-up questions and answers with Dave Ferguson, lead pastor of Community Christian Church.

Did you start out planning to lead a multi-site church?

Not exactly. From the beginning we dreamed that our church would (1) make an impact, (2) be a reproducing church, and (3) if it wasn't presumptuous, that a movement would come out of this. When did you actually decide to go multi-site?

Peter Drucker says many decisions are "not so much made as they become apparent." That was true of us.

A real estate developer in our church was planning a community twenty minutes south of us. He wanted a church in the area, and he asked if we would move our congregation there. After praying it through, we concluded, "What if we just started another location down there?" So has launching new sites become contagious?

Actually, we saw what this did for our leadership development. We were forced to develop 100 "spiritual entrepreneurs" who would see this as a missional opportunity. It gave people the motivation and opportunity to grow as never before. We saw leaders being multiplied. It was great.

What kind of person is cut out to lead a multi-site church?

You have to have a heart for developing other teachers, artists, and leaders. You've got to love multiplying your team. We have an entrepreneurial kind of culture. And you've got to enjoy that.

Multi-site church planting gaining steam

by [Marc S. Botts, editor](#) 31 Dec 2003

It's the kind of problem most pastors would love to have.

The Rev. Mike Richardson anticipates his [Polaris Christian Church](#) will soon grow too large for its current location. The former cinema the church recently renovated seats 275, and with nearly 350 in regular attendance, two services are needed.

After spending time, money and energy renovating the cinema, Richardson knows moving to a larger location is not a viable option. So, Richardson is exploring one that many experts believe may be the next big movement in church growth: multi-site church planting.

Under the multi-site model, a church opens additional locations but continues as one congregation, with a single treasury, membership roster, governing board and name. Many times, the sites have dedicated staff who share the church's common vision, mission and resources.

"A person coming to Christ in a new location doesn't really grasp how you are connected to all these other churches," said Richardson.

Once his Brunswick, Ohio-based Polaris surpasses the 400-member threshold elders imposed before any new growth-strategy can be adopted, Richardson said he will push hard for a multi-site approach.

"It gives you a lot of flexibility and a quicker return," Richardson said. "We have a multiple teaching staff, so for us to split into different sites it not at all a stretch."

A Growing Phenomenon

Church-growth expert Lyle E. Schaller, in his book "Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future," noted that several "multi-site congregations have discovered that their off-campus ministries are the most effective channels for reaching skeptics, agnostics, non-believers and inquirers at the very earliest stage of their faith journey."

Schaller also pointed out that from a financial perspective, multi-site churches may be the most cost-effective approach to evangelism.

Dave Ferguson, lead pastor at [Community Christian Church](#) with sites in Naperville, Romeoville and Montgomery in Illinois, is one of the early church planters who recognized the benefits of multi-site churches.

"When we started our church back in '89, we did a big marketing blitz and had about 465 show up the first Sunday," Ferguson said, referring to the Naperville location.

"We started from scratch. There were just five of us, me and four friends, so that was great. But it leveled off to about 180 people, which is terrific when you started from zero and about 80 percent of those people were unchurched."

Ferguson said he used a similar marketing approach when he opened the Romeoville location in 1998.

"We had 560 people at the first service, but we had 360 that stuck around," Ferguson said. Four years later, Community Christian launched its third location, in Montgomery, with similar results: 600 people in attendance early on, with 350 returning regularly.

The retention rates - 39 percent at the first church versus roughly 60 percent at the second and third locations - coupled with the fact 80 percent of those attending were previously unchurched, convinced Ferguson he was on to something big.

"It's a God Thing"

[Leadership Network](#), a foundation created in 1984 by social entrepreneur Bob Buford to identify, network and provide resources for senior ministers and staff of large congregations, has carefully watched the multi-site movement.

The Dallas-based organization brings in groups of leaders from churches to meet with facilitators to discuss and find ways to overcome challenges pastors at large churches face. In June the organization published a white paper titled "Extending Your Church to More Than One Place" in which it offered insights designed to help church leaders looking for ways to reach more people for Christ.

