

The following article is from **Leadership** magazine, and is located at:
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2003/002/21.81.html>

The Multi-Site Church

Some of the strengths of this new life form.
by Dave Ferguson

The multi-site church is a phenomenon that you will no doubt be hearing about in the future. An estimated 100 to 200 churches nationwide are experimenting with this concept: one church (meaning one staff, one board, one budget) meeting in multiple locations, usually with the various sites developing unique personalities yet sharing the same "brand identity" and DNA.

One leading example: Community Christian Church, which was planted in Naperville, Illinois, in 1989. Its vision: "Helping people find their way back to God." In 1998, it launched a "south campus" twenty minutes away in a community center of a new housing development. A third site is in Carillon, a nearby "active adult lifestyle community" for those 55+.

Then in 2001, a struggling church in the town of Montgomery offered its building and five acres in hopes that by making it a fourth campus of CCC that new life would emerge. After six months of building rehab and enrolling about 100 new leaders and artists as "spiritual entrepreneurs," more than 600 people attended the inaugural celebration service there.

Combined attendance now averages over 3,000, and more sites are being considered. Dave Ferguson, lead pastor of CCC, explains why he's convinced the multi-site strategy is here to stay.

Lyle Schaller describes, in his book [*Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future*](#), what a long-time resident might say while showing a guest around town.

Yesterday. "That's the First National Bank at the corner of Main and Washington, and directly across from it is First Church, where we have been members since we moved here thirty years ago. The college is up on the hill, our hospital is about a half mile to the west, and our doctor has his office in that building over there."

Today. "That's the First National Bank, but I haven't been there for years. We do all our banking at a branch supermarket where we buy groceries. We're members of First Church, but we go to their east-side campus, which is near our house. We have one congregation but three meeting places—a small one on the north side, the big one out where we live, and the old building downtown here. The old college on the hill is now a university. This is their main campus, but they also offer classes at three other locations. We're members of an HMO that has doctors in five locations, but my primary-care physician is in a branch about a mile from where we live. I've never been in the main hospital except to visit a couple of friends."

This illustrates the direction our world is going—our institutions are growing *larger* and *smaller* simultaneously, blending the strength that size offers with the comfort and convenience of smaller, closer venues. This is one example of what Jim Collins in [*Built to Last*](#) called "the genius of the AND," the paradoxical view that allows you to pursue both A and B simultaneously.

While developing our multi-site church, we discovered eight other advantages that all demonstrate the genius of the AND.

Brand new AND trusted brand

It was a great day when Krispy Kreme doughnuts opened a store in our area. I'd heard how good they were, but I never tasted one until one of their stores opened nearby. The occasion was doubly exciting because it was brand new store opening, and it was offering a brand I knew about and wanted to try.

We've found a similar dynamic with the multi-site church. It has the upside of what used to be denominational loyalty, which was prominent in yesteryear but now is found in congregational loyalty. The particular congregation is the trusted brand, and the opening of a new site makes it brand new.

When we started our second site, we sent out 50,000 pieces of mail to announce the opening. We had 465 attendees. When we launched our second site, our south campus, the response was even better. We did similar announcements and mailings, and we had 565 attend the first celebration service. At least part of this improved response was due to the combination of our being a trusted brand while offering something brand new.

Staff with generalists

AND specialists New churches usually begin with one church planter, a generalist who has to oversee everything. If there is a team, it might include those over broad areas: a worship leader or perhaps a children's pastor.

The multi-site church, however, allows you to start a new location with the existing staff in place. Instead of hiring more generalists, you add specialists such as technical arts, administrator, or director of creative arts for children.

The big win is that now all locations have the benefit of the generalists, and the added specialists! When we added our second site, we brought on specialists like a teaching pastor, adult small groups pastor, administrator, and a director of creative arts for children. When we started a third site (at the active adult lifestyle community), we added a specialist in the area of senior's ministry, and the whole church (every location) benefited from the added expertise.

Last year at Carillon, for instance, we celebrated the baptisms of more than a dozen people, all of them more than 70 years old.

Less cost AND greater impact

Financially, a new campus is tremendously cost effective. When we started our north campus (our first) we spent lots of money on staff, equipment, and marketing.

At our first celebration service, as mentioned, we had 465 attendees. Three months later our attendance had leveled off at about 180, 80 percent of them previously unchurched.

When we started our south campus (our second site), we spent less money, added specialists to our existing staff team, and a similar marketing blitz. We had 565 at the first service, but more importantly, after three months we were averaging 360 at our south campus, again 80 percent unchurched.

