

THE MULTI-SITE CHURCH MODEL

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One change that is sweeping through the Western church today is the multi-site model, where one church spins off several branches or sites. This phenomenon is so popular that a recent book by Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird called *A Multi-site Church Road Trip* has the audacious subtitle: *Exploring the New Normal*. According to their book, on a typical Sunday in 2009 some five million people—almost 10 percent of protestant worshippers—attend a multi-site church in the US or Canada. Leaders at some forty-five thousand churches are seriously considering the multi-site approach according to a recent survey by LifeWay Research. Before you jump on the bandwagon, I want you to think about a few things.

What does it mean to be a multi-site church? Basically, it is one church meeting in more than one location. Some use the term “campuses,” or “services,” others call them “satellite churches,” “polysites” or even “house churches” or “missional communities.” With such a wide range of descriptions I imagine one could say that our organic church networks or even CMA as a whole could represent this idea, but I personally believe that would be a stretch. Listening to those considered the forerunners in this model, it is clear that they mean one church in multiple locations...not multiple churches like we would articulate.

There are, of course, variations on this theme. Some are video-venues where different styles of worship are offered at different sites, sometimes even on the same campus, but the same sermon from the same preacher is beamed in to them all on a larger-than-life screen. Others are spread across a city while some branch out across a state and a few go even interstate. Some are on the internet; a few are even branching out internationally. For some it is a way to grow their church when there is not any possibility of building a larger facility. For some it is a way of building a network of churches. Many like it because they can have church for a variety of different tastes. Some even would call it church planting, while others say that it is counterfeit church planting. I heard one person describe the Mars Hill Campus strategy as “Just add water and Driscoll and POOF you have a new church.” For the next few blog entries I will weigh in on this subject. All seat backs and tray tables must be in their upright position. Fasten your seat belts.

The idea of satellite church campuses is not new. One could argue that the New Testament is one gigantic multi-site church. Certainly, there are examples of churches in the Bible that are meeting in a variety of locations. Paul wrote to all the Christians in Rome and at the end of the letter described them all meeting in a variety of different homes throughout the city. All of them got a special greeting from Paul and his companions. Could this be the first multi-site church?

There are some similarities, but also some drastic differences between the Romans church and today’s multi-site churches. Both have groups meeting in different locations and yet they are still considered one church. Both seem to have localized leadership for each “campus”. It is hard to tell with the Roman church, but perhaps these New Testament churches had a variety of styles simply because they are in different places with different people.

But I think the differences between the Romans and their counterparts today are more obvious. The multi-site churches of today all have a centralized headquarters, which is not evident at all in Romans. The Romans churches were a network of simple churches all meeting in homes rather than a large church with multiple congregations. The multi-site churches of today are mostly starting satellite worship services and forming congregations around them, whereas, in Romans these are spiritual families tied to households and are much more than a worship

service. In fact, there is no mention at all about worship services beyond the service of worship that each disciple is to offer before God (Rom 12:1-2).

I must be honest and confess that I have not been smiling at the spread of the multi-site phenomenon. I know some do it well, but many do not.

I have friends who used to start lots of churches and lately they have resorted instead to starting video venue services with their own sermons beamed in. To call that a church plant, in my opinion, cheapens missiology. Where they used to spend a great deal of time training new church planters, now they train campus pastors, and there is a difference. It is no longer necessary to train preachers, visionaries or entrepreneur leaders, because the lead pastor can have his sermons beamed into every venue. A strong leader is not as desired as a good manager in starting new campus sites. Even the vision is developed and cast by the lead pastor; the campus pastor simply finds ways to pass it on. This is not church planting as we have known it but worship service addition. Addition is not bad, it is certainly better than subtraction or division...but it is not multiplication.

There are a few satellite church venues that have actually initiated others to date. The number of these "grandchildren" are very few, and the reproduction is actually very slow when compared to CPMs.

