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Publisher's Note by Mark Dever
In my early thirties, I pastored a multi-site congregation, back before they were cool.

It was the early 1990's. I was the associate pastor. We had a thriving congregation in the middle of the city, but our building was full, packed with hundreds of college students. At the same time, we had concentrations of members both in the north and the south of our city. So we came up with an innovative idea. We would have three congregations, but one church.

How did we remain one church? We maintained one name, one budget, one membership role, one set of elders, one evening service, and united members meetings. On Sunday mornings, however, the north and south congregations would meet at 9:30 while the main central congregation would meet at 10:30. This allowed the preacher at either the North or South congregation to preach, and then to sprint across town to the central congregation, arriving just after the singing and in time for the sermon. Whew!

I remember one time when I was leading the service at the central congregation and Don Carson was supposed to preach, but there was this race, see, and…well, it could get interesting.

Are multi-site congregations good ideas? This special extra long, year-in-the-planning issue is meant to help you think through that question. And to help us, we've got professor Gregg Allison and multi-site pastor J. D. Greear explaining and defending multiple congregations as one church. (J. D. is a force of nature, even in print!)

Have we seen multi-site churches before? Good question. So we try to gain some historical perspective with the help of Greg Gilbert, Bobby Jamieson, professor John Hammett, and pastor Jeff Riddle.

Any problems with multi-site? Yes, says multi-site pastor Matt Chandler. But are these problems so bad that we shouldn't do it? No, says the same Matt Chandler. Don't miss Matt's provocative out-loud wondering what evangelical churches may look like in twenty years.

Okay, so go ahead and go multi-site? No, says Southwestern professor Thomas White. The Bible rules it out, says pastor Grant Gaines. Dead Baptists wouldn't approve, says Bobby Jamieson. And Jonathan Leeman, the untiring editor of this journal, raids his own doctoral work on membership to provide the most substantial concerns yet I've seen raised about multi-site congregations. Don't be put off by the length of Jonathan's piece—you want to read it, all of it.

Pray for wisdom in this important conversation between friends.

—Mark "I was a multi-site pastor" Dever

PRESENTING AND ARGUING FOR THE MULTI-SITE CHURCH

IDENTIFYING AND LOCATING THE MULTI-SITE CHURCH

ARGUING AGAINST THE MULTI-SITE CHURCH

Exegetical Critique of Multi-Site: Disassembling the Church?
A pastor-scholar weighs the exegetical arguments in favor of the multi-site church and finds them wanting.
By Grant Gaines **Page 33**

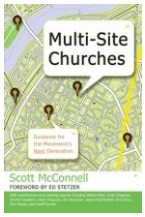
Theological Critique of Multi-Site: What Exactly Is a "Church"?
The local church on earth is constituted by a gathering of Christians, which means the multi-site and multi-service "church" is not a church, but an association of churches?
By Jonathan Leeman **Page 38**

Historical Critique of Multi-Site: Not Over My Dead Body
Regardless of the fact that multi-site churches haven't existed for most of the past four hundred years, historic Congregationalists and Baptists have a lot to say against them.
By Bobby Jamieson **Page 46**

Nine Reasons Why I Don't Like Multi-Site Churches, From a Guy who Should
A young, tech-savvy seminary professor explains why he's not getting on board the multi-site revolution.
By Thomas White **Page 49**

The Alternative to Multi-Site: Why Don't We Plant?
The multi-site church phenomenon looks like a capitulation to consumeristic culture. We should plant instead.
By Jonathan Leeman **Page 52**

MULTI-SITE BOOK REVIEWS



Book Review: *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation*, by Scott McConnell
Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson **Page 55**

MISCELLANEOUS BOOK REVIEWS

AUDIO—*LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS*

Christians and Culture with Ken Myers
Posted on May 1, 2009
Mark Dever asks Ken Myers, host of Mars Hill Audio, about why Christians today are so worldly and yet so obsessed with culture. Does he see any correlation?

College Students and the Local Church
Posted on April 1, 2009
Aaron Messner, college chaplain of Covenant College, discusses the unique challenges
and opportunities churches face in reaching college students.

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Theological Defense of Multi-Site
By Gregg R. Allison

Let me begin with a brief comment on my involvement in the topic of multi-site churches. Through The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I facilitated an independent study course in 2007 on the multi-site church[1] phenomenon at Sojourn Community Church. Sojourn is an emerging and dually aligned (Southern Baptist Convention and Acts 29) church that targets the artistic community in Louisville, Kentucky. Sojourn and its pastoral staff, well led by Daniel Montgomery, are seriously considering developing a multi-site church approach, and this course was designed to read some of the literature, research some of the players, and draw some tentative conclusions.

That course resulted in an earlier draft of this essay, which I originally presented on November 20, 2008, at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Providence, Rhode Island.

In this article, I use the fourfold grid (biblical, theological, historical, and missional) that we used in the course to evaluate what we read and observed. Specifically, I will ask, how strong are the biblical, theological, historical, and missional arguments used by advocates of multi-site churches. I will also offer some thoughts on church government because the multi-site model raises issues related to congregationalism. But I will not take the time here to address the issue of technology, like using videos for preaching, because that's an important topic unto itself (and, frankly, beyond my expertise).[2]

WHAT IS A MULTI-SITE CHURCH?

Because multi-site churches are a relatively new phenomenon, a significant literature has not yet built up around the topic.[3] Therefore, let me begin with some introductory comments. The operative definition of a multi-site church comes from *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*:

> A multi-site church is one church meeting in multiple locations—different rooms on the same campus, different locations in the same region, or in some instances, different cities, states, or nations. A multi-site church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board (MSCR 18).

As this definition indicates, this phenomenon is composed of several varieties of multi-site churches:

> For some churches, having multiple sites involves only a worship service at each location; for others, each location has a full range of support ministries. Some churches use video-cast sermons (recorded or live); others have in-person teaching on-site. Some churches maintain a similar worship atmosphere and style at all their campuses, and others allow or invite variation" (MSCR 18).

Though not an exhaustive list, the following, overlapping models are common among multi-site churches.

Video-Venue Model

With the video-venue model, a church employs videocast sermons (live or recorded) at multiple sites on the same campus, each of which offers distinct worship services. These services may be differentiated by language, music style, or other factors.

For example, the North Melrose campus of the North Coast Church in Vista, California has six sites:

- *North Coast Live*, the "original venue with a full worship band and live teaching in the main auditorium";
- *Video Café*, with "contemporary gospel music, Starbucks coffee, pastries, and message via big screen video";
- *The Edge*, "an edgier atmosphere with big subwoofers and the same message via big screen video;"

- *Country Gospel*, “featuring gospel/bluegrass worship, Starbucks and cookies, with the message via big screen video;”
- *Traditions*, “a mix of classic hymns, old favorites, and contemporary worship; Starbucks and pastries with the message via big screen video;”
- *Canvas*, the “newest venue for artists featuring a full coffee bar and a unique experience” that blends “a portion of the sermon, worship and art” throughout the service.[4]

In 2007, 38 percent of multi-site churches used this approach (LN, 9).

Regional-Campus Model

With the regional-campus model, a church has multiple campuses in a region—like Seattle—each of which replicates the experience of the originating campus. This model is often adopted because of spatial constraints at the originating campus and/or because of the church’s missional commitment to extending the gospel and its ministries to other communities in the geographical area.

This model may be combined with the first model, such that the sermons are videocast from the originating campus; or it can be combined with the third model, such that the sermons are preached by members of the teaching team.

For example, Mars Hill Church meets in six locations in Seattle (Ballard, Bellevue, Downtown Seattle, Lake City, Shoreline, and West Seattle) as well as in Olympia.[5]

In 2007, 62 percent of multi-site churches used this approach (LN, 9).

Teaching-Team Model

With the teaching-team model, a church has a strong teaching team that is responsible for preaching at the multiple sites on the same campus or at other campuses. This model does not employ videocast sermons.

An example of this approach is Community Christian Church in Naperville, Ilinois.[6]

In 2007, 24 percent of multi-site churches used this approach (LN, 9).

Total Number of Multi-site Churches

Though current statistics are hard to obtain, the best estimates place the number of multi-site churches at somewhere in the several thousand range, with predictions that in the next few years, that number could reach a staggering thirty thousand churches (MSCR 11).

Now that the multi-site church phenomenon has been briefly introduced, I will offer my assessment of it according to the four-fold grid.

BIBLICAL ASSESSMENT

As one might expect, some multi-site proponents misuse Scripture to support the multi-site phenomenon. Some examples include:

- *Exodus 18:21-23*. Moses delegates some of his judging responsibilities to others: “You might say that Moses created the first multi-site church” (MSCR 142-143). Then again, you might not say it!
- *Matthew 11:4-5.* Jesus responds to John the Baptist’s question of whether he was the Christ by emphasizing the good things that are heard and seen. Thus, say the advocates, multi-site churches are warranted by the good things they produce (MSCR 94). But just because something “works” doesn’t mean it’s biblically warranted or legitimate.
- *Acts 15*. Proponents maintain that the Antioch church was not seen as a separate body but as an extension of the Jerusalem church; it even functioned under the authority of Peter and the

apostles in Jerusalem. Accordingly, Barnabas became the first campus pastor when he was set to Antioch to lead the new congregation. Moreover, the many new congregations that formed throughout Asia Minor and Europe were all connected to the church of Jerusalem (MSCR 91-92). The basic problem with this argument is that while the first churches did sustain a connection to the Jerusalem Church, they were individual churches with their own leaders, not campuses of the Jerusalem Church.

- *1 Corinthians 9:22*. Paul says that he becomes all things to all people so that by all possible ways he could save some. In keeping with this principle, multi-site proponents claim that their churches have the potential of extending the gospel in dramatic new fashion, which is what Paul's life and model expressed (MSCR 29, 199). But the argument doesn't compare like with like. There's a difference between personal adaption (becoming as a Jew for the Jews) and church adaptation (for example, becoming as an artistic community for the artists). The latter requires a church to adopt a homogeneity principle and thereby abandon the biblical idea that the local church is where social (barbarian, slave, free) and ethnic (Jew, Gentile) divisions dissolve.

Though I promised not to delve into the issue of technology, I will say that some proponents of multi-site churches offer disconcerting interpretations of Scripture on this point. For example, the authors of MSCR argue from Hebrews 4:12 to say that "The power of the Word isn't limited by the medium" (MSCR 93; cf. 165-166), which seems shockingly naïve and utterly besides the point of the passage, to say nothing of the fact that it divorces how God means to use both the life and doctrine of a preacher to save himself and his hearers (see 1 Tim. 4:16).

Also troubling is the understanding of leadership promoted by some multi-site writers. Although Scripture gives explicit requirements for church leaders (e.g. 1 Tim. 3:1-7), the "top five campus-pastor qualities" listed for developing multi-site churches are the following (MSCR 144):

- a leader who completely buys into the church's vision and is loyal to its senior leadership;
- a team player with strong relational skills;
- a team builder who can reproduce vision in others;
- a pastor, someone with a desire and heart to shepherd groups and individuals;
- a flexible entrepreneur.

