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The Multi-Site Movement

Dave Ferguson

Remember the days when your bank had only one location and not multiple branches? Back then you could say, "I'm going to the bank" and everyone knew that you meant the bank at the corner of Elm and Main. Remember the days when your hospital had one facility and not multiple locations? You could tell people, "I'm having some tests at the hospital" and everyone knew that you meant the hospital facility downtown. Remember the days when colleges had only one campus? If you told someone, "I'm taking classes at the State College" they knew not only the College, but also what town you were talking about. Now, banks, hospitals and colleges serve their communities with multiple facilities in various locations. And, add to that list churches! There are now at least 1500 multi-site churches in the United States. No longer does a church have to only have one branch, one location or one campus.

Among these 1500 multi-site churches is Community Christian Church located in Chicagoland. In 1998 Community Christian Church became a multi-site church when it officially became one church with two locations. This eight-year-old church that had already grown to over 800 attendees took this proactive step and launched a second location to reach unchurched non-Christian people. After becoming a multi-site church their outreach more than quadrupled with an average attendance of more than 3800 with the majority of these new attendees being unchurched. This second location was so successful they launched a third location in 2001, a fourth in 2002 and two more in 2004 for a total of six sites!

But who are these other 1499 multi-site churches? Multi-site churches are hard to stereotype because they include new churches like Journey Community Church. This church in New

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York City is only two years old, but has two locations averaging over 800 attendees. Some multi-site churches are mega or giga churches like Willow Creek Community Church that now has four locations with plans to add a fifth. Other multi-site churches are center-city churches that find themselves with a tough decision: relocate to the faster growing side of town or to stay and reach the changing constituency around the old church building. Center-city churches like St. Paul's Lutheran in Aurora, IL are saying "yes" to both relocating and staying put by becoming a multi-site church.

But if we dig a little deeper we are discovering some interesting facts about this growing segment of the church that is being called the "multi-site movement". The following is data collected by Leadership Network in a survey they conducted with over 1000 multi-site churches and some of my own observations:

Why do churches go multi-site?

51% of the churches surveyed said their reason for going multi-site was evangelistic outreach and 21% said they went multi-site so they could get closer to their target group. The remaining 19% said this was a solution to overcrowding or being land locked (Bird). This is very exciting because it points out that the vast majority of these multi-site churches are missional and looking for proactive ways to reach out and not just reacting to growth.

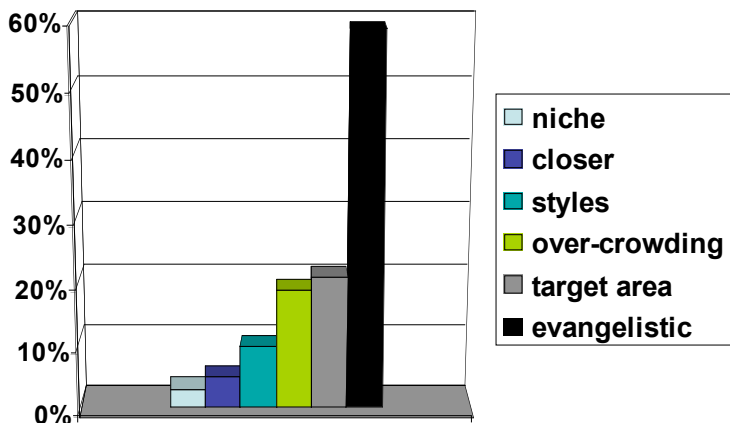


Figure 1: Evangelism is the #1 reason churches go multi-site.

What approach do most multi-site churches follow?

The approaches to multi-site can be put into two categories: franchisee and licensee. 21% of those surveyed said they followed a franchisee approach where every site or venue gives you a similar experience. 25% follow the licensee approach where each location has their own “flavor”. The remaining 54% have a mix of the two, with many still trying to figure out their approach (Bird).