Surratt, Ligon and Warren have pointed out in their book about six or so "grandchildren" campuses of the multi-site "revolution" across the country. To date there is not any evidence of a fourth generation church plant or campus. In their book, Surratt, Ligon and Bird site 3,000 multi-site churches of two or more campuses. This would account for probably 10's of thousands of services on thousands of campuses and of that large number, less than ten grand children can be identified in the US and no fourth generation churches to date. In the book, they state that it is grandchildren that sustain and give legs to a movement, but I argue that it is the forth generation, or great-grandchildren that are the true evidence of multiplication and thereby a movement. The multi-site model is very far removed from seeing this. Currently, this model has only a 1% reproductive rate. This is not enough to maintain any species, so I do not put great hope in this burgeoning "movement." I believe it will never become a multiplication movement because there are too many values inherent within it that prevent true multiplication from happening—primary of those is the dependence upon the main preacher in a consumer oriented environment.

In order for the church to multiply freely she must be:

1. Self-perpetuating: she is healthy, enduring and will continue to live without needing any outside props or infusion of resources.

2. Self-propagating: she reproduces and will naturally start self-perpetuating groups that will in turn do the same.

When you set out to start a church, if the church is dependent from the beginning upon outside resources and organizations, it is likely that it will never reproduce spontaneously and will not start self-perpetuating groups. If that is the case, you have begun with a strategy that requires dependency; you have set up churches that cannot reproduce spontaneously.

One reason it is so rare for satellite churches to reproduce is because they are dependent upon the mother church and therefore unable to fully mature to a fertility. In a sense, the umbilical cord that ties the satellite to the central hub must be cut if the church will be free to mature to a

place where she can give birth to the next generation.

A central hub can continue to birth first generation churches (satellite campuses) but to get to the third and fourth generation, the dependency must be ended. The sooner the dependency is cut off the faster the reproduction can occur. In other words, addition of churches is possible with such a model, but multiplication is beyond the reach of the umbilical cord that ties the satellite churches to the mother church.

I am more appreciative of multi-site churches that send out pastors who will teach at the satellite campus, though this is quickly becoming the rare instance. Even the shining examples of multi-site who once did this exclusively have been seduced into using more of the video-venue style. There are some things to like about multi-site that raises up real leaders to actually teach and preach at the satellite venue. At least in that scenario they are still developing leaders, empowering them and sending them out. Such churches have a sense of unity and diversity at the same time and that can be cool (though I would still have some questions about it). It is the video-venue approach that bothers me most.

The video-venue model communicates several things that are not healthy in my opinion.

First, it communicates that church is a worship service with small groups attached. While most churches in the west already are in this scenario, the new multi-site model further exacerbates the problem. Once you have a location, a worship team, a campus pastor (manager) and the technology...you've started a new venue. That is a far distance from what Luke and Paul describe as a church in the New Testament.

Second, it seems to elevate the preaching of a sermon to the height of what church is about. Everything a church can do is seemingly reproduced in a campus church with the lone exception of the sermon. A campus pastor will care for needs and local leadership. A new worship band can be recruited. Small groups will be formed. Children's workers are developed for each site. But the sermon is not something that can be done by another person. Why listen to someone else when you can see (Fill in the Name) on the big screen, larger than life? There is usually one other thing that connects the satellite back to the mothership--the money trail. No comment about that.

Third, it elevates one personality to the status of church leader in the only role that is not reproducible. This of course seems to communicate to all that this one person is the most important person in the entire church. This one man's messages (it is usually a man, though not exclusively) are considered so profound and necessary that no one else will do. This in turn makes the style, intelligence and personality of the preacher more central and effective than the message of the Gospel itself. One man is the conduit from which God's message and vision for the body comes through to the people. God's perspective, personality and even preferences are filtered through this one person's point of view. With this sort of mentality, releasing the true power of the Gospel into disciples is cut off, and now we just bring our friends to hear Dr. So-N-So speak. Reproduction in the disciples, leaders and churches is stifled. I realize this is a problem in many churches, not just the video-venue ones, but the medium accentuates that problem and does nothing to help fight it. It is a sad truth that many Christians only receive God's word through the predigested sermons of their pastors. This model feeds such a scenario.

Fourth, it places a brand on the churches that are all connected to the network making a name for itself much like a business. Churches begin to carry a brand name more like a business than becoming a connected body of Christ. This connection is limited to the churches own satellites rather than the whole body of Christ in an area. We build a reputation in the community as a

church that has the same leadership in campuses all over the region, rather than lifting the whole body of Christ. Why are we so intent on lifting ourselves (leadership, brand, systems) up, often at the expense of other churches where our new people are coming from? We do this under the name of unity and I can't help but think something is wrong with that.

