

AVOIDING DETOURS

Insights from Multi-Site Pioneers Who Are Leading the Way

by Warren Bird

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Tell good people what you know — they'll profit from it. (Prov. 9:9, The Message)

Readers of magazines for church leaders consistently report that they like it better when the articles talk about a church's ministry warts, not just its good looks. Something about us learns more when we look over the shoulder at the painful lessons other church leaders have made along the way and the learnings that came from them. Larry Osborne, pastor of **North Coast Church**, Vista, CA (www.northcoastchurch.com), says it this way: "Why should two people have to pay the same 'dumb tax'?"

The following insights come from churches that have developed a healthy multiple-location approach to ministry. They are largely an answer to these questions, "What is your best piece of wisdom for other churches, based on what you experienced?" and "How can you save them pain or accelerate their progress?"

In that spirit, here are what various multi-site pioneers said they wish they had known before they started....

1. Remember that multi-site isn't a vision by itself, but a vehicle to achieve the vision.

Generally multi-site is used to solve a problem – such as running out of room – or to take advantage of a new opportunity. At **North Coast Church**, Vista, CA (www.northcoastchurch.com), worshipers can currently choose between three geographic locations, four different worship times and seven different worship venues. That adds up to more than 16 options or services a weekend! Yet the pastor, Larry Osborne, has consistently found: "Video venues are a great ministry tool but a pathetic engine."



LARRY OSBORNE

2. As you look for staff, remember that multi-site leaders need strong relational skills.

Chartwell Baptist Church, in a suburb of Toronto, ON (www.chartwellchurch.org), has been doing multi-site since 1993. It has campuses in four different locations. "More

than anything, we've learned the absolute importance of making sure any staff you hire are highly relational," says Peter Roebbelen, team leader of the pastoral staff. "At first we hired for expertise, which seems great on paper, but people without relational sensitivities don't work well in the complex matrix environment of a multi-site church."



PETER ROEBBELEN

3. Make sure each site has a "face with the place" – a campus pastor or venue director.

"We underestimated the role of campus pastor as leader, at first looking primarily for an emcee," says Kevin Penry, a pastor and operational leader at **Life Church**, Edmond, OK (www.lifechurch.tv). "This person needs to be someone that others are willing to follow." The church has four geographical campuses, plus an online campus, all of which bring the sermon by video. That structure causes Life Church campus pastors not only to need relationship skills for leading a campus, but also ability to convey equity to the screen. "A campus pastor has got to believe in our approach to such an extent that he imparts credibility to the screen," says Penry.



KEVIN PENRY

4. Expect your most successful multi-site leaders to be home grown.

The idea of developing staff from within the congregation generally works well for any congregation but it works especially well for multi-site ventures. **Gulf Breeze United Methodist Church** near Pensacola, FL (www.gbumc.org), is typical. They have two different permanent campuses, plus a "Worship at the Water" restaurant site during the summer. "Raising people up from within the congregation is a key to keeping our DNA," says Mac Fulcher, one of the church's pastors. "Some of our best staff members are those who have sat in the seats." One of



MAC FULCHER



JUNE NIXON

their best, for example, started out as a volunteer, has worn four or five different hats, and now oversees adult discipleship for the main campus. June Nixon, another pastor, adds, "Some of our best grow up with us, leave to serve or be trained, and then come back."

5. Don't underestimate people's willingness to experience portions of the service by video.

A typical response comes from **Mecklenburg Community Church**, Charlotte, NC (www.mecklenburg.org). "Our biggest surprise is that video actually works. People like seeing our pastor up close," says Jeff Sheets, campus manager for the church's Lake Norman site, which meets in a movie theater. Even larger churches like Willow Creek had a bit of discovery with video: "We were surprised that video would be as successful as it was. Most of our programming department thought we would be fighting uphill, so we overinvested in it at first," says Jeff Small, associate regional director for **Willow Creek Community Church** (www.willowcreek.org). Adds Jim Tomberlin, Willow's regional pastor, "What stained glass was in the Middle Ages, what the printing press was in the Reformation era, and what TV and radio was in the twentieth century, videocast is in the twenty-first century. It's a technology to communicate truth and extend the church."



JEFF SHEETS



JEFF SMALL

6. When experimenting, try a low-regret, high-return strategy. Restated: look for what you can do with maximum impact and minimum regret.

A good example is **Seacoast Church** (www.seacoast.org), just outside Charleston, SC. They're currently in 9 different locations, with plans to expand further. For their first multi-site, they made huge financial investments in preparing their facility—not even knowing how long the experimental location would work. It's still running well today, but church leaders

wince at the bells and whistles they incorporated, much of which turned out to be unnecessary. Likewise **Stillwater United Methodist Church**, Dayton, OH (www.stillwaterumc.org), spent \$1.2 million to relocate the main site of the church, but only \$50,000 to launch its second site in Englewood, according to Duane Anders, lead pastor at the Stillwater site. Ongoing costs have also been proportionally smaller at the second site.