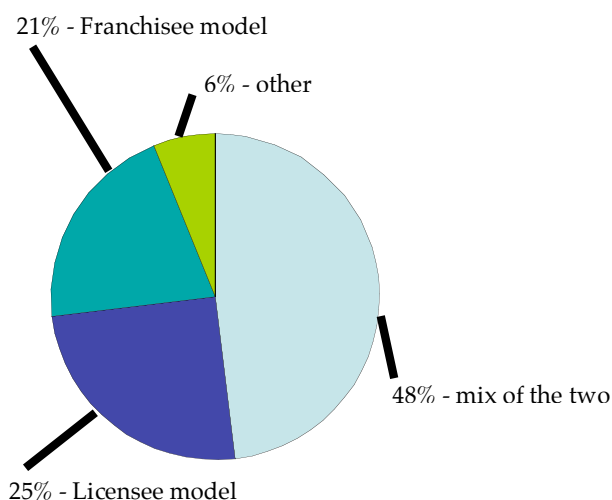


Figure 2: Churches use a variety of multi-site approaches.

What size church goes multi-site?

The survey included churches as large as 7000 and as small as 200 in average worship attendance with the median attendance about 850 (Bird). My own observations are that the smaller churches who are reproducing implement a house church or simple church methodology. These small churches have a reproducing DNA and size does not matter. When they have a leader who is ready, they reproduce. The larger churches that are reproducing also have a reproducing DNA, but it is seen in the strategies and systems that reproduce their large church culture in multiple locations.

How do multi-sites build a one church identity?

The survey asked these churches to pick one answer to this question and here are their response: 20%—vision/mission, 17%—leadership structure, 15%—common name, 13% teaching

(live or video), 10%—worship style, 8%—centralized budget. The remaining 17% said their “one church identity” was found through big events, marketing or common mission projects. Almost all these churches use the phrase, “one church with multiple locations (Bird).

“The Big Idea” at Community Christian Church contributes to our one church identity. Every week our adults, students and children all are taught the same big idea in an age appropriate fashion in their large groups and small groups. We have also followed Lyle Schaller’s advice and used the “Four Ones” as points of identity; one vision, one leadership, one staff and one budget.

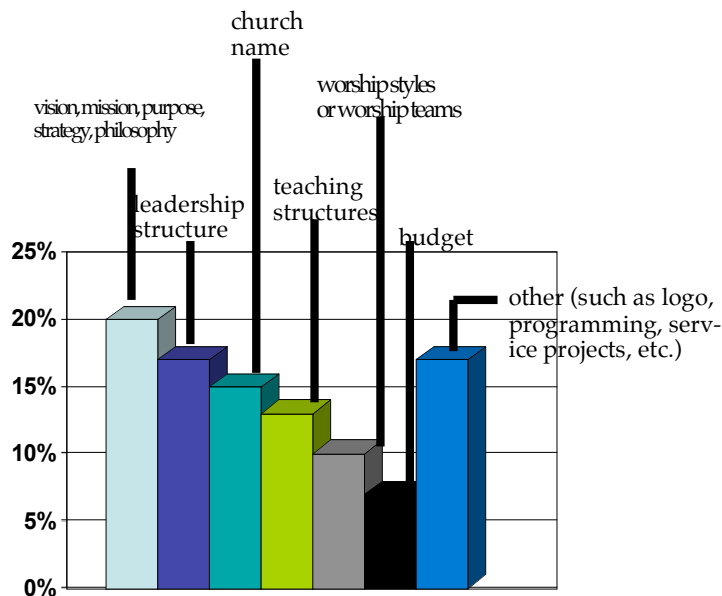


Figure 3: Shared vision creates “one church” identity in multi-site churches

Where do multi-sites tend to meet?

Bill Easum in his upcoming book, *The Nomadic Church* tells of a 2001 survey that reports since 1945 half of all new churches were started in the 1990’s and the majority of those churches meet in rented facilities. The majority of multi-site churches are among these nomadic churches with 55% meeting in schools, 13% meet in theatres and 13% meet in community centers or YMCA’s (Bird). These missional churches understand they can

not build buildings big enough or fast enough to keep up with the movement of Gods Spirit.