Substituting biblical qualifications for requirements such as these denies the sufficiency of Scripture and establishes a kind of leadership that fails to reflect biblical standards.

A Better Biblical Case for Multi-Site Churches

I believe a better case can be made for multi-site churches from the biblical data. Certainly, the New Testament emphasis is on the church assembling together.[7] It's mentioned three times in 1 Corinthians 11:17-20:

> But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because *when you come together* it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, *when you come together as a church*, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. *When you come together*, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.

At the same time, the New Testament indicates that the early Christians met together regularly both in large gatherings and in the homes of the more well-to-do members: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). Even in the example cited above from Corinth, the house-churches in that city would come together as the "church of Corinth" to celebrate the Lord's Supper (cf. Rom. 16:5).

These examples may underscore what would have been normative for the early church, as the many multi-site house churches were considered to be part of one citywide church (Elmer Towns, Aubrey Malphurs, MSCR 17). These smaller congregations met regularly in homes (i.e., campuses) as well as all together as a church (i.e., the originating campus).

THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Theological warrant for multi-site churches is often anemic. Some examples of poor theological support or theological framework include the following:

- Some claim that the multi-site phenomenon is "a God thing" (MSCR 21). This claim is linked to results: "Our logic was simple: obviously the way we were already doing church was the right way, all you had to do was look at how God had blessed our church" (MSCR 42). Of course, all this boils down to the claim that God must be favorably supporting everything in this world "that works." Perhaps we're to overlook the prosperity of the wicked?
- MSCR argues that a multi-site church is one that develops "worship communities in multiple locations" (MSCR 28). Assuming for the sake of argument that this is fine, there are many other factors we need to consider in developing and executing a "church." But other than nursery, children's and student programming, and small group ministry (sometimes also missions), these other elements do not receive much attention. Indeed, some churches intentionally do not develop these other elements (e.g., Life Church, Oklahoma City; MSCR 128). This circumscribed ecclesiology raises an important issue: how do multi-site churches such as these engage in evangelism outside of the church, biblical and theological instruction, women's and men's ministries, seniors programming, prayer, counseling, member care, bereavement care, personal mentoring, church discipline, providing material help for those in need, and community care for those within the sphere of the church?

These considerations become particularly important when proponents claim, "Multi-site could eventually change the location people picture when they answer the question, 'What is a church?'" (MSCR 199). This claim is offered without any theological consideration of whether the question "What is a church?" has a right or wrong answer and what Scripture affirms as the answer.

Better Theological Arguments for Multi-Site Churches

I believe a better theological justification can be offered for multi-site churches. Specifically, theological arguments that may better support the multi-site model include the following:

Unity. The New Testament emphasis on love, unity, cooperation, and interdependence certainly addresses the sanctified reality that should characterize churches individually. But I wonder if these virtues should be extended beyond the local church level to address the sanctified reality that should characterize churches together in a particular locale. Examples such as the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) and the raising of money from the churches of Macedonia for the relief of the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8-9) developed on the basis of such love, unity, cooperation, and interdependence.

When we come to multi-site churches, then, are we that far removed from this theological ground? This notion appears among proponents of the multi-site approach. For example, Richard Kaufmann of Harbor Presbyterian Church says, "I think the whole concept of cooperating as churches is a significant theological point in order to demonstrate the unity of the Christian body." Drew Goodmanson of Kaleo Church in San Diego likewise says, "with multi-site strategies you give the city witness to kingdom expression as seen in the unity of multiple sites working together."

This theological emphasis on unity is often cited as a key reason for preferring multiplying campuses rather than multiplying church plants: when a new church is spun off, the mother church and the daughter church quickly move away from each other and stop cooperating.

Paul lists fifteen "works of the flesh" (sin nature) in Galatians 5:19-21, and eight of them focus on disunity and division within the church: "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy." He addresses these sins with dire seriousness: "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (5:21). Because such sin is so entrenched with our churches today, we should pause and ask whether or not multi-site churches better embody these virtues than most independent churches today. After all, the very structure of the multi-site church

explicitly stands against such sins in order to promote the opposite values of love, unity, cooperation, and interdependence.

Pastoral Care. A theological concern often raised in opposition to multi-site churches is the issue of pastoral care: how can multi-site churches provide the pastoral care that is envisioned in Scripture and demanded by churches that take the responsibility to disciple their members seriously? The response from responsible multi-site churches is that the pastoral team at each campus/site is responsible to provide the full range of pastoral care for its campus/site.

For example, at Mars Hill Church in Seattle,

> Each campus must have its own paid staff appropriate for a church its size such as a campus administrator and children's leader, along with some unpaid elders and deacons to administer such things as premarital counseling, small groups, membership. For this to happen each campus must have its own budget that the campus pastor and other elders spend as they see fit, within certain established guidelines for all campuses…." (VC 253).

At the same time, different campuses will share resources with one another. Sharing resources is part of the strong connectionalism envisioned by multi-site churches.

Responsible Church Growth. Finally, the multi-site church structure can aid responsible church growth. Here the issue is not merely numeric growth for the sake of numbers, church prestige, or pastoral notoriety. Rather, what must be considered is growth that comes from God and how a church is to embrace such growth and adapt itself to accommodate it.

John Piper and the elders at Bethlehem Baptist Church wrestled with this issue first by looking at biblical data on growth and then developing a theological conviction. As for biblical input about growth, the Gospels underscore "the public ministry of Jesus to large crowds" (Matt. 14:14, 21; 15:38; Mark 4:1, 6:34; Luke 12:1). Next, the book of Acts "records the amazing growth of the church both in Jerusalem and in Antioch" (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:711:21, 24-26). Furthermore, the New Testament emphasizes that "the gospel is good news to be spread in all places" (2 Thess. 3:1; Acts 9:31; Matt. 29:18-20; Acts 1:8; Luke 14:21-22). In light of the preceding, Piper articulates his theological conviction:

> While growth at Bethlehem creates very real pastoral care and ministry responsibilities, we ought not begrudge the Lord's grace upon us. We have not always grown and probably will not always grow. Let us be thankful to GOD for the growth He is presently giving. Surely we can agree that the spreading of the gospel is good. And that large numbers coming to hear the clear preaching of the word is good. And that a growing number of people meeting GOD in worship is good. Granted the large numbers at Bethlehem demand responsible discipleship and task the elders with a big shepherding task. But we believe this growth we are being granted is good. God is sovereign over our growth. Our responsibility as Elders is to responsibly shepherd and manage the growth the Lord gives. Or to put it another way, the question before us is not a question 'If we are a mega-church' but 'What kind of mega-church are we going to be?' The elders' decision to embark on a multi-site church vision of July of 2002 was a decision to be a different kind of mega-church."[8]

The multi-church structure is a way of managing responsible church growth.

HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT

Little serious work has been done either to establish historical precedent for multi-site churches or to discuss how such precedents are relevant.[9] The case from church history generally consists of appeals to mission stations, Methodist circuit riders, and brand Sunday schools done by bus ministries (MSCR 91). For example:

> Historically, preachers have even traveled between various churches to provide preaching and pastoral leadership. One such example is the Methodist circuit riders, who would travel on horseback to preach at multiple churches. Each of the multiple meeting places had local identity and leadership, with the pastor serving successively in the various sites. Francis Asbury (1745-1816), the founding bishop of American Methodism, traveled more than a quarter of a million miles on foot and horseback, preaching about sixteen thousand sermons as he worked his circuits." (VC 245)

The problem with this historical precedent is that the situation that faced the early Methodists was a lack of trained pastors to preach in all the churches. Such a dearth of pastors is hardly the case in America today, and I have never once found an appeal to such a shortage of personnel as a reason for multi-site churches.

Better Historical Support for Multi-Site Churches

Baptist Statements of Faith. A better historical precedent for multi-site churches, to begin with, can be found in the emphasis on collaboration between congregationally governed churches and their denominations which can be found in historic statements of faith.[10] For example, in 1644, the *First London Confession of Faith*, representing the seven Particular or Calvinistic Baptist churches in that city, was quite explicit about the cooperation that should characterize the churches:

> And although the particular congregations are distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.[11]

This emphasis continued fairly steadily throughout Baptist history and appears in the latest version of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000). Section 14 on cooperation affirms,

> Christ's people should, as occasion requires, organize such associations and conventions as may best secure cooperation for the great objects of the Kingdom of God. Such organizations have no authority over one another or over the churches. They are voluntary and advisory bodies designed to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people in the most effective manner. Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ's Kingdom.[12]

Multi-site churches embody this emphasis on strong connectionalism. Certainly, the documents cited above call for unity between separate churches. But is it not possible to achieve that strong connectionalism more readily through the multi-site approach?

Connectionalism and Cooperation. This element of strong connectionalism among multi-site proponents arises out of an intense longing for cooperation—as strong as it is *for* interdependence as it is *against* the fierce independence and exaggerated autonomy promoted by rugged American individualism in evidence in a growing number of churches today. I have found that multi-site pastors and churches (1) desire deeply to live life and engage in ministry together, (2) repudiate strongly the fierce autonomy that has typified many independent churches in the past, and (3) reject the formalized structures for cooperation between churches (e.g., local ministerial groups, state associations) that currently exist. Too often, they find these networks bureaucratically heavy-handed, ponderously slow and even incapable of offering realistic help, and staffed by incompetent workers. Thus, they expand their ministries through multi-site churches that enjoy a strong connectionalism.

As these pastors and churches develop a vision for expanding their ministries in order to impact more people, a basic dissatisfaction with traditional models of planting churches directs them to search for a different way. They find the concept of multi-site churches attractive.

For instance, one church exists in various locations or campuses, and the pastoral teams of the various sites engage in ministry together by meeting weekly, sharing ministerial resources, encouraging personal accountability, fostering pastoral cooperation through the preparation of sermons together, addressing problems, distributing monies from a shared budget, and the like. They sense that this strong connectionalism is more biblical than the far too prevalent reality of fiercely independent churches competing with one another and denouncing the attempts of other churches to intervene in their local matters, even when such intervention is sorely needed.

Multi-site Baptists in Seventeenth-Century England. Some more concrete precedents for multi-site churches can be found in seventeenth-century British Baptist history.[13] In his Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Ph.D. dissertation, Hugh Wamble writes, "It was normal for a local church to have a scattered constituency and to be composed of several congregations. For convenience or protection, the membership was divided into several parts for worship."[14]

This arrangement was particularly prominent throughout Britain during times of persecution such as the Restoration. In rural areas also, the "conventicles" or small congregations were parts of the originating church. For example, the Ilston church (Wales) of John Miles consisted of widely scattered congregations: Abergavenny, Llanwenarth, Llangibby, Aberavon, Llanddewi, and Llanelly.[15] In many such cases, one pastor would preach at these various sites, engaging in itineration for the conventicles.[16] Occasionally, a number of capable preachers served multiple congregations.[17]

Consideration of these historical precedents may help to dispel the notion that the contemporary multi-site church phenomenon is merely the latest (twentieth- and twenty-first century) fad fueled by business models of franchising and branding, a lust for notoriety, or other insidious reasons.

