



MULTISITE TO OMNICHANNEL:

A MULTIPLICATION STRATEGY FOR YOUR CHURCH POST-PANDEMIC

BY RICH BIRCH



We've all made the digital pivot. Remember those days in mid-March 2020 when every church became an online church?

It's exciting to see that most churches across the country have kept their online ministries. As I talk with church leaders from congregations of varying sizes, **we retell stories of how, through online ministry, our churches have been able to reach new people – people who weren't being reached before.** This has opened new possibilities and opportunities for us to see people connected with Jesus, take steps closer to our community and become devoted followers of Christ.

It's an exciting time to be involved in the local church!

Pre-pandemic, there was a subset of the church already positioned for a post-pandemic world. **Multisite churches are uniquely ready for the challenges that we face in the coming years.** In previous posts, [we've talked about how this would be an ideal time for your church to look at launching a new location. We've discussed how multisite churches have unique opportunities in this reopening season.](#)

As we look beyond the pandemic and figure out where we go from here, there are opportunities for us to transition our churches from exclusively being in-person or online to becoming omnichannel ministries.

Too many churches live in a false dichotomy where there are only two options: either you're online or in-person. When we think about the online world, we may narrow it down to a single channel or a single community. **If you're doing this, you may be missing an incredible opportunity to reach people across a wide spectrum of online communities.**

You're already doing the hard work of producing video content to put online, don't limit yourself to just a single online channel! As your church plans the rest of this year and next, perhaps include transitioning your church to an omnichannel church.

WHAT IS AN OMNICHANNEL CHURCH?

Dave Adamson wrote a [blog post in 2019 predicting the future of the omnichannel church](#). It's worth looking back to those pleasant pre-pandemic days when we would simply consider and surmise theoretical ideas. His article provides a good primer on what we should be thinking about when it comes to becoming an omnichannel church. But in its most basic form, **omnichannel churches are churches that make their ministry available in a wide variety of environments, both online and in-person.**

Oftentimes it is helpful to think about marketplace examples of omnichannel businesses to get an idea of how we might restructure our ministry. **The multisite church movement was built on the cultural underpinnings of franchising that swept through the country between 1950 and 2000.** The omnichannel approach asks: How do we take what we have, our core offerings, and take them to where people are at?

Multisite was (and is) about taking the church to the people. The omnichannel church continues this but in a deeper format both online and in-person.

Here are some marketplace examples that might help you get a clearer picture of what we mean by omnichannel.

■ BANK OF AMERICA

This organization has physical branches across the country, offers a compelling mobile app experience, and has a great web interface. As a customer of Bank of America, you can interact seamlessly with them through any of these three avenues. Banks are not often considered as being on the cutting edge of trends! It's worth noting that this approach to delivering a good customer experience is used by financial institutions worldwide.

■ REI

The adventure retail company has transformed itself into an omnichannel delivery juggernaut. Their channels include a traditional catalog that bridges the gap somewhere between a magazine and a shopping experience. Within each brick-and-mortar shop, they have an in-store kiosk that extends their product availability from the limited amount they can fit in their square footage. Their app not only provides a way for existing customers to engage with them but also invites new customers to live the adventure that REI projects. Then, they have their premium physical locations across the country.

■ STARBUCKS

The ubiquitous coffee purveyor has made a significant push towards moving beyond its traditional brick-and-mortar stores, which we're all very familiar with. Over the last half-decade, they have added coffee that you can buy from a grocery store (previously considered sacrosanct for the brand), they offer home delivery, and they have outlets in airports and many other kiosk locations. Plus, their in-app and web experience are second to none.

What are the lessons that we can take from these omnichannel marketplace organizations? Each of these organizations started with a customer-first orientation and asked the question, “where are the people that we're attempting to reach, and how do we get in front of them?”

Churches need to find where pockets of their community are online and insert their ministry into those locations.

Churches that will impact the communities of tomorrow aren't obsessed with getting people to come to their “boxes”. They will engage people in places they're already gathering – in person and online.

7 CHANNELS YOUR CHURCH SHOULD CONSIDER

At its core, being an omnichannel church is not about us, it's about where our people are.

An omnichannel church does not ask people to come to them. With a missionary mindset, the omnichannel church wants to go to the people.

It's about taking our culture, our teaching, and our community, and providing portals of access to it from a wide variety of locations. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but one that you should be thinking about as you look to the future of the omnichannel church.

■ YOUTUBE

Many churches have already hit on the fact that YouTube is not only the world's second-largest search engine but is also a compelling social network. This powerful combination of both search and social creates an ideal platform for churches to both host on-demand content and stream live experiences. Their chat feature is robust and provides an opportunity to connect with people in real-time.

■ PODCASTS

I know it probably goes without saying, but a podcast is an incredible channel that you need to explore in order to expand your ministry. Podcasting provides a compelling content experience because it can be inserted into people's ears while they're doing other things, like cutting the grass or doing chores around the home. Furthermore, people are increasingly becoming more comfortable with podcasting while they drive. This kind of passive learning experience creates a great opportunity for our churches to help surround people with the message of Jesus wherever they go throughout the week.

■ **ROKU**

Roku is a streaming set-top box that provides both a low-cost and small-form way of connecting with a wide variety of content. If you're not familiar with Roku, this is a technology that has been gaining incredible steam over the past few years. In fact, in a lot of ways, they are at the top of the heap. There's an opportunity here for you to have your content displayed next to other providers like Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon. Multiple churches across the country have already seen great success in using Roku as a delivery device. They use it not only for their core weekend content but as a way to distribute supplementary secondary content, including small group materials and children's programming.

