4 Painful Mistakes

MULTISITE CHURCHES MAKE EARLY ON

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Is your church considering launching a multisite campus?

Do you think this might be the best next step in your journey?

Have you wondered if this approach could help you reach more people more quickly?

Over the years, I've had the privilege of talking with scores of church leaders who have launched campuses that went on to impact many people with the message of Jesus. In fact, I've had the honor of being in the driver's seat for the launch of 14 campuses. During that time, we recruited 1,500 volunteers, and somewhere north of 9,000 people attend those campuses today. It's been amazing to watch the spread and flourish of this movement over the years.

However, I've spoken with a number of church leaders who are struggling to resolve problems that have arisen in their multisite church as they try to unpack exactly what is going wrong. **They are often worried about the future of their multisite and want to diagnose the root cause of these issues.**

As I've listened and interacted, I've learned churches tend to make four painful mistakes in the early days of launching new campuses. These mistakes may not cause problems early on, but they always come to root in the long term and ultimately cause a painful future for churches pursuing this approach.

About Those Dotted Lines and Solid Lines...

When launching new campuses, the main question becomes who is responsible for what. People at other locations will feel the need to lead the ministry in a certain way. They want to make sure areas of particular concern are developed and led excellently as they serve their community. However, the central leadership team will likely have an approach, style, and brand that they're trying to maintain in the various locations.

At its core, campus teams are responsible for relationships and execution. They consider how the ministry affects people while the central team members are concerned with systems and curriculum. Regardless of who reports to whom, who has the first move, and who has the responsibility, it's important to communicate. This order breaks down when campus teams and central teams stop communicating with each other.

In order to radically grow your church, make sure that you have communicated your approach clearly. From which leaders are the first movers to who reports to whom, having these early discussions about structure will prevent painful conversations later. In fact, in my own leadership I would say **this conversation has been the most persistent and painful part of leading.** It's matter of authority and responsibility.

At a deeper level, this issue is really about many different things that can cause conflict in people's lives. It could be relational conflict between leaders; it could be an issue of monetary conflict. (Who determines how the church spends money is the root of many problems at so many churches.) This question of responsibility can be a complex situation to wrestle through and requires the church to think clearly about who is responsible for what in a multisite church.

Too Close or Too Far?

One common problem many churches encounter involves launches that are too close together on the map. Why is this a problem? When campuses are too near to each other, you're not reaching new markets. **The solution: put distance between the sites to ensure that you're reaching a new community.**

Another equally persistent problem emerges with too much distance between campuses. **Too much space discourages volunteers from going to serve at the new locations.** When this happens, the launch will end up feeling more like a church plant rather than a true multisite.

When choosing locations, it's critical to find the right balance between being close enough to existing campuses to draw on a large enough volunteer base but far enough away to reach a new community of people.

Trying to Replicate Too Much

There is an interesting dynamic that develops over time as churches launch multiple campuses. Often when the church goes beyond the first few locations, the campuses resemble each other less and less. Early on, leadership teams are convinced that there is a long list of items that need to be replicated exactly the same in all locations. Over time, we become wiser and

understand that there's actually a smaller list of things necessary to ensure the best for our campuses.

I was involved in the launch of a campus where we created a near-direct replica of our first location. While that campus looked amazing, we ended up finding ourselves in a situation where we were losing $10,000 a week at that site because of location and staff costs.

Early on, a multisite church needs to ask **what reasons do our people give their friends about why they should come to the church?** Those items are the things that need to be replicated well in the new location. Outside of that, there should be some flexibility over time concerning features in order to help the church launch new locations.

Failure to Build a Launch System

According to Leadership Network, **57% of all multisite churches don't get beyond two locations. [**ref**]**

We see this interesting statistic frequently. It tells us that churches seem to be stuck at either becoming a two or three-location multisite church. Why is that? No one sets out to launch multisite thinking that they'll only launch one or two. **Typically, we envision half a dozen or maybe 10 locations. However, that's the radical minority.** What are the reasons behind small-scale launches?

- **Churches have not built a system for launching campuses.** // They have empowered a leader to launch the first location only to discover that leader has become enamored with his or her current location and won't move beyond it, demonstrating both an unwillingness to move and to help launch new campuses.

- **The church hasn't documented the first launch process.** // Churches should *always* document that first launch. You want to make it easy to replicate that first successful launch with the goal of launching more campuses more easily over time.

- **Churches often don't analyze the total dynamics of a launch.** // A more complex and costly set-up inhibits the church from launching long-term. Pushing towards a simpler set-up—from staff requirements, start-up and ongoing costs—will allow the church to launch more locations down the road.

Recently, I was visiting with some leaders of a multisite church who are now sitting back and wondering, *why are we doing multisite?* **Your church needs to have a clear reason to go multisite, and that reason can't be "We want to go multisite." Multisite is a tool by which we accomplish our mission; it's not the mission itself.** Too many churches forget why they exist as a church and get caught up in the process of planning instead.

For me, creating additional sites has been an amazing way to help reach people who don't attend church. Our church is trying to create churches that unchurched people love to attend, and this approach gives us the opportunity to do that in new, accessible locations.

You and your team need to come back to your reason for doing multisite. If you can't state clearly why you're doing this work, it will atrophy. **The more locations you develop, the more important it is to ensure that your message is strong and clear.** A vision that's already unclear will only become muddier over time and drag the system down. As your church grows from one location to two or three, the transferring of the vision needs to move from the key leaders to staff and volunteers.

The multisite approach to church leadership is an incredible way to reach more people.

I'm a fan of this movement, and my bias is towards encouraging churches who are growing to explore this approach to church leadership. As this movement matures and enters its second decade of popular understanding, we need to be wary of churches who jump into doing multisite too quickly. I hope that this list of four painful mistakes will help your church avoid some of them as you consider next steps for your community.