Fifthly, it fosters a consumeristic mentality among Christians who can only be attracted by the bigger names and more entertaining speakers. Add to that the dynamic of being able to pick and choose which worship music you particularly like and you can see how consumerism drives this thing and competition among churches is the actual result. Since when is worship about what *you* enjoy anyway? This once again is an indication of our own selfish and individualistic view of church in the West. When we judge worship by how well it suits our own preferences and fuels our own enjoyment rather than simply offering God our lives in service we have seriously lost the plot several steps ago. Church has become a vendor of religious goods and services presented for the consumers. The video-venue approach takes that mistake to a whole new level in my opinion.

Finally, it is sometimes an attempt to own the churches in a given area. I have to ask, "Why is it more preferable to have multiple campuses as part of the same church, rather than simply starting self-sufficient churches that can do the same?" When I probe this further I find some not-so-pretty motives behind all the language of unity and mission. Basically, there really is a desire to have more followers, and keep the money in one account. More people and more money. I know that this sounds mean to say, but when you strip it all down you are left with these two things, because starting autonomous churches with relational connections can fulfill all the same ideas of unity and mission without the need to keep everyone tied to one headquarters with one growing budget. In fact, from God's point of view I would imagine He counts every follower in a given region as His church, so then why do we want to claim some of them under one church brand and leadership? I'm just asking.

I do not want to sound cynical or jaded. I am actually not accusing those doing this form of church of intentional evil motives. Many of my own friends around the country are doing multi-site churches with the video-venue approach. I understand how they got there; I just don't think they asked the right questions before they did.

Church growth has a way of becoming so important to us that we really do think this is the way to reach the world. But church growth that is all about the numbers attending our worship service is way out of balance. Reaching people with the gospel is not the same as growing the numbers that attend a worship service. Perhaps we should focus on those who need to be transformed by the gospel rather than on getting the unchurched to attend our church worship services. The Gospel is what saves us, not our wonderful music and entertaining sermons. The Bible doesn't say, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten church."

When one is a preacher he or she wants to communicate the Good News to as many souls as is possible. This can easily lead one into this multi-site, video-venue approach. The problem is that these leaders see their role as simply preaching to the masses rather than mentoring others to do the same. The typical consumer-minded parishioner doesn't want to hear the apprentice speak when they can hear the master! These are some of the ways that good leaders end up proliferating a bad idea.

I can imagine that after a pastor has died, he will continue preaching to his congregations through the years, why bother finding a new one? This adds a whole new twist to the idea of leadership succession. I still have many volumes of C.H. Spurgeon's sermons on my

bookshelves. Imagine being able to advertise that he is your pastor 117 years after he was buried!

I once worked on the staff of a mega-church of 3500 in attendance. The pastor was a larger than life personality who was on the radio and wrote many books. He left the church to take the lead of another church about 30 miles away. Our church attendance went from 3500 to 700 in about a year. In the same year the new church the pastor led grew from 700 to about 3500 in the same year. My numbers and timing are not precise but very close to what took place (this was a few decades ago--which means that my mind is getting older \;o;). After that same pastor left the new church under difficult circumstances, the second church struggled in much the same way as the first. Some shoes are near impossible to fill in a ministry built on attraction.

We must ask ourselves what is the fallout with the rise of the mega-church phenomena that is so dependent upon large personalities. Many of my other writings go into great depth at critiquing some of the fallout of this way of doing church (financial cost, marginalization of the majority of people, lack of missional impulse...etc.), so for this entry I will simply restrict my thoughts to the leadership and its succession.

I believe that a high percentage of the mega-churches today are still led by the founding pastor. Many of those leaders are getting older. We are now getting close to watching what happens when they attempt to pass on that leadership to the next leader, and I am not sure it will turn out so nice. Many of these outstanding leaders are being succeeded by their children, which works well sometimes (Thomas Road Baptist, Billy Graham Evangelistic Crusades) and not so well at other times (Crystal Cathedral). Some of their children are starting something new somewhere else (Charles / Andy Stanley, Chuck Smith Sr. / Jr. And even Robert Schuller Sr. / Jr.), perhaps because the parental pastors are not ready to let go of the baton when they hand it over (I can only speculate).