MISSIONAL ASSESSMENT

Much attention has been placed in recent discussions of ecclesiology on the church as *missional*,[18] or its identification as the body of divinely-called and divinely-sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God (John 20:19-23). Jurgen Moltmann emphasized the importance of understanding "not that the church 'has' a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own church. Mission does not come from the church; it is from mission and in light of mission that the church has to be understood."[19] Accordingly, George Hunsberger underscored the focus and necessity of "a missional ecclesiology—an ecclesiology that sees the fundamental missionary character of the church as critical for its self-understanding in a post-Christian, postmodern setting."[20] This contrasts with missions being seen more as an activity of the church rather than in terms of the church's essential image of itself. *Missional* is a matter of identity first, then function:

> a missional ecclesiology stresses that the church's *very existence* has been sent into the world….the fundamental point is that missions is not peripheral or additional for the church. The fact that is has been sent is of its essential nature, so much so that the sending is implicitly and explicitly formative in all aspects of its life—its worship, its *koinonia*, its engagements, its witness, its birthing of new communities, its sociopolitical engagements, its compassion and mercy.[21]

Moreover, *missional* is a matter of corporate identity first, then individual engagement.

More Evangelistic?

Proponents of multi-site churches make much of the missional nature of the church and appeal to it as a justification for their approach. Some of these appeals are less than convincing. For instance, some claim that "multi-site churches are more evangelistic than those with one site" (MSCR 23), which leads them to conjecture "Multi-site may be the only vehicle big enough to complete the Great Commission" (MSCR 178).

Though empirical data is unavailable, it is probably the case that some multi-site churches are more evangelistic than some churches with one site, and some churches with one site are more evangelistic

than some multi-site churches. Furthermore, I would hazard a guess that the Great Commission will be completed by many vehicles.

More Contextualized?

The multi-site model is envisioned as the latest attempt (following seeker-driven churches, purpose-driven churches, and postmodern churches) to give a contextualized "response to the skyrocketing number of unchurched Americans and the constant need to apply a biblical worldview to current contexts" (MSCR 23).

I concur that the missional nature of the church demands that it engage in contextualization. At the same time, it should be admitted that some contextualization efforts turn out to engage in overcontextualization, thereby significantly weakening or even destroying the church through syncretism.[22] Accordingly, it's just not enough to claim be contextualized. Multi-site churches , like all other churches, must engage in responsible, appropriate contextualization.[23]

More Missional?

The claim is made that multi-site churches are most focused on the mission: "Imagine the power of a church not built around a personality or a facility but instead built around a mission!" (MSCR 200).

Yet multi-site churches are probably as susceptible to "the cult of personality" as one-site churches (whether those churches are large or small) (VC 256-257).

Why Multi-Site Churches Really Are Missional

Missional discussions that may better support the multi-site model include the following:

Reaching the City. Multi-site churches for city reaching may grasp the missional identity of the church better than other churches, because they are designed with the specific missional purpose to reach the city with the gospel as a community. This is often done with sites targeting specific areas or groups within the city.

In a sense, multi-site missionality reverses the trend of taking people out of their missional/relational networks in order to attend the church; it instead establishes campuses at multiple sites so as to affect all the neighborhoods in the city (paraphrase of Darrin Patrick, The Journey). One might say the multi-site church is more locally minded, because it's not forcing everyone in a church into one centralized location.

Growth Is a Blessing, not a Curse. Missionally, growth that is from God is a blessing, not a curse. And a church that is experiencing God-given growth must expand and restructure so as to accommodate this growth and minister effectively to each person coming to Christ and incorporate them into its missional community.

For example, Bethlehem Baptist Church has opted "to create and nurture a radical, risk-taking mindset for 'spreading' by multiplication as opposed to the more comfortable mindset of expansion by centralized enlargement." Accordingly, its "Treasuring Christ Together" vision encompasses multiplying "churches and campuses" and works from this principle:

> If a band of radical disciples of Jesus are able to keep a pilgrim mindset and believe in an expanding vision of the local church, multiplying campuses is a feasible and affordable way to do it under the united banner of spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ (TCT).

Why *Not* Just Plant Churches? People commonly ask multi-site churches why they don't just engage in traditional church planting. Though empirical data is not forthcoming, a number of multi-site churches (like

Bethlehem Baptist Church, noted above) exercise a dual pronged expansion strategy: plant churches and multiply campuses.[24]

Another example of this is Mars Hill in Seattle, which initially tried to manage its staggering growth with church planting through the Acts 29 Network, even being "honored as the second most prolific church planting church in America" (VC 249).

But church planting is especially difficult for several types of churches:

- churches in which many new people are coming to faith in Christ, since it's not possible to send them away to another—even daughter—church;
- churches in which the church planters have targeted areas far beyond the reach of the mother church, because the presence of these daughter churches cannot relieve the pressure of the growth of the mother church;
- and churches whose plants are still relatively immature and incapable of attracting and/or handling growth from the mother church.

Other factors influencing some churches to move toward multi-sites rather than doing church planting include the following:

- Traditional church planting efforts are generally thirty percent more costly than multi-site growing. \
- The multi-site approach generates more opportunities for people to serve at the various sites. \
- This approach encourages each campus to be faithfully contextualized in one particular place, then expand specifically in other neighborhoods. This missional emphasis is often accompanied by a warning against homogenized churches with generic DNA. Much to be preferred are homogenized churches with specific DNA—targeting a specific culture—or diversified churches (multicultural churches).

In 2007, 12% of multi-site churches spun off sites to become independent churches (LN 11). In actuality, then, this approach may contribute to church planting in the long run.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT ASSESSMENT

Episcopal or Presbyterian

I am not sure how multi-site churches would be governed in a "high" (e.g., Anglican) episcopal system, and I could not find any examples of multi-site churches in this system. In a "low" (e.g., Methodist) episcopal system, the lead pastor does not become the "bishop" over the various campuses; rather, the one church with multiple sites functions like a single site church under the regional bishop.

As for multi-site churches in a presbyterian system, the elders of the various sites constitute the one session of the church. When a site develops its own session, then it becomes independent of the other sites.

Congregational

Some multi-site churches do not have any structures above the local church level that exercise authority over the campuses. These would be considered legitimate multi-site congregational churches. In this congregational model of multi-site churches, each campus has its own leadership team (both campus elders and campus deacons) that is responsible for the oversight and full-orbed ministry at that site. In addition, the elders from all the sites meet together regularly as a "council of elders" to share resources, cooperate for high impact ministry, pray together, assist one another in identifying and resolving intrachurch problems, prepare sermons together (in a teaching team model), promote mutual accountability, and the like. "The power and synergy of an interconnected network of churches held together through vision and values is far more greater (sic) than the segmentation and disconnectedness of our present system" (MSCR 7).

TWO FINAL MODELS

To conclude, I offer two models of multi-site congregational churches:

Model #1: Traditional Southern Baptist Multi-Site Church

Model one is a traditional Southern Baptist church—Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. It is one church with six locations. Its governmental structure has one senior pastor (Kevin Ezell), a group of pastors (composed of the lead pastor from each of the other campuses), one deacon body (composed of representatives from all of the campuses), several committees (finance, personnel, grounds, nominations; each committee is composed of representatives from all of the campuses), one budget, and one congregation that engages in accepting new members, excommunicating sinful members through church discipline, voting on official business, etc.

This one congregation meets together quarterly for Sunday Night Celebrations that include worship, baptisms, the Lord's Supper, business meeting, and so forth. The pastoral team meets together weekly for sermon preparation, site updates, mutual accountability, prayer, and more. There are also weekly ministry meetings for the pastors leading (at all of the campuses) children's ministries, student ministries, adult ministries, and worship.

Model #2: Elder-led, Deacon- and Deaconess-served, Congregational Multi-site Church for City Reaching

This second model would constitute my own proposal. Under the sovereign direction of Jesus Christ, its head, the church is led by a plurality of elders. This council is composed of the elders from the various sites. As a team, they are responsible for teaching, leading, praying, and shepherding the church, which exists in multiple locations. Some of these elders may be paid while others are not. Some may preach and teach at the various campuses while others have a specific campus assignment. But all shoulder together the leadership for the entire church in the areas designated as their responsibilities. Coming together regularly, the elders support one another in prayer, share ministerial resources, encourage personal accountability, prepare sermons together, address intrachurch problems, distribute monies from a shared budget, and the like.

The church is served by both male and female servants, or deacons and deaconesses. Whereas the office of eldership is dedicated to the work of teaching, leading, praying, and shepherding, the deaconate is devoted to serving in all other areas of the church. These areas may include men's and women's ministries, youth and children's ministries, worship ministries, sports and fine arts ministries, bereavement and mercy ministries, evangelism and mission ministries, and many more. Deacons and deaconesses are campus-specific; that is, they engage in their ministries at particular sites and not system-wide.

As a congregational church, it is elder led, not elder ruled: the elders work with authority in their sphere of responsibilities (noted above), and the congregation—which exists at multiple sites—works with authority in its sphere of responsibilities, which includes confirming the elders, receiving new members, excommunicating sinful members through church discipline, affirming the budget, approving any major changes to the constitution and the philosophy of ministry, and doing whatever else is designated as their responsibilities. Regular congregational meetings, which bring together all the members from the various campuses, exhibit and foster unity among members, display and promote strong connectionalism between the various sites, provide opportunities for members to discharge their congregational responsibilities, model the pattern of the early churches, and so forth.

The church exists in multiple locations for the purpose of city reaching. Accordingly, there is a geographical limitation placed on the multi-site church, which is the city the church is attempting to reach with the gospel and its ministries. Its strong sense of missional identity translates into the church as a whole reaching out to the city's residents, including adding other sites to expand the church's reach into heretofore outlying areas of the city.

Though much more study is required, I am hopeful that this model (or several models) of multi-site churches can pass muster according to the fourfold evaluative grid of biblical, theological, historical, and missional (as well as governmental) matters.

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[1] The adjective "multi-site" is just one among many adjectives that have been attached to the noun "church" in recent publications on the church. These adjectives include: "emerging," "simple," "perennial," "spin-off," "aqua," "blogging," "missional," "externally focused," "irresistible influence," "healthy," and "total." Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005); Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2006); Robert D. Dale, *Cultivating Perennial Churches: Your Guide to Long-Term Growth* (Danvers, MA: Chalice, 2008); Rodney Harrison, Tom Cheyney, and Don Overstreet, *Spin-Off Churches: How One Church Successfully Plants Another* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008); Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch 2.0: Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Colorado Spring, CO: David C. Cook, 2008); Brian Bailey and Terry Storch, *The Blogging Church: Shaping the Story of Your Church through Blogs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007); Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006); Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004); Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001); Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

[2] Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009) has an entire chapter (ch. 11) devoted to the issue of technology.

