

5 Things Every Pastor Should Know About the Multisite Church

by Dave Ferguson

1. Multisite is about quality, not quantity.

It's not about being a megachurch or getting huge. It's about taking who you are, reproducing the ethos or quality experience of your church, and bringing it to more people. The multisite church is really just one form of what I call the reproducing church – the idea that you are continuing to produce at all levels, whether it has to do with reproducing leaders and artists at a micro level, or reproducing congregations, campuses and even churches.

Once you have established that quality, why not reproduce it? Why start from scratch? Here's an example. With our original church plant, we had to beg, borrow and appeal to other churches for leaders to fill our children's ministry. But when we started the second site, we had refined the system into an Excel spreadsheet we called the Matrix, which helped us recruit and organize leaders to fill all the slots. And at the launch of our second site, the Matrix was already completely filled with volunteers.

Another example: At the original church plant, we would pay \$50 to hire an outside vocalist. It was a good day if we had a drummer. But by the time we started the second site, we had video, a full drama team and a full band. So part of the reason for going multisite is that you can reproduce your high-quality, large-church culture instead of starting all over from scratch. You're giving people who show up for the first time a much better experience. And then they're more likely to stay.

2. Any size church can consider going multisite.

We often see examples of large mega (even giga) churches that are multisite. But fundamentally, any church that has one leader who is ready to go out and start a new thing can reproduce itself. You only need one leader. We need to keep it that simple. Remember that larger churches are much more complex organizations and less of an organism, so they are harder to reproduce than a small church. It's

incumbent on local church leaderships to rise up and start new churches. The senior or lead pastor must bless that and not be afraid of it, or afraid of losing people—that's a scarcity mentality.

If smaller churches have the right ethos and a missional kind of DNA, they will be able to reproduce. Even from the beginning, start thinking, "How can I do multiple locations?" Church planters are transitioning from thinking, "How can I plant a church, grow it, and make a big impact?" to the sharpest and the brightest planters thinking from day one, "How can I do this in multiple locations?"

3. The multisite approach demonstrates good stewardship of our resources.

Community Christian Church has eight locations in the Chicago area, and we've also started, in less than four years, six churches nationally. And now we're looking to plant churches internationally. We want to plant churches and start new sites, but right now we're focusing more on multisite for a good reason: stewardship. We've looked at retention rates. When we first started CCC, we had 465 people come to the first service of the church plant. Our average attendance our first quarter was 180. That gave us a 39% retention rate.

Then we started a second campus, and had 552 people at the first service, 360 of which stuck around, giving us a 65% retention rate. We figured we spent about the same dollars launching both the church and the second site. We started our third site and had 606 people at the first service, and 350 stuck around. This was a 58% retention rate.

So, when you compare the original church plant—that 39% retention rate—with the second campus, we saw an increase of 26% in our retention. And our third one, we saw a 19% increase. So in basic stewardship, what's your return on your dollar? Within a certain geographical proximity, multisite allows you to reach more people for the same amount of money, or reach more people for less money. And while raising the funds to build new campuses is good, you can also grow into alternative venues such as digital church, extension sites, video-café congregations and satellite ministries.

One last thing: Multisite also demonstrates good stewardship of time and creativity. The leaders of CCC actually create a Big Idea together—what we want to do for our adult service and students' and kids' services—and then each of our eight locations does the exact same Big Idea in their own context. We believe that kind of collaboration really leverages creative power, and we get a better product in less amount of time. This synergy is one of the important advantages of multisite.

4. Multisite is today's most powerful method of church expansion.

Until now, we've had two options to accomplish the Jesus mission. Option #1 was to grow a church at a single site larger. Option #2 was the church planting another

church in another location. And multisite gives everybody a third option now—you can both grow larger and also start other locations.

Quite frankly, I don't see multisite competing against or eliminating church planting—I see both of them as expressions of what it means to continue the legacy of the Church. If you continually reproduce the church as Acts 1:8 describes, you can almost imagine expanding concentric circles—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, all the way to the ends of the earth. But the church must reproduce. The only way we're going to reach the world is if the church continually reproduces.

Of course, we still need original church plants. But multisite is an expression of that within geographical proximity, and it's often a more effective way of reproducing the church than straight church planting because you're using your existing resources.

That doesn't mean your new sites will never fail. For example, there has not been a great track record of success for long distance sites yet. But I think it's so important that we start feeling comfortable with failing. If we don't, we are never going to figure out the things that really work.

We tried a site last year, a parish model in a partnership with a real estate developer. It didn't take off, so we closed it down. But in our leadership community meeting that month, I asked the campus pastor to come up, along with the people of the launch team, and we gave them a standing ovation. That's because the value was "This is what God called us to do as a community." People were faithful, but it just didn't take.

And when those things happen, you still celebrate the risk of faith and not just a success. We are going to learn from that, and somebody is eventually going to get it right.

5. In the next 10 years, the multisite church will gain more influence than the large church.

As I look to the future, this is what I see happening: More organizations like Leadership Network, the National New Church Conference, and the Willow Creek Association will give a platform of influence to churches that aren't large, but that are really reproducing. Once you get this reproducing DNA inside churches, it becomes a strong value. This value says, "It's great to grow large at one site, but the real

Kingdom value is in reproducing sites and reproducing churches.” Even right now, it seems multisite churches are getting people’s attention and being given a voice.

The influence of the multisite church also has to do with branding power. Starbucks has an amazing brand power. You may not even be a coffee drinker, but because Starbucks has this magnetism and pull to it, you might say, “I’m going to go try one of those Frappachinos.” Likewise, multisite churches are creating a brand of church that is so compelling that when unchurched people move into the neighborhood, they say, “OK, you know what? I want to go check that church out.”

In the next 10 years, we’re also going to see more and more emerging multisite networks, like our New Thing Network or The Acts 29 Network, because sites need to be connected locally and churches need to be connected nationally. Senior church

leaders are joining networks and saying, “No, we don’t want to get in the way of this thing. We’re going to bless it and send people out.” CCC’s New Thing Network is half multisite coaching and conferences, and half a network of churches across the country that is committed to being reproducing churches. We collaborate with these churches every week through teleconferencing and video conferencing to create the Big Idea. We provide accountability. And people want to be a part of this thing because they know we are going to make them better than they are on their own.

I think innovation happens on the edges. Continually starting new sites keeps us on the edge. Moreover, multisite churches and emerging reproducing church networks are apostolic because their value is placed on the edge and not on the center. The value becomes the new and not the old. The value becomes the lost and not the found. And I’m totally fine with that, as I would think Jesus might be.