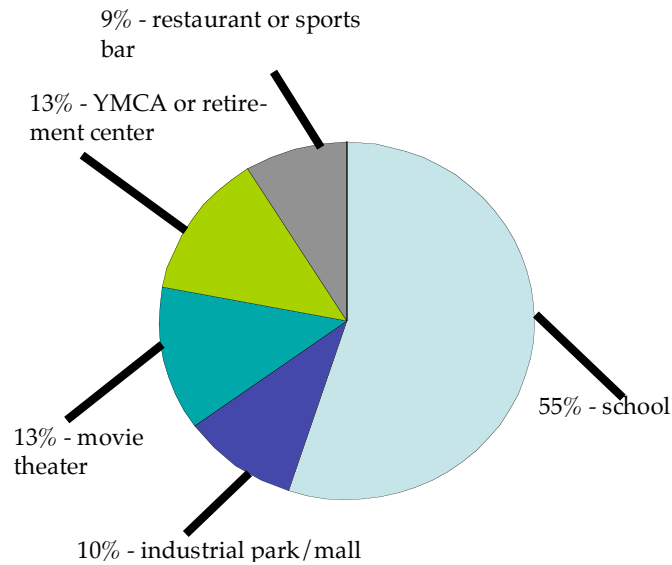


Figure 4: Most multi-sites use schools for facilities.

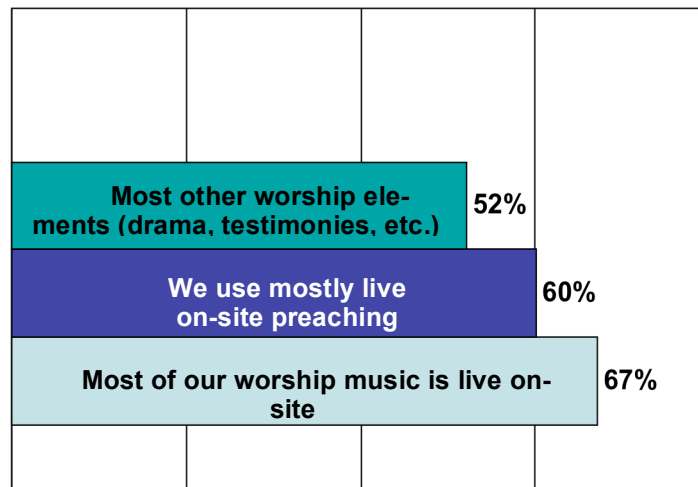


Figure 5: For most multi-sites, worship and preaching are live on-site

How do multi-sites handle preaching?

60% of those churches surveyed use live teaching. Of those churches that do not use live teaching most use DVD or video by recording the teaching on Saturday night then using it on Sunday morning. A very small percentage use live simulcast and even less are using two way live simulcast (Bird).

How do churches fund a multi-site vision?

Most multi-site churches tap into the general operating budget for start-up costs. On the very high end is a \$2 million budget for a new site and on the low end is no budgeted costs at all (Bird). The last two locations that Community Christian started cost \$135,000 each. Both sites were self-supporting from the launch with average worship attendance at each location of 250 and 300 nine months after beginning.

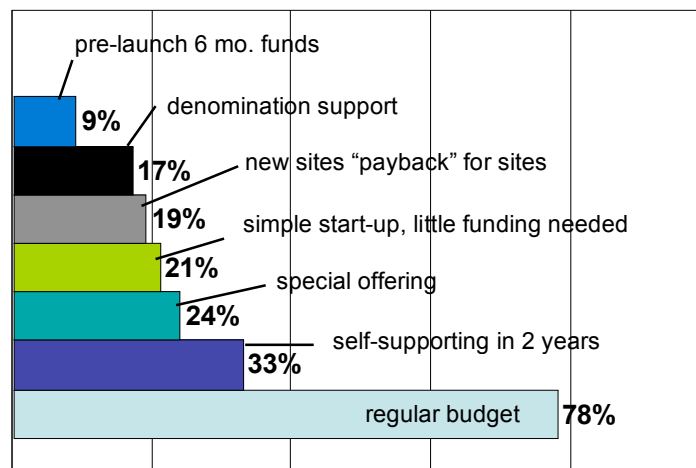


Figure 6: Most multi-site campuses are funded by the regular operating budget.

What is their source for new leaders?

