6 Dirty Secrets About Multisite Churches

THAT (ALMOST) NO-ONE IS TALKING ABOUT

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Is your church considering going multisite? **It would seem like every church leader I talk with is wrestling with this approach on reaching new communities.** Studies have shown that basically every growing church is either already multisite or actively looking into it.

I've been a practitioner of this approach to church since the early 2000s. I can still remember having conversations with Greg Ligon from the Leadership Network many years ago and him telling me about nearly a dozen other churches that were doing something like what we were doing at The Meeting House - launching this dispersed approach to church. **At that time, it seemed crazy to me that there were that many other churches trying out this approach; little did I know that in just over a decade, the multisite revolution would jump to 1,000 churches** and impact the lives of millions of people.

As an unabashed fan of this approach to reaching more people, I do have a confession to make. **There are aspects of being a multisite church that aren't as great on the inside as they look on the outside.** There are some dirty secrets within this movement that I want you to be fully aware of if you are considering launching a new campus. Or maybe you already have a few campuses and something just doesn't feel right.

85% of Multisite Churches Aren't Launching More Than 2 Locations.

Leadership Network has been at the heart of fueling this movement. They've done a number of great studies and books that have been cornerstone to this movement's development. **In fact, in a lot of ways, they deserve the credit for helping codify how this movement understands and talks about itself... a critical aspect of disseminating ideas.** They've done a number of landmark studies into the dynamics of this movement that you should check out. In their most recent study, it was found that 85% of multisite churches don't get 2 locations beyond their original location. The vast majority of multisite churches simply aren't moving beyond 3 locations in totality.

Why?

It could be that the movement is still too young and this number is likely to rise over time. It could be that there is something built into the complexity of 4+ locations that is slowing down the churches' abilities to go there.

Having talked with dozens and dozens of multisite church leaders over the years, **I'm convinced about the problem: most multisite churches launch campuses as opposed to launching a system for launching**

campuses. They think about how they extend themselves into a location or two, but don't put enough creative thought into building a culture and approach that gets the church into the rhythm of launching regularly.

I had the honor of being a part of The Meeting House as this fantastic church launched its first 6 locations. **After launching out the first location we set the audacious goal of launching one campus every year for 5 years!** We had no idea what we were doing when we set that target, but it did impel us to think about building a system for sustainable launches rather than a single location. All these years later, this church has 19 locations and is actively looking to launch more in the future.

Finding Campus Pastors is really (really!) hard.

Over the years, I've had a number of whispered conversations with multisite church leaders at many conferences about this secret. Every once and while I talk with a senior leader on the phone who admits they are really struggling with this fact.

Finding, training, releasing, rewarding and ultimately, retaining campus pastors is an incredibly difficult task.

We've suffered over the years with cute sayings about this role in an attempt to define it. Among the things we led ourselves to believe about what these leaders need to be includes...

- Face with the place...
- A big dawg leader!
- Bleed the vision out one arm and the community with another...

When I think back about the most personally painful aspects of leading within the multisite movement, a lot of it has to do with managing campus pastor relationships. Sometimes we didn't clearly articulate what we were looking for because we didn't know what we needed. Sometimes, the campus pastors convinced themselves about fitting into the scheme of things even as they realized deep down that they really wanted to do something else. The eclectic mix of expectations, ambitions, vision and communication seems to conspire against us to make it really difficult.

Churches often find themselves with the location, the people and the financial resources to make new campuses work, but they can't find the right leader to lead it!

87% of campus pastors come from within the church. [ref]

I wish I had let this fact sink in deeply years ago. All the time, effort, energy and money that we spent on attempting to attract campus pastors from outside should have been spent on identifying, training and releasing people from **within our church** to lead campuses. **Your next campus pastor is already attending your church.** The question is: What is the system you're employing to identify them and raise them up to do justice to that role?

I've seen it first hand; campus pastors who are from "within" have a better "stick" rate than those from elsewhere. It makes sense because they have already bought into the vision of the church. Their notions of what it means to lead within the church have been shaped by the church.

Older Location's Ability to Reach People Slows Over Time

Nothing reaches new people like new campuses. The other side of that coin is that older campuses aren't as effective at reaching people as newer ones. This isn't just my personal opinion; it was backed up by Warren Bird in his study on the dynamics at play within new multisite campuses. [ref]

We often like to celebrate the fact that new campuses reach more people, but until you've lived within the dynamics of an "old" campus and understand its subtle

contours incisively, the conversation takes on a slightly different tenor. (Studies show that "old" campuses are anything over 5 years.)

Some of the impacts of this on a church culture can be:

- "Shiny New Car" Syndrome // Where the church leadership gets fixated on launching new locations, much to the determinant of the older locations.

- Deflated Leaders // People leading in "older" campuses can easily get down on themselves because they aren't seeing the same results over time.

- It's a push // Older campuses have to push more to reach people. Stop using the same "yardstick" to measure the effectiveness of all campuses.

Leaders who are effective during the early days of the launch of a campus are different than those who are effective after a few years.