I do not know of any studies that have been done, but I do know that many of my personal friends who have led large mega-churches have experienced some sort of personal and emotional melt down due to going too long carrying so many people's expectations and functioning on adrenalin and giftedness. A sabbatical is usually helpful and often leads to adjustments that enable a better pace for a longer tenure...but then what? Inevitably we all must die and succession is an important issue, especially if the manner in which a church is led depends so much on a specific leader's exceptional giftedness as it is with the multi-site / video-venue approach.

For me the success of a leader is not determined by the number of followers attained, but by the number of fruitful leaders that are blossoming around the leader.

I have the privilege of knowing many exceptionally gifted leaders and preachers that have large churches. I find myself thinking that toning down who they are and what gifts they have received is just not a wise idea, so what do we do? God made them to be a certain way and it would be wrong for them to try to be something less.

I have come to believe that what is really needed is an alteration of their understanding of success and also learning what it truly means to use their own gift-mix to the max. I am convinced that many of these highly gifted leaders have not tapped into the real depth of their gifts or calling because they have been seduced by early success. This early success must be maintained and the demand comes from so many places that they are prevented from going further into their calling if it means that they do less of the front line ministry itself. Can it be

that their own growth and maturity is stunted for the sake of the expectations of the masses? I believe so.

I believe that all the gifts of Eph 4:11 (Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds and Teachers) are meant to equip others to do the ministry...not to just keep doing the work themselves. The evangelist is not called to reach the lost, but to equip the saints to reach the lost. The teacher is not called to simply teach the saints, but to equip the saints to teach. I have come to understand that the difference between one who teaches (what we are used to) and a true teacher (equipper ala Eph 4:11) is that the person has reached a level of maturity that gives birth to the next generation of people who teach. So many of our current leaders in the West are not progressing in the maturation process to become spiritual parents of the next generation.

The Apostle John laid out three phases of maturing that are helpful for us. He refers to little children, young men and fathers. (1 John 2:12-14) These broad categories can help us to see what the maturing process is like. Please excuse the masculine exclusivity but I am merely following the pattern put forth by the apostle John to discover the maturing process. This is in no way something that is strictly limited to male leaders (though perhaps women with a maternal instinct within are better and quicker to give everything for their children than men are).

1. *Little Children* cannot help themselves but are consumed with their own needs. That is the nature of immaturity. In the spiritual life, young believers are focused on themselves and their own spiritual needs. I find that they typically are wracked with shame over their sin. The good news for them, according to John is, "your sins are forgiven." The child is set free from their sins, and most of their childhood will really be about coming to realize this important truth.
2. *Young Men* are warriors that finally venture out into adulthood. This phase of development is where leaders begin to emerge and take on the issues of life. Young men are interested mostly in winning the battle and wooing the girl. Therefore, he is no longer only thinking of himself but is now facing an enemy. The good news for them, according to John is, "you have overcome the evil one." The strength of faith in God is the protection of someone in this stage of life.
3. *Fathers* are a phase of reproduction. It is a time of maturing when you now are more concerned with the success of your children than your own success. Your life, at this point, is spent to help others to grow, and bear fruit. No longer are fathers the ones taking on the enemy with a full frontal assault, instead, they are training the new, young warriors with their own rich experience and mature paternal heart. The good news for these leaders is, "You know the Father." Intimacy with God is the reward to maturity and is actually a far greater reward than large attendance and celebrity status.

It is my opinion that this "father phase" is when we become true equippers of others. Not enough Christian leaders reach the "father phase" of maturation, which is unfortunate in so many ways. They never know the deepest level of intimacy that they could experience, and their own spiritual children are kept from the kind of success they could have. Too many stay in the less mature level of being a young man out on the battle field and never give birth to the next generation because all the pressure to succeed there holds them back. I would challenge my friends who are leading these huge churches to consider the influence they could have on a more global basis if they succeeded on birthing next generation leaders rather than staying young and immature. We need mentors who are more concerned with the success of their children than their own success. It is when you become a spiritual father that the intimacy with our heavenly Father is so strong and God trusts you in a fuller way with His greatest gifts. Don't be content with less than what you were designed to be.