■ **TWITCH**

Twitch is a live video streaming service that primarily focuses on video game live streaming, including many eSports competitions. This service is a subsidiary of Amazon and provides a compelling platform if you're looking to reach a younger demographic (a demographic many churches are trying to reach). A fascinating aspect of Twitch is its evolution over the last couple of years. It was primarily a gaming platform but has evolved by providing a whole series of other “talk radio-style” content for the extremely online, 24-hours a day. This platform provides a compelling horizon for churches attempting to reach new people with the message of Jesus.

■ **FACEBOOK**

Remember when Facebook was new and hip? Of course, many churches are leveraging Facebook to reach new people and help them get connected. Over the last year, Facebook has added multiple features to help churches reach their audiences, most recently including a prayer function within groups that makes it easier for churches to manage prayer requests. You should be leveraging this service if you aren't already.

■ **CLUBHOUSE**

This social audio app (that is either the hottest thing in Silicon Valley or about to die) provides some interesting new community opportunities for your church. Essentially, Clubhouse provides live talk shows where people from the audience can come “on stage” and connect others “in the room”. It offers some fascinating ways to build new audiences and stay connected with people. I've heard of multiple churches using Clubhouse as a place for volunteers, teams, or groups to meet and connect during the week.

■ **OH YEAH, MORE CAMPUSES**

Let's not forget that in the middle of this omnichannel revolution, we should be looking at new physical locations. This could be your pre-pandemic campus expansion plans or new expressions of your church. You may be establishing smaller locations or niche communities, such as senior homes or prisons. This is a great season for you to think about new locations for your church to connect with.

CHALLENGES YOUR CHURCH WILL FACE BECOMING OMNICHANNEL CHURCH

The future of the omnichannel church is filled with lots of opportunities, but at the same time, some challenges will arise.

Each one of these online communities has its own culture, codes of conduct, and approaches. **Like missionaries going into a new community, every time we step into a new channel, we need to think carefully about how we customize our content and experience for that location.** We shouldn't just take a video stream from one location and blast it out to multiples. Ideally, each one of your channels should take a unique approach. This means taking your core content and adapting it to the culture of the community it is uploaded to.

But to do this, you'll need to overcome some challenges:

■ SILOS

So many churches already struggle with siloed ministries. Whether it's in-person or online, kids' ministry, youth ministry, and other ministries act as individual channels. However, they need to work together, not fight against each other. Finding ways to cooperate across the various ministry channels and finding ways to leverage learnings from one to help another will be a challenge as you go forward.

■ KIDS' MINISTRY

Growing churches minister to families. Many online channels don't lend themselves to reaching entire families. We need to think carefully about how we encourage entire families to connect with our ministries and not just focus on netizens.

■ WORKFLOW

You need to find a way to take your existing content and carve it into multiple pieces to be distributed to each of these channels. Surely some of your content will end up on each channel but then some will only be on one or two. We need to develop a new way of "making content" that helps us speak clearly to these various "audiences". Some churches have stepped out and developed some early workflows that we need to look carefully at, but this will continue to be a challenge as we look to the future.

■ BOTH CONTENT AND COMMUNITY

Each of these channels has a unique expression of what content looks like. YouTube videos look different from Facebook videos. Your church's content needs to reflect that. At the same time, however, each channel has a unique community culture, and we need to be careful that what we're presenting reflects the culture of the people we're trying to reach, rather than just a photocopy of what we're doing in other places.

■ TECH CATCH UP

Each one of these channels can present new technology challenges as we attempt to provide a compelling experience via different streams. We must keep on top of how we add these new channels to our offerings: it must be in an efficient and healthy stewardship way.

■ MISSION CONFUSION

One of the weird things about the multisite church movement is that for years we saw churches redefine themselves around the fact that they had multiple sites. Multisite is just a way to accomplish the mission of your church, it's not the mission of your church. In the same way, becoming an omnichannel church is not your mission, it's just a way to accomplish what you believe God's called you to do. Make sure your main goal is kept central and use an omnichannel approach to reach more people.

SOME CHURCHES THAT ARE ALREADY LIVING IN THE OMNICHANNEL FUTURE

We're starting to see viable models of the omnichannel church pop-up. Two churches worth following for insight on an omnichannel approach are:

SANDALS CHURCH | www.sandalschurch.com

This church in California has a multiplicity of locations and has done a lot of work to sort through workflow challenges to deliver their content and community in a wide variety of locations. They've created not only their church online experience but are re-expressing that in a multiplicity of online locations. Each online location feels like Sandals, but at the same time uses the resident culture of the channel that they use.

CROSSROADS CHURCH | www.crossroads.net

Years ago, I remember hearing Senior Pastor Brian joke that Cincinnati is the cultural and technological epicenter of the Western world. I don't know if that's true, but Crossroads is on the front end of a bunch of innovations happening in the local church, including the omnichannel church revolution. Their online services are the best. Their visuals feel like they're from the internet and they're developing a robust community around them. During the pandemic, Crossroads has seen significant growth in their online ministry, and they continue to find new and innovative ways to see new people connect to their community.

Do you know of other churches that are attempting to be omnichannel? I'd love to hear who they are. This is an approach to church that is going to have a profound impact in the coming years.

Like any "new" approach to spreading the message of Jesus, the omnichannel church is simply about wanting to live out Jesus' command to be his witness to the ends of the earth! [\[ref\]](#)