Multi-site churches are extremely intentional about leadership development. Most of these churches have created leadership "pipelines" both within their churches for bringing people on staff and outside their churches for recruiting the best available talent. The last two sites we started at Community Christian Church were started by two of our most capable leaders who wanted to go and start a new thing. CCC is not alone, 58% of the churches surveyed said they sent out their most experienced

people to start the new site.

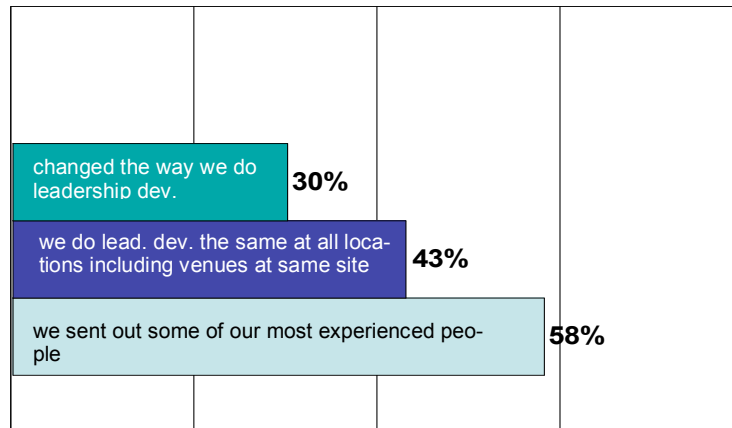


Figure 7: Multi-site churches become very intentional about leadership development.

How do off-sites handle children, nursery and youth?

Perhaps the most leadership intensive and least talked about aspect of reproducing sites is reproducing children’s ministry leaders. Most off-site campuses surveyed do have a children’s ministry but most do not (yet) have a youth ministry (Bird).

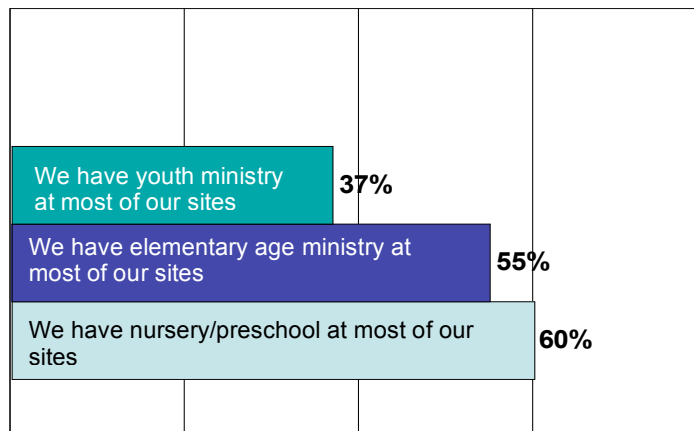


Figure 8: Most off-sites provide Children’s ministries.

How do multi-sites track money?

At Community Christian Church we have one budget and publish one total giving number. Internally we track each location to make sure that each site is self-supporting and contributing to the overall mission of the church. Of those churches surveyed, 71% also had a centralized budget and accounting system (Bird).

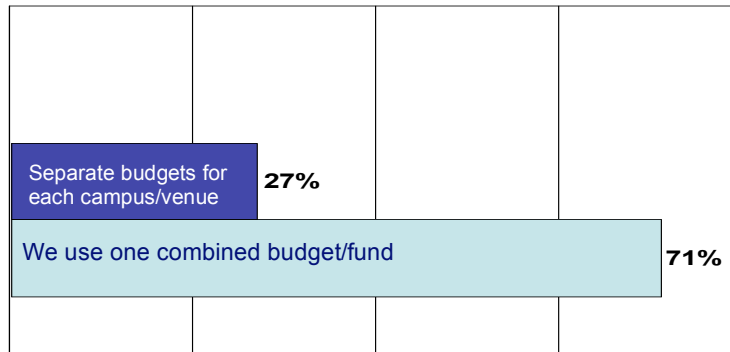


Figure 9: Financial record keeping is usually centralized.