[3] The following are the resources consulted for this article: Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) (MSCR); Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009) (VC); Stephen Shields, "2007 Survey of 1,000 Multi-Site Churches: Latest Insights on a Growing Movement" (Leadership Network) (LN); Dave Ferguson, "The Multi-Site Church," *Leadership Journal* (spring 2003): 81-84; Eric Reed, "Let's Go to the Tape," *Leadership Journal* (spring 2003): 76-80; Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church: How Today's Leaders Can Learn, Discern, and Move into the Future* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), ch. 3, "Multi-Site Churches"; an unpublished paper by Jeffrey T. Riddle entitled "A Theological Critique of Multi-Site Ministry," presented November, 2006, at the ETS national meeting in Washington, D.C; an unpublished paper by Thomas White entitled "The Dangers of the Multi-Site Church Movement," presented November, 2007, at the ETS national meeting in San Diego, CA; "Treasuring Christ Together: A Vision for Church Planting and Campus Multiplication, Bethlehem Baptist Church 2004-2014" (April 21, 2004) (TCT); and "Multi-Site Vision: Assessment and Recommendations," Bethlehem Baptist Church (April 15, 2003) (MSV), both available at desiringgod.org; interviews with multi-site church pastors: Jimmy Scroggins (at the time with Highview Baptist Church, Louisville, KY), Richard Kaufmann and Doug Swaggerty (of Harbor Presbyterian Church, San Diego, CA), Drew Goodmanson (of Kaleo, San Diego, CA); and Darrin Patrick (of The Journey, St. Louis, MO). I did not have access to a pre-publication copy of Scott McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches: Guiding Principles for the Next Generation* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2009).

[4] Accessible at www.northcoastchurch.com/north_coast_melrose.

[5] Accessible at www.marshillchurch.org. The Olympia campus has a different and independent history from the other six campuses.

[6] Accessible at www.communitychristian.org. Two other multi-site models are often presented: the partnership model and the low-risk model. Because these approaches generally involve the use of locations or facilities in which the experience of the originating church is replicated much like one of the three main approaches, I will not treat them separately. A third model seems to be catching on: the "preacher-less church," which is "an independent congregation that uses recorded sermons from another ministry, while providing its own worship, leadership, programming, and governance." (Eric Reed, "Let's Go to the Tape," 80). An example of this model is Heartland Community Church in Rockford, IL, which uses videos of Bill Hybels for its sermons. Because this model fails to implement one of the responsibilities of pastors in the church (preaching), I will not give it serious treatment.

[7] This point is underscored in Everett Ferguson, "When You Come Together": *Epi To Auto* in Early Christian Literature," *Presbyterian Quarterly* 16 (1973): 202-208.

[8] "Multi-Site Vision: Assessment and Recommendations," Bethlehem Baptist Church (April 15, 2003), 2-4.

[9] Although see John Hammett's assessment of the historical precedents for multi-site churches in the present eJournal, available here (link).

[10] Because I am most familiar with them, the examples I note will be of Baptist churches, but these examples could be extended to other types of churches and denominations.

[11] William L. Lumpkin, "London Confession, 1644," in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969), 168-169. I have rendered the text in Lumpkin more clear for today's readers. As another example, the *Second London Confession of Faith* (1677/1688), closely following the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) in general and the *Savoy Declaration* (1658) in particular on the doctrine of the church, affirmed:

> Saints are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities: which communion, though especially to be exercised by them in the relations wherein they stand, whether in families or churches, yet as God offers opportunity, is to be extended to all the household of faith, even all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus; nevertheless their communion one with another as saints does not take away or infringe the title or propriety, which each man has in his goods and possessions.

William L. Lumpkin, "Second London Confession," in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969), 289-290. I have rendered the text in Lumpkin more clear for today's readers.

[12] *Baptist Faith and Message*, section 14. An outstanding example of such cooperation between Southern Baptist churches is the Cooperative Program (CP). Individual church members give to their local church, which decides what percentage of undesignated contributions goes to the CP. The church forwards these funds to its state Baptist convention, which in turns decides what percentage of CP funds will stay in the state for local evangelism and missions endeavors and what percentage will go to the Southern Baptist Convention for support of national and international ministries. The SBC distributes these funds among its International Mission Board, six seminaries, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, GuideStone Financial Resources, the Historical Library and Archives, and the Southern Baptist Foundation. CP giving is currently well over $500 million.

[13] Hugh Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship,: The Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 1955), 255-73; Walter B. Shurden, "Associationalism among Baptists in America, 1707-1814" (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967), 1-58. My thanks to Chad Brand for pointing out these references.

[14] Wamble, 255-256.

[15] Wamble, 256.

[16] Wamble, 192-204.

[17] Wamble, 261.

[18] The following section is taken from my forthcoming book on ecclesiology: Gregg R. Allison, *The Assembly of "The Way:" The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming).

[19] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 10. He adds: "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil [sic] to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way." Ibid., 64.

[20] George Hunsberger, "Evangelical Conversion Toward a Missional Ecclesiology," in John Stackhouse, ed., *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 105.

[21] Ibid., 110.

[22] For more discussion of overcontextualization (and undercontextualization), see Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 198.

[23] The missiological literature on contextualization is extensive; some is more helpful than others. For a thorough discussion of the history and practice of contextualization, see Charles H. Kraft, ed., *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005).

[24] After embracing a multi-site vision, the leadership of Bethlehem Baptist Church underscored that this move "should not be viewed as a step in opposition to church planting. We are strongly committed to planting new churches. However, we have come to believe that church planting alone will not adequately solve the lack of space and insufficient seating problems of the downtown site.…So while we are committed to planting churches we believe we also must develop strategies to manage our growth in ways that keep us true to our God-given mission" (MSV, 1).

May/June 2009

A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church
By J. D. Greear

In 2005 our congregation moved to a multi-site strategy for spatial necessity. God was graciously bringing to our doors more people than we could handle. We were doing as many morning services as we could in our rented school facility, and were having to turn people away. So we opened another campus 3 miles down the road, where I preached between our other services at the main campus.

Since that time, we have concluded that the multi-site model for the church is both biblically sound and practically helpful, and we have embraced multi-site as a strategy for growing our church and reaching our city, not merely as a temporary way to deal with a space problem. We currently are a church of about 3500 attenders, meeting on 4 campuses throughout Raleigh-Durham, NC. We plan to add two new sites in the fall of 2009.

We believe that at the core of our mission as a church is the commission to seek and save the lost in our city, and we believe that the presence of a local body of believers is the greatest evangelistic tool for any community. We are also a church who believes that faithful ecclesiology must trump pragmatism. We have concluded that the multi-site strategy is the best way for us to both reach our community *and* practice faithful ecclesiology. We also believe that planting churches in strategic cities around the world is the New Testament's most effective evangelistic strategy, so our vision is to plant 1000 churches in RDU and around the world, in the next 40 years.

Let me first acknowledge that I readily agree with many criticisms of many multi-site churches. Many multi-site environments encourage consumerism, foster anonymity, are built on a cult of personality, and depend more on man's wisdom than God's wisdom. That said, here is why we enthusiastically embrace the multi-site strategy as biblically sound, practically wise, and pastorally helpful.

I. Why the Summit Church believes the multi-site model is biblically sound

A. The essence of a local church is a covenant, not a manner of assembly

Some argue that since a local church is by definition an *assembly*, a multi-site strategy fundamentally skews the nature of a local church. The essence of a New Testament local church, however, is not "assembly" but "covenant body." If the local church is essentially an assembly, then it only exists when it assembles and only when all the members are present. "Assembly" is a much-needed function, but "covenant" is the essence.

The New Testament nowhere demands that a local church meet all together each week. Nor is a single-service assembly the only model given in Acts. While it is certainly true that we see evidences of local churches assembling all together (1 Corinthians 11), we also see evidence of single local churches which met in multiple locations. The new congregation in Jerusalem is frequently referred to in the singular, one "church" (Acts 8:1; 11:22; 15:4). However, they obviously had to meet in different times and locations. Historians tell us there was no space in Jerusalem available to the disciples in which three thousand or more people could have met on a weekly basis. It also appears that many first-century house churches came together to celebrate the Lord's supper as one citywide church (see 1 Cor 11:17–20; Romans 16:5).

Quite simply, the New Testament neither demands nor uniformly models that all members of one local church are to assemble weekly in the same place.

B. The New Testament gives guidelines, but not specific details, on how to best organize a congregation for pastoral care and effective ministry

John Piper has written, "Neither here [in Acts 2] nor elsewhere in the New Testament do we get detailed instructions on how to organize the church for pastoral care and worship and teaching and mobilization

for ministry. There were elders in the churches (they show up very soon in the Jerusalem church) and there were deacons, and there were goals of teaching and caring and maturing and praying and evangelizing and missions. But as far as details of how to structure the church in a city or in an area or even one local church with several thousand saints – there are very few particulars."

C. The Apostles used the technology available to them to preach *in absentia*

It is clear in Acts 2 to 8 that all eight thousand (some historians estimate that the actual size at the end of Acts 3 would have been about ten thousand) were not gathering weekly in one place to hear one teaching pastor give a message. Perhaps the Apostles were a teaching team who rotated between the houses. Perhaps groups of the church gathered with particular apostles in small assembly places (campuses). Yet they were one church.

We know that many of Paul's letters were intended to be circulated for reading throughout the churches. If Paul could have cut a DVD from the Philippian jail and passed that around, I can't see why he wouldn't have done so. I know that some might respond, "Well, yeah, but Paul's letters were the inspired Bible. He was an Apostle. That's why his letters could be passed around." We know, however, that there were several of Paul's letters passed around that were not "inspired," such as the middle Corinthian letter.

If the technology was available, don't you think Peter might have burned a DVD of himself and sent that around? If they could have simulcast John's recounting of his last meeting with Christ, don't you think they would have done it? Is there anything that says that we must be able to see the actual flesh and blood of the preacher? Those who say that video removes the "flesh and blood, incarnational" nature of gospel preaching would also have to question the use of voice amplification. If it is argued that video removes the incarnational nature of preaching, a similar argument could be made that God did not intend churches to ever be bigger than what would allow an unamplified voice to be heard by all, because in so doing it would remove the touchability of the pastor. Obviously, such questions go beyond a responsible interpretation of Scripture.

This is not to say that all technology is allowable or helpful, because sometimes the medium affects the way people perceive the message. No doubt, deciding what to do with technology that was unavailable in biblical times is a difficult subject, and we must be both open-minded and cautious in appropriating it for our purposes.

II. Why the Summit Church believes the multi-site strategy can be practically wise

A. A multi-site model is an acceptable, if not better, alternative to addressing a church's growth by building bigger buildings, multiplying services, or planting new churches.