Churches need to find a way to build growth strategies that take into account the needs of an older campus.

Leaders in older campuses shouldn't shy away from reaching new people. Instead, they should see the natural "slow down" as a challenge to meet and overcome.

The most effective days of new campuses are when they first launch, so your strategy needs to push hard in those early days, months and years to reach as many people as possible. The growth trajectory of the campus is set early on!

The Size and Health of Your Launch Team is THE Key Success Factor

I've been in the middle of the launch of 14 campuses directly and seen a bunch more from the fence as coach. I've seen all kinds of factors that impact the effectiveness of a campus. (Campus pastor, location, time of year, etc.) **By far, the most important factor in the launch of a new campus is the size and health of the core volunteer launch team.** Across all the launches I've seen, this one factor is the best predictor of how the campus will fare over time.

The benefits of a large and healthy team are pervasive...

- More people to invite friends to the church.
- More people to share the volunteer load, which in turn increases the appeal to serve.
- More financial resources to help sustain the campus.

When you are thinking about the target size of the community of volunteers that are needed to launch a new location, try going beyond your comfort zone. **What factors would have to be in place to send 10% of your church to go launch the new location?** What would it take to get 150+ volunteers to make the new location their home?

This dirty secret pushes towards you taking longer in your launch cycle. You need to take longer to work with "late adopters" who aren't initially interested to be involved in the launch. **You can convince a small team of "innovators" to jump to the new location quickly, but you need to slow down to woo less innovative people to be a part of the launch.** The advantage of this approach is that "late adopters" are more likely to stick with the campus in the long haul than "early adopters" any ways.

You don't just need people to attend the new location. You need people who are willing to serve at the new campus. **Your launch process needs to revolve around building up a strong and healthy volunteer core team, and not finding people who will sit on the seats at the new campus.** Build a big enough volunteer team and you won't need to worry about what your attendance will be, because all those volunteers will invite their communities to be a part of your church!

Multisite Will Scale Up Your Problems

Multiplication is at the core of the multisite church movement. It's a way for your church to spread the good things that are happening at your church to new locations. It's a path to see your church implement the lessons you've learned in a new community.

The downside is that your problems will scale up as well.

If your kid's ministry is struggling in one location, it will struggle even more in three locations. Taking a music ministry that is having a hard time developing artists in one location and spreading that problem to multiple locations may not be a great idea. If you have problems aligning your vision with your leaders in one location, the discord will just grow wider as you add new locations. Your financial predicaments in one location won't be solved just by adding new locations.

As the multisite movement enters this next phase, its pervasiveness means that lots of churches that might not be ready to multiply are now beginning to consider it. Even worse, some leaders are seeing this approach as a tool to help kickstart a stuck church. Please don't.

Nail it before you scale it.

Your church needs a modicum of excellence within its ranks before you look to replicate the model. There needs to be signs of health weaving through the ministry across multiple levels. With humility, can your church say that you are doing aspects of your ministry differently from what other churches are doing in the communities you are looking at moving into?

Conditions Will Never Be "Perfect" For Launch

Talk with any of those rare churches that have launched more than 8 locations and they will tell you they never really felt ready to launch new locations. It was always an internal drive to reaching people, something that the church isn't able to do today. It was choosing the future while living with a real reality that the present still needs a lot of work.

Over the years, as we'd come up to the launch of a new campus, leaders within our church would start to hold back our plans on the launch. These caring and intelligent leaders would list internal factors that simply weren't in the spot that they should have been. People could find reasons why this was the year we did not need to launch. **They were right but we launched anyway.** In fact, the resistance to launch ended up becoming the first step in our launch process. It was like that moment when you stand on the end of the diving board and think twice about jumping. You have to go through the second thought as a human before you can jump.

The fact remains that if your church is growing, you need to launch a new campus. 94% of churches are losing ground against the population growth within their communities. [ref] **If your church is growing faster than the community you're currently in, we need your church to multiply what is happening there.** The kingdom needs your church to launch its next campus.

You'll end up facing the fact that things won't be perfect, but you'll need to launch anyway. There will be things that you'll need to work on even as you multiply. **It will feel like building the plane while trying to fly it.** It will require a lot from you and your leaders... but it's worth it. Seeing new people connect with the eternal message of Christ in a new campus is exciting and invigorating in equal measure.

Let's talk about your next campus (or two!)

Yes, I'm biased. Even with all of these "dirty secrets", I think that the multisite church approach is the most effective way to reach more people in today's generation. Is it perfect? Definitely not, but the results

are breathtaking to see and be a part of. From just a handful of churches all those years ago to millions of people attending a multisite campus today, it has been an honor to be a part of this amazing transformational journey.

I have the privilege of being a part of the Exponential Conference again in Orlando in 2018. This conference is the largest gathering of people considering church multiplication in the world. This is something you must attend! Follow this link to see the seminars that I'm going to be presenting. If you will be at this year's conference, I'd love to connect and hear your church's story!

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