

Multisite Churches

The mission of Bluebonnet Baptist Association is *assisting churches*. We have no other reason to exist and I try hard to remember that. The decisions we make concerning budgets, personnel, ministry priorities, and associational activities have that one mission in mind. We are here to help churches and church leaders carry out their Great Commission responsibility. Period. We are not going to do anything else.

Our mission requires me to ask this question regularly: “What is changing about how churches go about their ministries?” One answer is that more and more churches in North America are pursuing a multisite strategy. *Multisite* means *one church meeting in more than one location for their primary worship gathering*. A multisite strategy differs from church planting in that new meeting sites are not intended to become autonomous churches but will remain as ministry points of the multisite church. All sites and their campus staffs remain under the direction of the senior pastor and senior leadership team of the church.

Leadership Network reports that multisite churches now number over 5,000 in North America, up from 200 in 2001. Since there are only 1,650 megachurches in North America with weekly attendance of 2,000 plus, it is clear that multisite is not just a megachurch trend. Leadership Network reports increasing multisite activity in churches of 500 and up.

The need for church revitalization is also fueling the multisite trend. Jim Tomberlin of Multisite Solutions reports that one in three multisite campuses are a result of a merger. A significant number of struggling churches see becoming a site of another, more vibrant church as the way to achieve revitalization of the church in their community.

Economics also has a role in multisite. For a growing church it can be more cost effective to multiply sites than to build ever-larger buildings on one site. Some churches also see multisite as less risky, financially and otherwise, than church planting. They would rather leverage what is already working than try something completely new. There is some evidence that this strategy is bearing fruit. Leadership Network reports that multisite churches have higher-than-average rates of both volunteering and baptisms.

Some church leaders do not like the multisite concept. I confess a bit of trouble with it myself, particularly where it seems to be in competition with church planting for leaders and resources. Many of the criticisms leveled at multisite churches concern the quality of discipleship and Christian community taking place in multisite churches. These are valid questions and deserve thoughtful discussion. To be fair, though, the quality of discipleship and Christian community is a valid concern for a lot of single-site churches, too.

There are two common criticisms of multisite that I believe are misguided. First, the senior pastors of multisite churches are often criticized as being ego-driven. Now I am sure that is the case for some. The human ego has been running amuck for a long time and shows no signs of abating. All people, especially those deemed highly successful, run the temptations of self-centeredness and self-promotion. But here is my problem with the criticism of multisite strategy as ego-driven: *It puts the criticizer in the role of judge*, defining the hearts and motives of other ministry leaders, most of whom the criticizer does not even know. It assumes there is no valid reason for multisite and thus the multisite pastor is only interested in building his own kingdom. This is unchristian judgmentalism and name-calling.

Second, multisite is often criticized because the New Testament church, particularly as seen in the book of Acts, does not support such an expression of church. Now I do not know if that is actually true. *Where* and *how* the church met in the first century seems, to my reading, to be a fluid and changing phenomenon and not one that is precisely defined. But let's assume the assertion is true: Does that mean all expressions of local church ministry that are not seen in Acts are therefore invalid? If so, then there goes Vacation Bible School and youth lock-ins, not to mention senior adult trips to Branson and Upward basketball. Clearly methods change with culture and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. Various modern technologies make multisite viable in our culture. We should not dismiss it because we do not see it presented in Acts. That would be a poor use of Scripture.

Multisite is a reality and it is adding to the kingdom in many places. The Mission Coordinating Team of BBA has discussed the issue of multisite and the association's role in it under our mission of assisting churches. They decided BBA should facilitate a network of interest for church leaders who want to learn more about multisite. I am new to this multisite thing, so I look forward to sharing in this learning community with you.