Assuming that a growing local church decides not to turn people away when its facility is "full," it faces three options to accommodate growth: build bigger buildings, multiply services, or plant new churches. Simply turning people away, obviously, is a terrible and unbiblical option. The Apostles did not turn away the 5000 new believers in Acts 2, even when they surely were overwhelmed with the problems these new believers posed. As John Piper said of his own church, "The question is no longer whether we'll be a megachurch, but what kind of megachurch we will be."

- **The multi-site strategy is a more financially responsible response to growth than building a huge building.**

Buildings are expensive. Large buildings are enormously expensive. They are also inefficient uses of space. Large auditoriums (that seat several thousand people) are difficult to use for any other purpose than one weekly assembly of the entire church body.

The multi-site model allows churches to save much of the money usually spent on a building. Venues in which smaller congregations can meet are much more plentiful and can be rented on a Sunday or, if owned, can be used throughout the week for other purposes.

Jim Tomberlein, who has written a great deal on the multi-site movement, notes that a multi-site strategy is usually a zero-sum game, financially speaking. Most campuses will make up the money spent on startup costs within the first year.

- **In many cases, it will be more effective to add new venues in new locations than it will to multiply services at any one location.**

The church might decide to multiply services, but you quickly reach a limit of how many any one location or teaching pastor can handle. Also, as will be discussed below, having people drive more than 20 minutes to get to their assembly place can hinder evangelism and local community ministry.

- **In most cases, church planting will not effectively solve the space issues of a congregation.**

Some say that when a church reaches capacity it should just plant a new church. This is certainly a good option, and one we are pursuing concurrent with our campus-multiplying strategy. However, most studies show that church planting will not itself alleviate space needs of a local church. Many churches have found that even when they convinced 200 of their people to go and start a new church (an extraordinarily difficult feat, I might add!), they ended up making up that growth in the original congregation within a few months. In other words, even if you plant 10 churches out of your church in 10 years, chances are that you will still be dealing with space problems each year.

Furthermore, finding the people *willing* to leave their church to plant a new one as well as the leader who can do it are both difficult! Yes, they should be willing to leave. But there is a gap between what people should do and what they will do, especially in churches that are growing rapidly and filled with young and immature believers.

Church planting is a wonderful and effective evangelism strategy and should thus be pursued aggressively by every local church, but church planting will not provide a solution for a church's space issues. So, by all means, plant churches, but in order to steward the people God is bringing to the original campus, you'll need a different solution!

Multiplying campuses is not an alternative to church planting; it is an alternative to multiplying services, building a larger building, or turning people away. Furthermore, not only does multiplying campuses not replace church planting, it facilitates it.

B. The multi-site strategy facilitates church planting

The multi-site strategy does not preclude church planting. Rather, it fosters it! Not every church planter is equipped to be a senior teaching pastor. Campus pastors need to be men who are gifted leaders and good communicators, but not necessarily preachers. Many guys who are great leaders and pastors do not enjoy doing what I do each week, spending 20+ hours preparing messages and deciphering vision. As campus pastors they exercise leadership within their gifts in a way that they could not as church planters. Many of those not gifted to be the senior leader or primary teaching pastor would still make ideal campus pastors.

As you plant new campuses, you will notice some who begin to demonstrate the gift set to lead independent churches. This seems to be how the Jerusalem church operated. They noticed leaders emerging in the ministry who had the capacity to plant churches and they sent them out.

Finally, it has been our experience that multiple campuses provide a leadership pipeline for developing church planters. It provides a place to hone the skills necessary for teaching and leadership. The multi-site strategy is integral to our church planting strategy.

Thus, we have found that the multi-site strategy does not in any way eclipse church planting. In fact, it provides an opportunity to determine who has the right gift set to plant and pastor. As it stands now, new churches fail more than half the time. Wouldn't it be helpful to have an in-between stage in which leadership abilities can be tested?

C. The closer a congregation meets to where the people it is trying to reach live, the more effective can be its evangelism and community outreach.

Being closer to where the people live helps you engage them, invite them to your services, and perceive the needs of the local community. Our desire is for everyone in our community (the Triangle) to be no more than 15 minutes from a thriving evangelical church or a Summit congregation. We tell people, "Stay where you are; serve where you live; be the church in your local community."

D. The multi-site church is better suited for the post-pastor succession.

It is rare, in every generation, for one pastor to be able to hold the attention of several thousand people each Sunday. Many churches with one of those pastors built an auditorium to hold the audience, but for whatever reason the successor did not have the same ability. While grateful that the church attempted to be a steward of those God was bringing to them, how depressing it is to walk into one of those huge, nearly empty sanctuaries on a Sunday now!

If our church has ten thousand attenders, we believe that it would be better to have ten campuses of one thousand, who identify with ten campus pastors, rather than one campus of ten thousand who identify only with the one. If the lead pastor passes on, it is easier to find ten pastors to lead one thousand than one who can continue to lead the ten thousand. The many empty, depressing monuments now polluting the American landscape are evidence of that.

III. How the Summit Church believes a multi-site strategy can be pastorally helpful

A. The multi-site model allows us to enjoy the pastoral benefits afforded by both a large and small congregation.

It is undeniable that large churches face pastoral issues. (It should be noted, however, that a landmark study done by Rodney Stark in 2007 showed that megachurches had more intimacy and better pastoral care than smaller churches.)[1] That said, it is easier for people to slip in and out of a large congregation unnoticed. That is why we believe that the multi-site model is the best way for us to address the pastoral needs of our congregation.

One of the primary criticisms of a multi-site church is that you create disparate groups of people who will never know each other—perhaps never see each other! Realistically speaking, however, this happens also at any multi-service church. For that matter, it happens at any church above two hundred! The hardest ecclesiological shift for me was not in going to multiple campuses, but in growing larger than four hundred members! At that point I realized that I couldn't know every member in a meaningful way and they wouldn't all know each other, either. Large churches of all types have members who do not know each other, and not every pastor knows every member.

However, of large churches, perhaps the multi-site church most effectively addresses that problem. Since the venues are smaller, it is easier for campus pastors and elder representatives to keep up with those that come. In other words, smaller venues reduce anonymity. It is easier for our members to be known by a pastor, be under the care and governance of our church elders, and served by campus deacons at a smaller campus rather than a large one.

At the same time, the multi-site model allows its members the advantages of a larger church. Churches often grow large because many people find the gifts of one pastor-teacher edifying, and the multi-site model allows for the stewardship of that gift. Larger churches are able to offer many ministries that

smaller churches cannot. Large churches can often put more weight behind their ministries. John Piper writes: "Worship in larger gatherings with other believers whom we don't know personally can be powerful (the way a whole battalion gathered before battle to hear the commander's challenge is powerful even though the soldiers don't all know each other)."[2]

B. The multi-site strategy is an excellent way for a large church to develop and maximize the use of leadership.

I've often heard this response to the multi-site model: "Why build the church so much around you? Do you really think there are no other good preachers in Raleigh-Durham? Why not develop other leaders and teachers?"

We have found that a multi-site church is better at developing leaders than a single-location large church. My wife remarked to me the other day, "Have you ever noticed that some of your favorite staff members are the ones you no longer see each Sunday?" They are serving at one of 3 campuses I don't usually get to on Sunday. These were guys I raised up, trained, and depended on. Now, as campus pastors, they have the opportunity to lead in ways they didn't when we were all at one place. And, in their wake, new leaders have emerged at the original campus.

We have more and better leaders as a multi-site church than we did as a single-campus church.

C. The multi-site strategy can help protect against a cult of personality.

I've often heard, "The multi-site movement fosters a cult of personality by tying everyone to one mega-teacher." Leader-worship is certainly a danger in large churches, and unfortunately many large church leaders seem all too willing to foster it.

However, the cult of personality can exist as much in a small, single-campus church—in fact, sometimes moreso! When I pastored a small church, my congregation seemed to think that my presence was necessary for everything of spiritual significance. I had to marry and bury everyone, and my people wanted me to resolve every problem and answer every question. I tried to teach them otherwise, but their natural tendency was to be much more dependent on me than they are now that we are a multi-site church! Summit Church members are now exposed, weekly, to many other Spirit-filled pastors in our church to whom they can look for leadership and ministry.

IV. What the Summit Church is still wrestling with regarding the multi-site strategy

- Does the "one body" ever need to assemble all together in one place? If so, how often?
- What is the best way to organize budgeting and staff structures so that each campus has freedom to organize its ministries effectively while at the same time ensuring that each campus retains the DNA of the whole church?
- How do we best do membership and discipline in the multi-site model?
- How can congregations vote on issues when people live too far from one another to be able to congregate often?
- How far is too far when planting a new campus? Can one 'local church' have campuses all across the world?
- If people rotate which campuses they attend, will that make it difficult for elders and other leaders effectively to watch over them?
- How will we know when a campus would function better as an independent church?

V. Conclusion

The multi-site model is messy. As with all large churches, it is easier for important things (like people!) to fall through the cracks in multi-site churches than it is in a single-campus, smaller church. Growth from evangelism always invites chaos and disorder into the church. But it is a wonderful and welcome problem. My wife and I sometimes rue the loss of the neatly-packaged, clean, simple life we had before kids. We lived without the worry, fear, chaos, frustration, and dirty diapers that dominate our lives now from dawn to dusk. But we wouldn't trade it for the world! It is the same with our church. Growth creates problems, however you facilitate it. The multi-site model is messy. But our church will gladly deal with the headaches of the multi-site model if it means reaching more people for Jesus.

We must live with the holy tension of taking care of our local church body and constantly bringing new, immature sinners loaded with problems into our midst. The elders of the Summit Church believe that the best way for us to do both is to adopt an aggressive multi-site strategy. The multi-site approach, in our judgment, best allows us to be effective in evangelism, pastorally responsible over our members, and to develop leaders and church planters.

It is our prayer that in the next 40 years God will allow us to put campuses within 15 minutes of everyone in Raleigh-Durham (with some rare but notable exceptions in places where a Summit campus might hinder the work of another local church), as well as 1000 churches planted in cities around the world. For us, the argument comes down not on whether you do multi-site but how it is done. Our responsibility is to do it in a way that is biblical and God-honoring.

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[1] Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe* (2007), 49
[2] "Treasuring Christ Together," Part 2: *Lessons in Love from 1 John* by John Piper, September 14, 2003.

May/June 2009

What is This Thing, anyway? A Multi-Site Taxonomy
By Greg Gilbert

Congregational? Presbyterian? Episcopalian? Presbygational? Conbypalian? Epigregyterian? I've heard them all (even made up a few myself).

"It's just as congregational as any other church," some argue. "We have a meeting of the whole church every quarter."

"No, it's Presbyterian" others say. "You have a group of pastors that makes decisions for multiple congregations."

And then the nuke: "One church in multiple locations? Looks to me like exactly how the papacy got started."