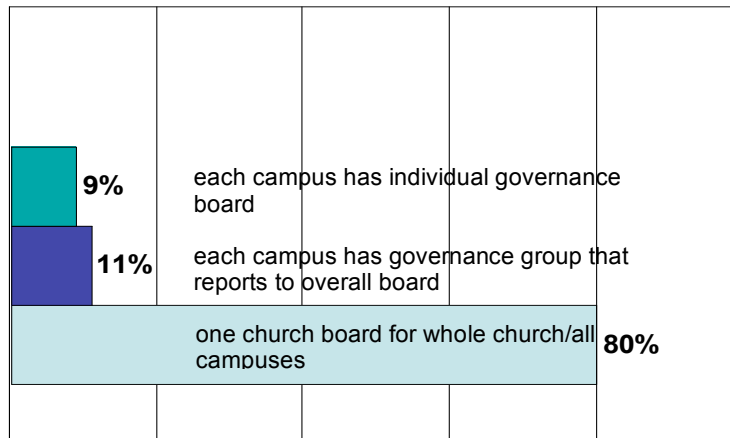


Figure 10: Most multi-sites report back to a main campus church board.

How do multi-sites configure governance/decision-making?

What seems to be emerging is that those churches adopting a franchising approach are more likely to have one board or old-

ership and those churches adopting the licensee approach are more likely to have a group from each site that reports to an overall board. When asked about church governance 80% said they have one board that oversees all campuses and the whole church, 11% said each location has a site-specific group that reports to an overall board and 9% said each location has its own board (Bird).

Multiple Sites Means Making More Christians

For years now church growth experts said very clearly, “the most effective way to reach non-Christian people is through the planting and development of new congregations”. Acts 5:42 describes a multiplying church with multiple locations, “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” And what comes to mind next for Luke? In the very next verse he says, “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing...” And this correlation between a multiple sites and making more Christians has been experienced at multi-site churches like New Life Christian Church in Centerville, Virginia. It was four years ago that I began talking with Brett Andrews the senior pastor of this dynamic new church about adding a second location. What is so visionary about this church is they added their second location before they even had their first permanent facility. The following is part of an e-mail I received from Todd Wilson the Pastor of Administration at New Life Christian Church after the start of their second location: “What a weekend! Thanks for your prayers. It really is reaching more people at higher quality and lower cost. We had about 420 people (on the first Sunday at their second location), and the quality was incredible. The quality at a brand new church (Ashburn campus) is (no kidding) higher than what we do in Centerville after 7 years. It’s all it’s touted to be!” Since becoming a multi-site church, New Life has seen their outreach expand from 600 weekly attendees to over well over 1000 weekly attendees with plans now to start a third location.

Multiple Sites Means Maturing More Christians

Jay and Ruthie were nominally involved at Community Christian Church and were falling short of our goal of being 3 C Christ Followers. The 3 C’s are celebrate (worship), connect (small group) and contribute (time and resources). However, when we started a new site within walking distance of their house everything seemed to change. Now Jay and Ruthie make our celebration services a regular part of their week. They not

only connected with a small group, but they both moved into positions where they were leading small groups. And they began to contribute financially and evangelistically in ways they never had before. The big surprise of the multi-site church is that it not only reaches out to make more Christians but also to make more mature Christians.

Many larger churches are learning that while people will drive long distances to join in the weekly celebration service, if they live more than 20 minutes from the main campus their serving potential and evangelistic potential is greatly diminished. Thus the possibility of them continuing to mature as a Christian is greatly reduced. But with the multi-site church you are able to not only reach out to more Christian but also make more mature Christians who fully utilize their potential for serving and evangelizing.

For a long time the church had two options if it wanted to reach out: church growth or church planting. We now have a third option, multi-site. And there is a new movement of churches embracing this third option.

Bird, Warren. "Survey of 1000 Multi-Site Churches." Leadership Network. http://www.leadnet.org/multisitechurches_resources.asp 23 Nov. 2004

Writer

Ferguson, Dave. davef@communitychristian.org. Dave Ferguson and four friends from college launched Community Christian Church www.communitychristian.org in the west suburbs of Chicago; a church that is passionate about "helping people find their way back to God". This church has grown to 500+ leaders with more than 3,500 in attendance at six sites every weekend. Dave serves as a resource for other churches and leaders seeking to expand through multiple church sites and provides visionary leadership for the NewThing Network www.newthing.org, a catalyst for a movement of reproducing churches.

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