

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



5 Warning Signs That Your Church Shouldn't Merge

RICH BIRCH



Is your **church healthy but considering merging** with another church?

Are you a **multisite church that is thinking about helping another church through a merger** and adding a campus at the same time?

Are you part of a **struggling church** that is looking at the potential of merging with another church in your community?

Over the last 10 years, church mergers have heated up and become a palatable topic for discussion, and what was once a taboo subject now seems to be a favorite topic of conversation among church leaders nationwide. A sizable number of multisite churches are considering merging and [one recent study revealed](#) that a third of all multisite church campuses exist because of a merger.

But how do you know if merging is the right next step for your church?

During my own ministry career, I've played a direct role in facilitating two mergers with churches that joined us to become campuses. Each time, the process required the leaders of our ministry team (myself included) and those of the joining churches to undergo an internal transformation. In my own heart, **I had to get to the point where I was willing to do whatever it took to see the incoming church succeed.**

Through the dialogue and conversation of this process, I found myself increasingly seeing the merger as an opportunity for us as a church.

I got to the point where I just loved these people and wanted to see something positive happen. My own conviction led me to realize that the fundamentals of my own church needed to change in order to restore its original passion for reaching the community. Likewise, the leaders of the churches that joined us came to realize that a significant and necessary change on their part needed to take place. **They realized that in order to reach new people, a type of death of their original church was required.**

We often talk about church mergers using rebirth language because it supplies a framework for understanding what a healthy merger could look like, especially since both sides of these merger conversations need to experience a transformation of heart. **There is a palatable sense of resurrection that needs to take place in the life of a church to experience the new life that is on the other side.** We come as lead churches thinking that we want to do whatever it takes to serve, care and love for this community of believers. But because we see that brighter future ahead for our communities as they join together, it requires us to lay down what we've done in the past.

As I think about your church and what it might take for you to engage in a successful merger, there are a few things that came to the surface as warning signs against merging. My desire is that you would be a part of healthy, thriving church mergers. **The two mergers that I was directly involved in resulted in a more than 20 times return on attendance, new life through baptisms, kids in church that hadn't been in**

there in years, and all kinds of other amazing things. But if you're thinking about a merger, I would advise you consider these five warning signs carefully before you step forward into one.

Too Far Away

The greatest success factor in the health of a merger is the lead church's ability to invest a large, healthy volunteer core that is able to breathe new life into the joining church.



Oftentimes when a church has atrophied, the volunteer community has withered as well. If this new campus is too far away from your existing community, it will be difficult for you to inject a renewed sense of vitality into that community. **If the distance between the two communities is too great, you won't be able to ensure that a solid group of volunteers can serve that community well in the days ahead.**

Measure the distance between the two locations and plot your volunteers onto a map to see how many you might have at the new location. **Let the data determine whether you have an existing community that could be a part of the merged campus.**

A Cultural "Misfit"

It all comes down to the culture and vision of the church.

What has God called your church to do? Require these conversations to take place to discover how strongly the joining church aligns with its own mission and vision. If there isn't a fundamental understanding about why the church exists and what its role is in the world, it will set up the post-merger dynamic to drag down the mission of the church.

Your conversations need to be united about what the mission of the church is and then focused on doing whatever it takes to achieve it. From my perspective, the church is the only organization in the world that exists for the people outside its doors, and the conversation needs to stay focused on that.

We would love to merge with other churches that share similar convictions but have just lost their way and don't have a recent history of being able to engage their communities as a result. But if there isn't a deep conviction within that church that they should be doing whatever it takes to reach and serve those in their community, then the merger is going to be difficult.

If you can't achieve strong alignment in the mission and culture of the church, you will face problems.

A Large Financial Debt Load

More often than not, financial troubles become the straw that breaks the camel's back as a church contemplates closing its doors.

Financial problems are common motivations for churches considering merging with another church, and while this is a frequent reality, the lead church needs to think very carefully about the implications of assuming that debt. For example, churches that have struggled with debt for years often defer maintenance on buildings (which may mask significant building issues that could drive into the tens of thousands—or hundreds of thousands—of dollars). Churches that struggle financially often underpay staff, which may have compromised the church's ability to serve with excellence. There may also be reputational issues that the church may not be able to overcome—even with the new brand.

Straight up: if you are assuming debt in the form of a mortgage or other long-term commitments, you need to consider very carefully whether your church can carry that load.

We want to ensure that the financial institutions that are expecting to be repaid actually get repaid so that your church can move forward. **Don't just blow past or ignore**

the financial entanglement that is about to happen with the merger. Evaluate it and consider its full impact on your financial operations.

Mutual State of Decline

There used to be a type of church merger where two struggling churches would pool their resources to try to bounce back and have an influence. This is not a particularly promising idea.

Two organizations that are unclear on how to impact their community, raise the required financial resources, release volunteers, or develop leaders won't get better at those things when they come together.



If your church is looking at joining another church, avoid churches that appear to be in decline. **Combining two churches that are struggling will not somehow magically produce a church that suddenly thrives.** Unless there is a change in the trajectory of where a church is going, then it won't be able to improve at what God has called it to do.

It's Just An Asset Acquisition

If you're a lead church considering mergers and your primary reason for doing so is to acquire assets that could help your church's balance statement, please don't merge with other churches.

There is a high level of hard work that needs to be done to honor the generation that is passing on the asset to your church. If you think of these churches as just buildings that you can slap your brand onto, you are mistaken. **These churches have been in their communities for years, or**

even decades, and you have the privilege of joining with another church in order to see amazing things happen in the community. Of course, there's often an asset transfer in a church merger and that tends to be a positive outcome for your church. However, if that's all it's about for you as a lead church, I would caution you from moving forward.

Similarly, if you're joining church and all you see is a building, you're missing the opportunity to have your people join this new venture and see amazing things happen. **I love seeing church leaders who have joined with the lead churches become reactivated in their leadership and service and re-energized with what God has in store for their community.** Look at this as a positive way to get people more engaged in the mission of Jesus.

More help for you as you think about church mergers

There's no doubt that church mergers are a hot topic, and we want to help you as you look for resources to make these mergers go better. [Click here to download an audio recording and a PDF that will help your leadership team as you think about church mergers.](#) Here's what you'll find:

- **An interview with Kristy Rutter** where she talks through the best practices of being engaged in a church merging process. (Kristy has since passed away after a battle with cancer. She was one of the clearest voices and practitioners in this area and I was honored to interview her about her experiences.)
- **A PDF download from Portable Church Industries.** on what every multisite should know for a merger conversation. This PDF offers some food for thought and acts as a great discussion starter as you and your team wrestle with campus expansion.

Visit unseminary.com for more free resources!