Before we set out, I should make two really massive qualifications that may make the editor scrap this article altogether on charges of First Degree Uselessness. First, it would be impossible to say anything accurate or helpful about "The Polity of Multi-Site Churches." That's much too broad a category unless you're going to write a book. There are simply too many mutli-site churches with too many different models of church government. Because of that, I think the best approach will be simply to take a look at the model of one church with which I'm somewhat familiar. That word "somewhat" is the second qualification. Apart from the one-off visit now and then, I've never attended a multi-site church. I just have friends who do, and I've talked to them and asked them some questions.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, based on a few conversations and nary a shred of first-hand experience, I'm boldly going public with some thoughts about their church's polity! How's that for brazen? So to those friends I've talked with about this article, thanks for answering my questions and letting me pick your brain. I hope I'm being fair with my characterizations here, and I'll be genuinely glad to issue corrections or retractions about this article wherever you think it necessary.

* * *

One thing we must understand from the very beginning of a discussion like this is that not every multi-site church is interested in the least in calling itself congregational. Indeed most multi-sites, I would guess, are quite happy to wind up looking almost entirely Episcopalian in their structure—a strong senior pastor with unquestioned decision-making authority over several different campuses. Others look more Presbyterian, with a group of campus pastors who meet together and make decisions about the direction of the church as a whole. There are other multi-sites, however, that very much intend to remain congregational and elder-led, rather than elder-ruled. Those are the ones that are most interesting to me, not least because congregationalism is one of the frequent topics of conversation here at 9Marks.

When it comes to these congregational multi-site churches, I think my conclusion is that charges that they are "nothing but retread Presbyterianism" or "nothing but Romanism redux" are inaccurate. There is something distinctly congregational about the way these churches conduct themselves. But I also think that it's not accurate to say that these churches are simply congregational, either. While there are distinctly congregational elements in their structure, there are also elements, I think, that are distinctly *not* congregational. Indeed there are elements that look very much to me like other forms of church government. Let me approach all this by asking three questions.

First, What's Congregational About It?

Quite a lot, actually. There are several elements in the structure of these churches that are distinctly congregational. First, congregational multi-site churches hold a whole-congregation meeting several times during the year. Sometimes it's an annual meeting, sometimes semi-annual, sometimes quarterly or even more often. That never happens in an Episcopalian or Presbyterian polity. The members of the

ECUSA or the PCA or the Roman Catholic Church are never invited to meet together with any decision-making authority. That's significant.

It's also significant that when the whole membership of a multi-site church meets together in its regular meeting, they have considerable decision-making authority. They call the senior pastor, fire the senior pastor, call the various campus pastors, exercise church discipline, vote on membership, and even celebrate the ordinances together. That is unlike anything in Presbyterian or Episcopalian forms of government.

On the other hand, it seems to me that multi-site advocates really ought to admit that the way they define "congregational meeting" is different from the way congregationalists have traditionally defined "congregational meeting." I realize that this is where the brunt of the argument lies. But even if there are instances of "church" being used for an entire region in the New Testament, and even if there are circuit-riders here and traveling pulpiteers there in history (neither of which points do I intend to argue here), can we not agree that a "congregational meeting" has most often referred to a meeting of a single community of believers, rather than to a coming together of several different communities which do not meet together for corporate worship on the Lord's Day? I don't mean to make a value judgment here; I only want to point out that the meeting together of several *different* groups of believers does not fit snugly into the way "congregational meeting" has usually been understood. My sense is that the old congregationalists would look at such a meeting and more readily say "associational meeting" than "congregational meeting."

Second, What's Episcopalian About It?

Really not much, in my opinion. In the church with which I am most familiar, the senior pastor has the authority to fire campus pastors, and everyone agrees that he has enormous influence over the direction of the church. But then again, the senior pastor can't install a campus pastor unilaterally, and senior pastors often have enormous influence over their churches, even in strictly congregational churches. That doesn't quite qualify in my mind as a bishopric.

Indeed, there's quite a lot about the congregational multi-site that is very un-episcopalian. The whole-congregation meeting is the most obvious example, followed closely by the senior pastor's lack of authority to install a campus pastor. There's also the existence of a "leadership team"—you might call it a "board of elders," even—which consists of the senior pastor and all the campus pastors and which meets as a group to think, pray, and set direction for the church as a whole. That's much closer to Presbyterianism than to Episcopalianism.

And that leads us to our third question.

Third, What's Presbyterian About It?

Here's where things get tricky, because I'd answer this by saying, just as I did about congregationalism, "quite a lot." Not everything, obviously, but quite a lot. Of course there is that unique meeting of the whole church, which never happens in a Presbyterian polity, and my understanding is that the members of the church, when they meet together in that way, have a great deal of decision-making authority.

But despite those important differences, congregational multi-site churches still, in my opinion, have much in common with a Presbyterian polity. For one thing, there is the obvious point that congregational multi-site churches operate with an authority structure that is outside and above the particular, local assembly of believers. If you are a regular attender of "Campus A," then decisions about your church life are being made—at least in part—by people who do not regularly attend your weekly gathering. The leadership team of the church—essentially, the pastors of other gatherings—are able to make binding decisions about another gathering's life and direction. Again, I'm not saying that's necessarily bad; that's not the point here. It's just to say that the same thing is true in a Presbyterian polity.

Perhaps what is most interesting here, however, is that there are certain elements of Presbyterian polity (the PCA, for example) that are actually *more* congregational than the polity of multi-sites. A few

examples: First, in a Presbyterian polity, a presbytery cannot install a senior minister without the consent of the particular gathering of believers. In a multi-site polity, by contrast, every attender of a particular campus could vote against a man being installed as their campus pastor, and it would happen anyway if the rest of the church voted in favor of it. Second, Presbyterian churches never celebrate the Lord's Supper outside the particular gathering; multi-site churches celebrate it both at individual campuses and at the whole-congregation meeting. Third, in a Presbyterian polity (or at least in the PCA), each particular gathering owns its own facilities. That is not the case in a multi-site church; the church as a whole owns the facilities and could therefore make decisions about that property above the objections of those who weekly meet there.

Conclusion

What we finally end up labeling the polity of a multi-site church is not an earth-shakingly important question. What's important, above all, is what the Bible teaches about how churches should be structured. Under that is what will tend to the building up of the saints. Other articles in this journal take up those more important questions.

But I think there *is something* important about this question of polity, however, and that's the simple question of accuracy. In the end, I think it would serve this whole conversation well if we could all agree that multi-site churches are simply not "just as congregational" as any other congregational church. The fact is, they're doing something fairly unique. Maybe that's fine; maybe not. Advocates of multi-site churches should make their case from the house churches of Jerusalem and Rome, critics can fire back, and we can all have long, fun, raucous arguments in between convention sermons about the myriad practicalities involved here. But what we can't do, I think, is cram multi-site polity into any existing, already-well-defined category—whether presbyterian, Episcopalian, or congregational. It just won't fit.

At the end of the day, I think we're going to need a new word. I'd like to nominate "Gregisanalian."

May/June 2009

Have We Ever Seen This Before? Multi-Site Precedents
By John S. Hammett

According to the definition offered in *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, a multi-site church is "one church meeting in multiple locations." This oneness involves sharing "a common vision, budget, leadership, and board." Moreover, noting that many churches have off-site ministries (such as a soup kitchen), the definition of a multi-site church goes further to specify that the meetings referred to in the first sentence are not for the purpose of ministry but worship. Thus, a multi-site church is "one that develops *worship* communities in multiple locations."[1] The task of this paper is to consider possible historical precedents for such a church.

Let me say from the outset, there are some parallels between contemporary multi-site churches and the patterns of relationship between some congregations in church history, but there seems to me to be no exact precedent. Indeed, much in the multi-site movement assumes and depends upon modern communication, ease of travel, and technology.

EARLY EPISCOPAL MODEL?

At first glance, any connectional system of ecclesiology, which emphasizes the oneness of the church and considers local congregations more as parts of the one church than as churches themselves, might seem to be a viable precedent for multi-site churches. For example, one could claim that the developing role of the bishop in the early church is similar to that of the "lead pastor" in the organizational chart offered for a typical multi-site church, and that the presbyters (later, "priests") bear some resemblance to contemporary "campus pastors."[2] Peter Toon describes the common pattern of organization of the church by the end of the second century in these words: "the bishop was the chief pastor and teacher of the flock as well as president of the college/meeting of presbyters."[3]

But was the early church truly multi-site? Perhaps for a time, smaller congregations did consider themselves together as forming *the* church in Antioch or Jerusalem or Corinth. But the process of growth produced a breakdown of the sense of being "one church in many locations." Bernard Prusak describes the process:

> During the third century, the Christian communities in some cities grew so large that they had to be subdivided. There could no longer be just one Eucharist concelebrated by the bishop with the elders, deacons, and the entire community. Instead, elders began to preside at subassemblies, as representatives of the bishop. . . . Since the *ekklesia* in a city was no longer one concrete assembly gathered around the bishop, rituals were created to preserve a symbolic experience of being one community united with and under the bishop.[4]

While the various congregations could be described as governmentally or organizationally one, united under and in communion with the bishop, they no longer worshipped together, and the process of growth could more accurately be described as producing multiple churches. Peter Toon describes the process this way: "as city churches (with their one bishop and several presbyters) established missions in nearby towns, presbyters went to the smaller churches to serve as pastors, and so it was the bishops came to have multiple churches in their care and presbyters came to be pastors of individual churches."[5] This system has one leader over a number of congregations, but what he leads is a multiplicity of *churches*, not one church in a multiplicity of sites. It seems very unlikely that these churches shared a common budget or board of leaders, however much they may have maintained unity in terms of being in communion with the bishop. As noted above, the type of unity multi-site churches desire for their scattered congregations seems to demand modern communication, transportation, and technology.

METHODIST CIRCUIT RIDER?

Another possible precedent within episcopal polity that has been suggested is the Methodist circuit rider, who would provide pastoral leadership for several congregations. One multi-site church pastor claims "the

move from horseback preacher to satellite broadcast is simply a shift from circuit rider to closed-circuit rider!"[6]

The problem with this is an ambiguity in the definition of church. On the one hand, in Methodist polity, a number of congregations can be considered "the church." Bishops are defined as those who are "responsible for the work and oversight of the church in a particular Annual Conference," which is itself defined as "a particular geographical area." On the other hand, the circuit supervised by a single pastor, is defined as "two or more local *churches,*"[7] not two or more congregations. It seems unlikely that these local churches share the common vision, budget, and board characteristic of a multi-site church, or that they think of themselves as one church in multiple locations.

PRESBYTERIAN POLITY?

A similar ambiguity or multiplicity of meanings for "church" also makes it difficult to see churches operating under traditional presbyterian polity as a genuine precedent for multi-site churches. Reformed theologian Edmund Clowney believes the word "church" can be used to describe local and extra-local bodies, and that "the church can be expressed at more than one level; in smaller or in larger fellowships, or even in gatherings like that in Jerusalem (Acts 15), representing the whole church."[8] Presbyterian polity may fairly be described as representative and connectional; and its advocates see the congregationalist's emphases on independency and local autonomy as contrary to Scripture.[9] Yet presbyterian congregations in different locations are not governed by the same board; rather, "particular Christian churches are to be governed by spiritually qualified councils of elders/overseers."[10] The governmental functions exercised by levels like the presbytery, synod, and general assembly over multiple congregations do not validate describing such congregations as being governed by a common board, or being described as one church in many locations in the way that multi-site churches are one.