Doing the math, that's 39 percent retention at our first location, and 64 percent retention at our second location. Our second campus cost less money to start, reached more people, and resulted in a greater retention. This is a result our already having staff in place—music minister, small group minister, and children's minister—who oversaw both locations. Our ministry was a lot better organized than when we did our first plant.

New church vibe AND big church punch

Lyle Schaller told us, "The most important thing you offer to this new work is your large church culture." At first I wasn't sure what he was talking about. He meant expectations and excellence. We were able to launch the second site with the same level of excellence that it took us eight years to achieve at our north campus.

When we started the north campus, we did not even have a complete worship team. The children's ministry consisted of volunteers from other churches and students from a nearby Bible college. We had 35 people involved in small groups.

When we started the second site, we had a full band, multi-media, drama, and hospitality teams, and a full children's ministry staff. We had 10 leaders waiting to start small groups—capacity for more than 100 ungrouped people.

One surprise was that excellence flows both ways. Innovations at the new campus inspired improvements at our existing campus. For example, the hospitality at south was much better than at north, so we made improvements at both.

Move there AND stay here

Growing churches and real estate have this in common: "location, location, location." Many existing churches, particularly older churches, are located in communities with little growth. These churches look across town where new development is happening and they see the potential. Perhaps many of their members are moving there.

Faced with this, they have two major options: sell the property they have and move to the area where the growth is, or keep the site they have as well as start another site where the growth is occurring.

That's what St. Paul's Church did in Aurora, Illinois, a community of over 100,000 people. The church was located in a rapidly changing neighborhood, with a growing Hispanic population. The west side of town was where all the rapid growth was.

After looking at their options, instead abandoning their existing site to move to the booming west side, they "moved there and stayed here." They kept a campus in the downtown neighborhood with an intentional outreach to the growing Hispanic community, and they also launched a west campus in one of the faster growing areas.

More need AND more support

As we think about a new site, we lay out a matrix of about 100 blanks, representing the positions we need to fill in order for us to launch. The increased opportunities create a vacuum that challenges more people to step in to serve in voluntary leadership roles in all areas, such as children's, hospitality, and small groups.

On our very first Sunday at our new location, after the service was over, people started stacking the chairs, unprompted by any announcement. They could see the need and wanted to help. One man who helped was Bob, who had never really plugged in at the first location. Soon he agreed to be a part of the set-up and tear-down team. He clearly saw he was needed.

This, of course, is true of any new church start-up. What makes multi-site unique is that the existing church already has coaches in place who are there to support, encourage, and organize volunteers such as Bob. Having a leader to care for them and train them makes volunteers more willing to help.

More outreach AND more maturity

While people will drive long distances to join the weekly celebration service at a large church, if they live more than 20 minutes away, their ability to serve and to invite friends is diminished.

Tim and Lynne were nominally involved, falling short of our goal of being "3-C Christ Followers," which we define as being faithful to celebrate (worship), connect (small group) and contribute (time and resources). When we started a new site within walking distance of their house, however, everything seemed to change. Now Tim and Lynne made our celebration services a regular part of their week. They not only connected with a small group, but they both are now leading groups. And they began to contribute financially and evangelistically in ways they never had before.

The multi-site church reaches out to make both more Christians *and* more mature Christians.

Dave Ferguson is lead pastor at Community Christian Church in Naperville, Romeoville, and Montgomery, Illinois.

Inside the Mind of a Multi-Site Pastor

Follow-up questions and answers with Dave Ferguson, lead pastor of Community Christian Church.

Did you start out planning to lead a multi-site church?

Not exactly. From the beginning we dreamed that our church would (1) make an impact, (2) be a reproducing church, and (3) if it wasn't presumptuous, that a movement would come out of this.

When did you actually decide to go multi-site?

Peter Drucker says many decisions are "not so much made as they become apparent." That was true of us.

A real estate developer in our church was planning a community twenty minutes south of us. He wanted a church in the area, and he asked if we would move our congregation there. After praying it through, we concluded, "What if we just started another location down there?"

So has launching new sites become contagious?

Actually, we saw what this did for our leadership development. We were forced to develop 100 "spiritual entrepreneurs" who would see this as a missional opportunity. It gave people the motivation and opportunity to grow as never before. We saw leaders being multiplied. It was great.

What kind of person is cut out to lead a multi-site church?

You have to have a heart for developing other teachers, artists, and leaders. You've got to love multiplying your team. We have an entrepreneurial kind of culture. And you've got to enjoy that.

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Spring 2003, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, Page 81*



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