DUANE ANDERS

7. Avoid adopting a mature organizational structure when you're smaller.

Fellowship Bible Church, Little Rock, AR (www.fbclr.org), offers three worship venues, each of a different size. Tim Lundy, directional leader and a teaching pastor, compares the need for greeters at a small drug store to Wal-Mart: At the mom-and-pop store it happens automatically, but Wal-Mart intentionally positions greeters as you enter, and has a rule for employees that if someone gets within 10 feet, the employee is to greet them. "The bigger you are the more directional you need to be about how to be a welcoming church," he says. "In smaller site locations, you can rely on natural relationships to make things work, but in larger venues you need more global rules."



TIM LUNDY

8. Don't view multi-site as merely an add-on, since it will change who you are.

Multi-site will either change you, or you'll have a step-child who will languish or leave you. Craig Cheney, the worship venue overseer/pastor at **Fellowship Bible Church**, Little Rock, AR (www.fbclr.org), says, "Multi-site is a culture shift, not a tactical addition. When we went multi-site, we became a fundamentally different church. Multi-site has not only changed our perspective but our practices of church as well." There is a big



CRAIG CHENEY

difference between being a church with multiple sites and being a multiple-site church.

9. Whatever small groups did for you as a single campus still needs to happen on each new site.

In most multiple-location churches, small groups play a vital role. Group life serves as each site's relational glue, the muscle for doing ministry, and a primary context for leadership development. **Jacksonville Chapel**, Lincoln Park, NJ, (www.jacksonvillechapel.org), is diligent about guarding their small groups. "That is our DNA," says Warren Hunt, worship pastor. "Small groups are a driving force for discipling as they focus on welcome, worship, word, and world."



WARREN HUNT

10. Avoid the term *main campus* because it implies that everything else is second-class.

Many churches begin identifying their campuses by geography, such as "Willow Creek South Barrington," "Willow Creek North Shore," "Willow Creek McHenry County" and "Willow Creek Wheaton" (www.willowcreek.org). **Christ the King Church**, Mt. Vernon, WA (www.ckonline.com) does likewise with its eight locations to date, calling Mt. Vernon the original campus when necessary. In order to prevent the sense that everything is better at the mother church, churches like Christ the King have actually moved the central support function – accounting, churchwide graphics, marketing, and office support – out of the original campus. "I wish we had figured out sooner that central services needs to be separate from the worship center," says pastor Dave Browning. "We use the term 'worship center' instead of 'main campus' so that every center is on equal par."



DAVE BROWNING

11. Learn the difference between replicating a site and replicating impact.

Dave Browning at **Christ the King Church** (see above) is developing simple and fast

ways to add a large number of new sites in any given year. "We want to multiply impact, not just sites," he cautions. "With each new site, we want people to sense that something is going on that's way bigger than us." For Browning, people at each new site need to be driven by the sake of the mission, not the convenience of having a shorter drive time. Otherwise the potential spiritual impact is diminished.

12. Don't underestimate the many contexts in which a multi-site approach can significantly help fulfill your church's mission.

Chris Mavity, Pastor of Expansion at **North Coast Church** (see above), has launched successful video venues in everything from warehouses to public schools to a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. "I am continually surprised by the types of worship service locations (hosts) who are interested in multi-site," he says, referring to many untapped "niche" locations his church would like to explore.



CHRIS MAVITY

Jim Tomberlin, regional director for Willow Creek, sees the extension possibilities of multi-site. According to Tomberlin, "In the future, multi-site will be a primary church planting tool. Multi-site is also the logical and inevitable next-step of a mega-church. If a church is so well endowed with gifting and anointing, it would be tragic to keep it in one container. Multi-site multiplies ministry exponentially because it maximizes seats at optimal attendance hours, and its return on investment in money and people is far greater."



JIM TOMBERLIN

Greg Surratt, pastor of **Seacoast Church** (see above), sees multi-site taking churches to places they've not previously been able to go. "Multi-site may be the only vehicle big enough to complete the Great Commission," he says.



GREG SURRATT

Evaluate Yourself

Think about the latest experiment your church has completed, in terms of multi-site expansion. Rate yourself on how well you did on each of these principles.

Now think of something new you're currently planning related to being a multi-site church. Which principle do you especially need to consider? Why?

PRINCIPLE	1 Poor	2 Fair	3 Mediocre	4 Good	5 Great	N/A
1. Remember that multi-site isn't a vision by itself, but a vehicle to achieve the vision.						
2. As you look for staff, remember that multi-site leaders need strong relational skills.						
3. Make sure each site has a "face with the place" – a campus pastor or venue director.						
4. Expect your most successful multi-site leaders to be home-grown.						
5. Don't underestimate people's willingness to experience portions of the service by video.						
6. When experimenting, try a low-regret, high-return strategy.						
7. Avoid adopting a mature organizational structure when you're small. Be innovative and entrepreneurial when you start.						
8. Don't view multi-site as merely an add-on, since it will change who you are.						
9. Whatever small groups did for you as a single campus still needs to happen on each new site.						
10. Avoid the term main campus because it implies that everything else is second-class.						
11. Learn the difference between replicating a site and replicating impact.						
12. Don't underestimate the many contexts in which a multi-site approach can significantly help fulfill your church's mission.						



WARREN BIRD



GREG LIGON

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