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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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One Congregation: Many Locations

Until three years ago, John and Mary did not attend church. Now, they are active members who rarely miss worship. But John and Mary have never set foot inside their church's main sanctuary! They worship at one of its other locations, five miles away.

What is a multi-site church? The congregation conducts worship at some combination of the following locations:

- *More than one place in the building.* Many multi-site churches offer services in their gym or fellowship hall. They video-cast the sermons (live or recorded). The worship style often differs from the worship style in the central sanctuary.

- *More than one campus.* When multi-site churches conduct services elsewhere, "off campus," the most common setting is a school. But these congregations also hold services in movie theaters, shopping malls, industrial parks, office buildings, restaurants, YMCAs, retirement centers, and prison chapels.

What happens and who leads? The majority of multi-site congregations present the same worship content—led by the same ministerial team—in all services, at all sites. Other multi-site churches offer the same content in each service, with different staff members leading at each location. In still other multi-site churches, worship differs in both content and leadership at each location.

A study of 1,000 multi-site churches in forty-nine states gives insight into this growing movement.¹ The majority of these churches schedule worship at two campuses and offer three types of services. Since becoming multi-site, these surveyed churches report an average of 33 percent growth in attendance, with a yearly average growth rate of 13 percent.

What Works?

Frequently observed components of multi-site churches:

"Live" worship leader and music. Many of these churches use video technology for the preaching component but not for the music and other worship elements. Parishioners feel comfortable inviting friends to hear a video-delivered sermon. But "live and present" worship leaders and musicians are absolute essentials.

Proactive outreach. Two out of three multi-site churches list "evangelistic outreach" as their primary reason for adding locations. Another closely related motivation: "to bring our church closer to a target area." Few leaders said that a lack of space motivated them to create multi-site services. Additional worship sites are more about mission than space.

Metropolitan location. Multi-site churches usually begin in suburban and urban areas—with a few notable exceptions. Based in Draper, Utah, South Mountain Community Church started its first additional site in a community of 28,000 where no Christian church existed.

Reaching new populations. About one-half of the surveyed multi-site churches report a different racial-ethnic make-up of worshipers at the original site than at their one or more other locations. Many of the new sites and venues introduce other diversity factors: socio-economic differences (three out of four churches), age differences (two out of three churches), marital status differences (37 percent of churches), and language differences (22 percent of churches).



Tell me, which of our church's campuses do you attend?

In addition to its traditional Sunday morning worship, an urban Kentucky church offers a Wednesday-noon service in the fellowship hall. Followed by a volunteer-served meal, the average attendance exceeds the Sunday-morning attendance. The two services attract vastly dissimilar populations. Mid-week worshipers come from nearby treatment facilities, group housing, and low-income families.

On-site pastor and experienced leadership. Alternate sites need a “face of the place” who provides leadership, pastoral care, and connections. Many multi-site churches said that not sending an experienced pastor to start the new site was their biggest mistake. And most of these churches advised that multi-site success depends on “getting the right people on the bus”—skilled and mature lay leaders working alongside the new site’s pastor.

Some multi-site churches warn against establishing an alternative site to rescue a declining church—leaving the same people driving the bus. A new site must not be a merger—you must replace the old ministry. As one leader stated, “If we don’t take an adequately trained, prepared, called core group, ... we’re only adding a ventilator to prolong life, rather than experiencing a resurrection.” Effective multi-site churches manage ministries, not museums.

Intentional leadership development. Multi-site congregations require premeditated leader reproduction. Keeping the new leadership pipeline loaded is a priority. Pastor Michael Trostrud said, “Apprentice and delegate. (1) I do it, you watch. (2) We do it together. (3) You do it, I watch. (4) You do it.”

Site-specific children and youth ministries. More is needed than merely replicating worship services at new sites. Eventually, these new locations must organize ministries for nursery/preschool, elementary-age children, and youth. Multi-site churches unprepared to offer children and youth ministries say that many families left as a result.

Unified mission and identity. Multi-site churches work hard at being one church with a shared vision, mission, and purpose. Regular meetings of all campus pastors and staff refuel the fire of shared vision. Some churches use the same or a similar name at each location to reinforce their “we are one church” identity.

Most importantly, multi-site churches operate from a singular infrastructure. One board and one budget running the multiple sites provide unified decision-making.

Surprising Outcomes

The most-cited surprise is the increased number of people willing to serve at new sites. Pastor Peter Couser asserts, “The very act of sending out new sites can invigorate the evangelistic vision of the sending location.”

Other multi-site surprises:

- Growth rates at the new sites match or exceed attendance growth at the original location
- Extremely positive response to video-delivered sermons

- Re-engaging people who can now attend closer to their neighborhood
- Unexpected leadership development—“seeing previously uncommitted members from our first campus become highly involved in significant leadership at the new campus”
- The emergence of excellence-centers, where all locations learn from other sites’ successes
- The original location continues to experience the highest volume of visitors
- Implementing a multi-site church strategy differs from starting a new church
- Clergy see themselves as apostles, not pastors
- Shift in thinking from a singular purpose of “caring for our church community” to a more balanced, bi-fold emphasis of “caring for mission and our church community”

Multi-site churches are not merely congregations that do ministry in several locations. They are congregations with transformed thinking about what God calls them to do.

What questions lead to multi-site church ministry?

Your church may already have one toe in the multi-church pond. For example, a Vermont congregation holds weekly services at a nearby state prison. Those worshipers never attend services at the central site.

Think of a fifteen-minute drive from your church. Ask questions to discover groups to which you can reach out:

• *Special population groups.* Could we be the church for a specific age, language, or shared-life-experience (affinity) group? Could we be the church for community newcomers, people without transportation, low-income families, treatment facility residents, or persons with disabilities? Could we take our church to them?

• *Specific geographic areas.* Could we be the church for a rural county, an isolated neighborhood, a retail zone, a state park, or a medical complex?

Multi-site churches use the word “campus” to describe their congregations’ many sites and venues. Perhaps they know that “campus” is Latin for “field.” Echoing the Apostle John, these leaders call out to us: “Look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”²

¹ Warren Bird, “Survey of 1,000 Multi-Site Churches: A Dozen of the Most Significant Findings” (2004); Stephen Shields, “2007 Survey of 1,000 Multi-Site Churches: Latest Insights on a Growing Movement” (www.leadnet.org); and Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Zondervan, 2006).

² John 4:35 (*New International Version*).