AMONG CONGREGATIONALISTS?

Among congregational churches, with their traditional emphasis on local autonomy, one would not expect to find precedents for multi-site churches. But there are some incidents that may be noted.

The idea that local congregations are part of a larger whole that can take some visible expression lay behind the early development of associations in Baptist life. The statement in the 1644 London Confession of Faith carefully balances affirmations of local and extra-local bodies:

> And although the particular Congregations be distinct and severall Bodies, every one a compact and knit Citie in it selfe; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affaires of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their onely head.[11]

It is not individual Christians but local congregations that are identified as members of one body. This gave a theological basis for the development of a type of voluntary, congregational connectionalism that was expressed in a number of ways in seventeenth century English Baptist life.[12]

During this era, Hugh Wamble says, "It was normal for a local church to have a scattered constituency and to be composed of several congregations," more for protection or convenience than from any theological principle, and more in rural areas than cities.[13] Wamble adds that the scattered congregations did not think of themselves as one church, and thus this example is not a real precedent for multi-site churches. Still, he notes that the relationships of these scattered congregations were much more intimate during this era than in later times when each congregation built its own meeting place.

He also notes some of the negative effects of the dissolution of such relationships. As congregations began to focus on building their own meeting places, "The burden of debt and overhead expenses paralyzed both mutual care and mission interest." Moreover, as churches became distinct, each with their own localized services, the formerly "close ties with sister congregations tended to become limited to formal associationalism. Church walls became obstructions to outside fellowship."[14]

While these seventeenth century English Baptists do not provide any sort of clear precedent for multi-site churches, perhaps the desire for more than merely formal association with other congregations, and the desire to avoid costly building programs are parallels that deserve consideration.

A WORKABLE MODEL?

This past November I heard of a multi-site church that seemed to avoid most of the aspects of multi-site churches that have been troubling to me.[15] This church, Highview Baptist in Louisville, Kentucky, is one church that meets in six locations. Each of the six campuses has a pastor that teaches his flock, but there is one senior pastor, a single deacon body, and a single budget. However, the whole church also assembles in one location quarterly for services that include baptisms, the Lord's Supper, and the conducting of the congregation's business (accepting new members, discipline of members, voting on matters of official business).

I asked the person describing this church why the six congregations do not simply avoid the inconvenience of the quarterly meeting and become independent churches. His reply was that the six pastors do not want independence and the accompanying isolation. They enjoyed being part of a larger body and sharing each others' joys and sorrows as one body.

NO PERFECT PRECEDENT

Seeking intimate connection with other congregations does seem to have some slight historical precedence among seventeenth-century English Baptists, but for the most part, multi-site churches are pursuing a path with little historical backing.

It is possible that some in the early church came close to this pattern, but growth produced not multiple-site churches, but multiple churches. In presbyterian circles, local churches are connected to presbyteries, synods, and a general assembly, but one board does not govern all the churches, they do not share a common budget, and in many cases, they do not share a common vision. Finally, the desire for intimacy with other congregations and to manifest the unity of Christ's body on a level larger than the local church is laudable, and has some place in English Baptist history.

Overall, however, the idea and practice of unity in multi-site churches seems tied to modern developments in communication, transportation, and technology. History has preferred multiple churches to multi-site churches.

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[1]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 18, 28. Italics in original.
[2]See the suggested organizational church in *ibid*., 137.
[3]Peter Toon, "Episcopalianism," in *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, gen. ed. Steven Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 25. The college of presbyters could be seen as the counterpart to the common leadership and board mentioned in the definition of the multi-site church.
[4]Bernard Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 155.
[5]Toon, 25.
[6]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, 91.
[7]Definitions are from the Glossary of United Methodist Terms, found on the website of the General Commission on Archives & History, The United Methodist Church, http://www.gcah.org/site, accessed 1/27/09. Italics added.
[8]Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 111-112.
[9]Roy Taylor, "Presbyterianism," in *Who Runs the Church*?, 75, states, "The presbyterian system of church government is representative and connectional." Robert Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 110, sharply criticizes ideas like local church autonomy, asking "where in Scripture is there any mandate at all for such independency among local Christian congregations?"
[10]Reymond, 95.
[11]Article XLVII, London Confession, 1644, in William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 168-69. I have retained the spelling of the original.

[12]The examples that follow come from G. Hugh Wamble, “The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship: The Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists (Th.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 1955).
[13]Ibid., 252.
[14]Ibid., 273.
[15]This church is described in Gregg Allison, “The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon: A Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Missional Assessment”; delivered November 20, 2008, at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Providence, RI and reprinted in this eJournal. Available here (link).

May/June 2009

Clouds on the Horizon
By Matt Chandler

The Village Church has been a "multi-site church" since 2007. We went in that direction reluctantly and with trepidation. I don't have the space in this article to unpack all the ways we wrestled with the scriptures, tested our ecclesiology, and, ultimately, believed the Lord was leading us to go multi-site. In this article I will focus on our thought process in moving in this direction and then state some of the problems that we believe might be in the future for us a multi-site church.

A DISCUSSION ABOUT METHODOLOGY, NOT THEOLOGY

When we researched multi-site churches we had a hard time pinpointing concerns with it because in all the reading we did we rarely came across two churches that do it the same way. Some use video while others use a teaching team. Some are "one church in multiple locations" while other very different churches simply share the same teacher via video. The list of differences could add up to pages of reading. Most of the criticism we found focused almost entirely on these methodological differences rather than on the issues involved in the entire philosophy of multi-site churches. For example, we read about how a multi-site approach would affect the development of young leaders and preachers. Although some of this was helpful and informative, none of these critiques addressed all multi-site churches, and they addressed different churches in different ways. For instance, while the critics consistently argue that multi-site churches hinder the development of new preachers, we found some multi-site churches that were using multiple campuses as a way to do just that. So we were finding that all of the talk centered on approaches to doing multi-site rather than the theological and philosophical framework for such a movement.

DISCUSSION ABOUT THEOLOGY FROM SILENCE

The theological and philosophical criticism we did find was both limited and weak. The main criticism we encountered is that the Bible is silent on multi-site. This is an argument from silence. To say that "the Bible doesn't say anything about such and such and therefore it's wrong to do such and such" is weak at best and a hypocritical at worst. In the end, it just isn't compelling. The Bible says nothing at all about cell phones. Does that mean it's a sin to use one?

WHERE DOES THIS GO?

And so after studying the issue, we decided to go multi-site. Yet we still have some serious concerns and questions about the multi-site idea even as we participate in it. The problem that haunts us is a simple one. Where does this idea lead? Where does this end? Twenty years from now are there fifteen preachers in the United States?

We have other questions, too. Is multi-site ministry a legitimate use of technology or an illegitimate one? Will the multi-site idea weaken the church at large by squashing the diversity of teachers, ideas, and leaders in the west? I'm not sure I can answer these questions. I know that there are many who are simply "peddlers of God's Word" who are in this thing for themselves and not the name of our great God or the health of his bride. My hope is that the Spirit would leverage the proclamation potential and frustrate the peddlers.

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May/June 2009

Exegetical Critique of Multi-Site: Disassembling the Church?
By Grant Gaines

Praise God for our brothers and sisters in multi-site churches who are reaching their communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ! Assenters and dissenters to this approach alike should be able to say with Paul, "What then? Only that…Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice" (Phil. 1:18).[1]

But the fact that Paul's primary goal was to see the gospel proclaimed does not mean he cared nothing for how a church is structured. Church structure may be secondary, but it remains important and a matter addressed in the Scriptures, which therefore requires Christian obedience.

The following critiques address what I believe is the most significant problem with a multi-site church structure—the belief that a Christian organization may be properly called an *ekklēsia* (church), even though the believers who constitute it assemble in different places. This essay provides an exegetical critique of that claim.

CRITIQUE 1: *EKKLESIA* DENOTES AN ASSEMBLY

The word *ekklēsia* denotes a literal assembly. Therefore, it should not be used to designate a body of Christians who are not characterized by literally assembling together in the same place.

This is true of the word's use in the Septuagint[2] as well as in secular contexts in the New Testament, such as in Acts 19:32, 39, and 40, where an actual gathered assembly is obviously in view. Unless evidence can be provided to the contrary, we should assume that when the word refers to the church in the New Testament, its meaning is the same as when it is used in the Septuagint and in secular contexts in the New Testament.[3]

In fact, the only development that occurs in the New Testament with the word *ekklēsia* is that the authors begin to use the term to refer to Christ's heavenly-eschatological assembly, and possibly a use that refers to the church as an institution in the abstract.[4] But even this heavenly-eschatological assembly refers to a *literal* assembly, as I will argue below. And any reference to the institution in the abstract (e.g., Acts 9:31) hardly implies that the particular manifestations of the institution are anything less than actual, concrete assemblies.[5] In fact, since all other uses of *ekklēsia* are concrete, one should assume that a particular expression of the church is capable of being referred to as an *ekklēsia* because its members are characterized by actually assembling together. Thus, even the possible non-literal (or abstract) use of the word would not be grounds for structuring a church in such a way that the members do not regularly, physically assemble, as multi-site structure does.

CRITIQUE 2: *EPI TO AUTO* MEANS "IN THE SAME PLACE"

Further exegetical evidence that an *ekklēsia* refers to a body of Christians literally assembled together is seen in instances in which the phrase *epi to auto* is used in conjunction with *ekklēsia*.

The phrase *epi to auto* means "in the same place,"[6] and is used to describe the local church gathering in both 1 Corinthians and Acts, the two biblical books that devote the most attention to the nature and life of the local church. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul implies that it is the act of gathering in the same place that enables a body of Christians to be labeled an *ekklēsia*. He states that when the believers in Corinth "come together *as a church* [*ekklēsia*]" (v. 18), they are "meeting together in the same place [*epi to auto*]" (v. 20, my translation).[7] Again, in 14:23, it is "the *whole* church [*ekklēsia*]" that "comes together in the same place [*epi to auto*]" (my translation).

Thus, the claim by some proponents of the multi-site model that "Corinth and other first-century churches were multi-site, as a number of multi-site house churches were considered to be part of one citywide church,"[8] clearly does not measure up to the evidence. In regard to passages such as Acts 2:46 ("breaking bread from house to house") as well as the several references to "house-churches" (Rom.