Leadership Network estimates that at least 1,000 churches across North America could be described as multi-site. It cited research by the Rev. Peter Roebbelen, who visited a number of multi-site locations under a grant from the Lilly Endowment-funded Louisville Institute.

"I think this is a true movement, a true new work because it's popping up in isolated situations all over the place at about the same time," Roebbelen, pastor of four-campus [Chartwell Baptist Church](#) of Toronto, Ontario, said in his analysis.

Roebbelen said the people he interviewed did not appear to be driven by fad.

"It's a God thing," he said. "Most didn't sit down to strategize and plan, and then conclude, 'We're going to try multi-site,' because none of us had heard of multi-site. We simply began doing it. The stories have been remarkably similar from coast to coast and from north to south." Ferguson agrees.

"Our experience, particularly with the multi-site deal, has been that God just did some extraordinary things and it became obvious to us that we had to say yes to it," Ferguson said. "So, really, the God-thing happened first and then came the vision. When the God-thing happens first and then there is a vision, it makes it pretty easy to sell the vision."

Ferguson said his entry to multi-site churches came after a church member asked if he would be interested in moving to a real estate community he was developing rather than the high school they were meeting in.

"I said, 'I can't move two towns away. Why don't we just start a second location?'" Ferguson recalled.

Furthering the Movement

To help share the success Community Christian has enjoyed, Ferguson started a non-profit organization dedicated to reproducing "multi-site churches relentlessly dedicated to helping people find their way back to God."

The organization, called [New Thing](#), draws inspiration from Scripture:

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland" (Isaiah 43:19, NIV).

Pat Masek, office manager and assistant to Ferguson, said their experience with multi-site church planting was something they were compelled to share.

"We just feel we have a greater impact. More people stick and more people find their way back to God," she said.

New Thing includes two apprentice churches in its network — [Jacob's Well Community Church](#) in Jacob's Well, Colo., and Life Journey Church in Bakersfield, Calif.

Ferguson was recently invited to speak to more than 10,000 church leaders in South Korea at the invitation of the Rev. Yong Jo Ha, pastor of [Onnuri Church](#) in Seoul, South Korea, which is home to five of the 10 largest churches in the world. "Pastor Ha, at Onnuri Church, probably the most progressive of all the large churches in Seoul, really believes that this the wave of the future," he said.

The Emerging Multi-Site Movement

by Warren Bird

The Spring 2003 issue of *Leadership Journal* announced that "the multi-site church is a phenomenon that you will no doubt be hearing about in the future." 1 Church consultant Lyle Schaller says "the success of . . . multi-site ventures has changed the context for ministry."²

The core idea of multi-site is simple: "one church meeting in many locations," as Elmer Towns describes it in *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches*.³ These alternate venues go by a wide variety of names including digital church, extension sites, video-café congregations, multiple campuses, and satellite ministries. A church becomes multi-site by extending itself to more than one location: across town, across the state, and/or literally around the world. In short, the multi-site movement is about a new way of re-assigning the physical boundaries of a church.

Greg Ligon, director of Multi-site Leadership Communities for Leadership Network, believes at least 1,000 churches across North America could currently be described as multi-site, with many more considering the concept.

Multi-site congregations occur in all sizes, with many off-site campuses averaging under 100 in weekly worship. Although megachurches with multiple-location strategies garner the most media attention, multi-site isn't solely a megachurch phenomenon. Multi-site churches can be found across the size spectrum, with churches in the 250 to 500 attendance range as a frequent multi-

site sponsor.

Motive Is Usually Outreach, Yet Rarely a Growth Strategy

Bill Easum and Dave Travis observe that the genius of multi-site is not that it grows a church, but it keeps it growing. In their new book, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches that Work*, they comment, "The key to understanding the multi-site movement is to remember that fulfilling the Great Commission drives these congregations, not a growth strategy." 4

In short, multi-site is a means toward an end, not an end goal in itself. Many churches do generate growth through multi-site, but just as importantly, multi-site keeps them from capping the growth they're experiencing.

Churches that use a multi-site approach tend to evolve into it, rather than starting with it. Typical is the 25-year-old Chartwell Baptist Church, in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, where Peter Roebbelen is pastor (www.chartwellchurch.org).

"We backed into multi-site," says Roebbelen. "It's not something we intentionally tried to do. It was more like a disruptive moment where we faced a problem and saw an opportunity." In essence, their problem became an opportunity.

For Chartwell, the initial motivation was to accommodate growth. "We needed to go to a third service, but we wanted to do it during the optimal Sunday-morning time." So, Chartwell began experimenting with the use of additional campuses. That was 1993. Ten years later, Chartwell offers 6 Saturday-night or Sunday-morning services on 4 campuses. By early 2003, more than 1,000 regularly attended one of the Chartwell congregations, and yet, the main church's seating capacity was 260--and still is--consistent with their particular strategy of creating a sense of relational intimacy within each local worship setting.

Trigger Event Varies, Most Often a Space Issue

According to Leadership Network's surveys, the most-cited trigger reason for launching multiple campuses or multiple venues is lack-of-space issues. These range from a lack of seats or parking spots at optimal service times to zoning/building restrictions on future growth. The second most-often cited trigger reason is a vision to impact through "more" instead of "bigger"--i.e., a desire to avoid certain downsides of megachurches.

One example is Seacoast Church (www.seacoast.org) near Charleston, S.C. Their primary trigger for going multi-site was lack of space; but they faced other motivators too. The town had shut down any expansion hopes, so they became really imaginative about how to use existing spaces: college campuses, theaters, closed churches, and warehouses. It currently worships 5,500 total in 10 services on 5 campuses.

Additional Resources Are Emerging.

April 2002 saw the launch of a **Multi-Site Leadership Community** involving 12 pacesetter

churches from the U.S. and Canada. With help from www.wildworksgroup.com, which designed a creative, interactive learning process, these innovative churches formed a peer community of innovators working together toward a significant leap in achieving their multi-site goals. For a summary of findings from this gathering, go to www.leadnet.org/resources/resources.asp and select the "Extending Your Church" multi-site report.

Interest was so strong among additional churches that a second **Multi-site Leadership Community** will be launched in November, and a third in 2004. For more details, contact greg.ligon@leadnet.org.

Also, several church websites provide extensive sections of Frequently Asked Questions about multi-site issues. Three of the best examples are:

- **North Coast Church**, Vista, CA, lists its FAQ section at www.videocafes.org.
- **Willow Creek Community Church**, S. Barrington, IL, has FAQ sections on each of its regional campuses. Go to www.WillowCreek.org and click the sections (currently at lower left) for the various regional campuses.
- **Bethlehem Baptist Church**, Minneapolis, MN, models how they presented the multi-site idea to their congregation at www.bbcmpls.org/goingwogoing.htm.

Endnotes:

1See the opening sentence, written by the editors, to this article: Ferguson, Dave. "The Multi-Site Church: Some of the Strengths of This New Life Form," *Leadership Journal*, Spring 2003, 81. It may be found online at www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/

2Schaller, Lyle E. *Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999, 176. See also Schaller, Lyle E. *The Very Large Church: New Rules for Leaders*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000, 110-112, 135-136, 192-194; Schaller, Lyle E. *Innovations in Ministry*, chapter 6 "Off-Campus Ministries" and chapter 8 "The Multi-Site Option, Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 86-97, 112-133; Schaller, Lyle E. *Forty-Four Questions for Church Planters*, chapter 4 "The Multi-Site Option", Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, 56-58.

3Towns, Elmer. *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches*, Regal, 1990, 239. Although the book is out of print, it is available at www.elmertowns.com, currently at no charge.

4Easum, Bill, and Travis, Dave, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches that Work*. Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003, 85.