16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2), it should be noted that the former instance by no means supports a "one church in many locations" model, especially since verse 44 states that they were also meeting "in the same place" (*epi to auto*, my translation). Rather, it simply states that they broke bread together in various homes. In the instance of house-churches, it is significant that these are always considered "churches" and not mere "campuses," "sites," or any other word denoting a portion of a church. A citywide church consisting of multiple house-churches is not in view in Corinth and is never mentioned in Scripture.[9]

Instances in Acts in which the whole church in a particular geographic location is designated as having come together in the same place by the phrase *epi to auto* include 1:15, 2:1, and 2:44. The latter two instances make it even more explicit that the entire church was in the same place by noting that "all" (*pantes*) were "in the same place" (*epi to auto*). Acts 5:12 and 15:22 are other instances in which "all" (*pantes*) or the "whole" (*holē*) church in Jerusalem met together. Acts 14:27 and 15:30 reveal that there were times when the whole church in Antioch met together as well. These latter instances are probably not references to regular Lord's Day assemblies, but they do show that the whole congregation in this city was capable of coming together in the same location.

The ease and frequency with which Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and the book of Acts speak of one church coming together "in the same place" suggests that this was the common practice of a New Testament *ekklēsia*.

Some might object that all the members of a particular church in the New Testament would not have been able to fit together in the same place due to space limitations, but this is an argument from silence that it is contrary to the explicit scriptural examples given above. The text says that whole churches met together in one place, whether in a house or not.[10] Besides, this objection contradicts the plain evidence of the text, at least for the church in Jerusalem, which we know numbered in the thousands and still managed to meet together:

- "And all those who had believed were together" (Acts 2:44).
- **"**And they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico" (Acts 5:12).
- "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number…the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples" (ESV, Acts 6:1-2).

CRITIQUE 3: EACH *EKKLESIA* MANIFESTS THE HEAVENLY ASSEMBLY

Each *ekklēsia* is a full-fledged, self-contained earthly manifestation of the heavenly-eschatological assembly. A local congregation should not, therefore, be subject to the governmental authority of another manifestation of the same reality unless explicit scriptural warrant is given for such a practice.

In Christ, there is really only one church, one assembly. This is so because all of those in Christ are assembled in the heavenly places even now.[11] Thus, Ephesians speaks of the church as all those who are currently alive with Christ, raised up with him, and seated with him "in the heavenly places" (2:7). Likewise, Colossians speaks of Christ as the head of the body, the church (1:18) in a context that, as Peter T. O'Brien notes, "is moving on a heavenly plain."[12] The book of Hebrews makes some of the most instructive statements in this regard. In chapter twelve, "the general assembly and church of the firstborn" (v. 23) is associated with "the heavenly Jerusalem" (v. 22). Ultimately, then, the church is a heavenly-eschatological reality that is gathered in one location—around Christ in the heavenlies. It's therefore not correct to say that the biblical use of *ekklēsia* to refer to the universal church demonstrates a use of the term to refer to something other than an assembly.

The fact that each of the multiple congregations on earth is called an assembly (*ekklēsia*) suggests that, as K. L. Schmidt notes, "Each community, however small, represents the total community, the Church."[13] Thus, for example, as Schmidt goes on to say, the phrase "*tē ekklēsia … tē ousē en Korinthō*" in 1 Cor. 1:2 should not be rendered, "'the Corinthian congregation,' which would stand side by side with the Roman etc., but 'the congregation, church, assembly [i.e., the heavenly-eschatological assembly in Christ], as it is in Corinth."[14] In this way, each earthly assembly should be viewed as a manifestation of the ultimate heavenly reality. No particular earthly assembly is in need of any other

particular earthly assembly or campus or site to fill up what might be lacking in its status as a full-fledged, self-contained earthly manifestation of the heavenly-eschatological assembly.[15] Thus, what proponents of multi-site church structures consider a site or campus that is still part of a church, the Bible considers a church in itself.

EXEGETICALLY OUT OF BOUNDS

In light of the exegetical evidence above, the multi-site church structure is outside the bounds of the New Testament's teaching on the local church in at least two ways. First, it violates the biblical understanding of church as assembly (see points one and two above) by considering a group of believers a church even though they never actually assemble. Second, it violates the biblical understanding of a particular local assembly as a full-fledged manifestation of the one heavenly assembly (see point three above) by not considering each local assembly a church in and of itself, and by subjugating local assemblies to the governmental authority of other local assemblies without biblical warrant for such a practice. Simply put, multiple sites equal multiple churches, and churches should be self-governing.

Because multiple sites equal multiple churches there is actually no such thing as a multi-site church. There are simply multi-*church* groups or associations that are connected under one governing structure and that have chosen to call themselves a multi-site church. In this way, multi-site church structure is nothing new. It is simply connectionalism, and it has been around for generations.[16]

It is my hunch that this confusion in terms—namely, calling something a multi-site church when it is in reality an association of multiple churches united under one governing structure—is the reason this model has been able to fly under the radar of congregationalists for the past twenty to thirty years. If the multi-site structure could be described to any number of congregationalists from the past, they would recognize it as something very similar to something in between presbyterian or episcopalian connectionalism, depending on the exact model of the multi-site church (one pastor only on video? Different campus pastors?). But since many congregationalists lost interest in ecclesiology in the twentieth century, and are only now seeming to regain an interest in it, contemporary congregationalists have been unable to spot connectionalism when they see it; especially when it is given a misleading name.[17]

HISTORICALLY SLIPPERY

Connectionalism has historically proven to offer a slippery slope toward liberalism. The history of connectionalism (as seen for example in Catholicism, the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church U. S. A.) is not exactly a history worth repeating. In a top-down approach, when the top turns sour, it is only a matter of time before the majority of the bottom does as well.

When congregational churches go liberal, the damage is contained. Notice also the difference between the connectional model and the cooperation model. When the executive committees and the seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention became liberal, the local churches which remained conservative were able to assert a conservative resurgence in the latter half of the twentieth century since the local churches controlled the executive committee and not the other way around.[18] Multi-site leaders should seriously consider this lesson from history before continuing with this model, and others should do the same before buying into it.

CONCLUSION

In view of the fact that multi-site churches are outside the bounds of Scripture, why not plant churches and maintain close *cooperation* with an associational type of model? This practice has the potential to preserve many of the "benefits" of the multi-site approach, while simultaneously respecting the biblical nature of the local church as assembly.[19] Multi-site churches could move toward turning each site into a church plant, and form, if they desire, their own association of churches that are bound not by church-governmental authority but by voluntary submission to a statement of faith and code of conduct. This might not provide the same level of control that a pastoral staff has in a multi-site situation, but it does have the advantage of (i) preserving the biblical teaching of the church as assembly, (ii) avoiding the

slippery slope toward liberalism characteristic of connectionalism, (iii) guarding a church from being driven by pragmatism, and (iv) providing the same benefits which the proponents of the multi-site model seek.

In conclusion, while we should be thankful for the gospel work that goes on in multi-site churches, it still seems right to this congregationalist to view the local church as one assembly in one location.

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[1]Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NASB, updated edition.
[2]A fact that most scholars acknowledge. See for instance K. L. Schmidt, "***ekklēsia***," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 527, who writes, "In the LXX ***ekklēsia*** is a wholly secular term; it means 'assembly,' whether in the sense of assembling or of those assembled." All Greek words appearing in titles and quotations from other works have been transliterated.
[3]Because the meaning of a word is determined by its use, words often have a range of meanings. Therefore, ***ekklēsia*** could in principle be used in other ways. One of the arguments I will make in this article, however, is that there is no use of the word ***ekklēsia*** in the New Testament that does not have the idea of an actual assembly in view, whether the reference is to a gathering at a specific moment in time, an institution in the abstract the particular manifestations of which are characterized by concrete assembling, or the heavenly-eschatological assembly in Christ.
[4]I say "possibly" because these instances might actually be cases of the heavenly-eschatological usage.
[5]Similarly, one can speak of the institution of the family in a way that abstracts the concept from its particular manifestations for the sake of making a generalized statement, such as, "The family is devalued in contemporary American society." Particular manifestations of the institution of the family, however, are concrete; they are made up of actual parents and children. In the same way, the institution of the church (the assembly) is made up of actual assemblies.
[6]So Everett Ferguson, "'When You Come Together': *Epi To Auto* in Early Christian Literature," *Restoration Quarterly* 16 (1973): 202-08; BDAG, 363, who gives this construction as one of three categories of the use of *epi*, "answering the question 'where?'"; W. Köhler, "*epi*," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 22, who categorizes this construction as "Local." Ferguson notes that this is also the way the phrase is used by the Apostolic Fathers. He writes that when the Apostolic Fathers use *epi to auto* in the context of church life the phrase always refers "to the public or common assembly of the church." He goes on to state, "We might appropriately translate *epi to auto* in every case 'in the assembly.' *Thus instead of a more general reference to unity or fellowship, there is a more specific reference to a definite expression of that unity: the assembly of the church, more particularly the worship assembly of the church*" ("When You Come Together," 206; emphasis added).
[7]For justification for translating *epi to auto* "in the same place," see previous footnote.
[8]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church…in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 17; referring to an observation by Aubrey Malphurs in Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 22-26.
[9]This is not to rule out the likelihood that members of a particular church might come together in various places for any number of reasons (e.g., Acts 2:46), but is to say that when they "came together as a church" (1 Cor. 11:18) it was "in the same place" (v. 20; 14:23, my translation).
[10]In light of the fact that the church in Corinth clearly came together in one location, Gordon Fee writes, "Given the limitations of size in even the most commodious of well-to-do homes, does this imply that the church was somewhat smaller than we might tend to think? Or is it possible that one of the houses was considerably larger than archeology has uncovered in Corinth to this point? We simply do not know" (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 43, pt. 1, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 683-84). David Balch argues that in the first century there were houses, shops, and other indoor spaces that "could have accommodated numbers far greater than 40 persons" (David Balch, "Rich Pompeiian Houses, Shops for Rent, and the Huge Apartment Building in Herculaneum as Typical Spaces for Pauline House Churches," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27.1 [2004]: 41). See also the insightful comment of C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries, ed. Henry Chadwick (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1968), 326, who states, "There is no reason, further, to suppose that these meetings always took place indoors." According to Rom. 16:23, Gaius was host to Paul in Corinth and "the whole church [*holēs tēs ekklēsias*]." Tom Schreiner holds that "***ekklēsia*** here represents the local church and that Gaius provided a place for the meeting of the entire assembly." He goes on to say that "Gaius was obviously a man of some wealth to support the church in this way" (*Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998], 808).
[11]On the church as ultimately a heavenly-eschatological assembly see Peter T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002) 88-119; idem, "Church II: Paul," in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament: A One-Volume Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Edmund P. Clowney, "The Biblical Theology of the Church," in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. Carson, 13-87; idem, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 31-32, 118.
[12]O'Brien, "Church II: Paul," 196. Note especially Col. 1:13 ("dominion of darkness" vs. "the kingdom of His beloved Son"), 16 ("visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities"), and 20 ("whether things on earth or things in heaven").
[13]Schmidt, "***ekklēsia***," 506.
[14]Ibid., 506. That Schmidt has the heavenly-eschatological assembly in Christ in mind is evident from his discussion in ibid., 509-13.
[15]This would also seem to account for the reason that it is the congregation that is said to be vested with ultimate authority in governing the local body (see Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5). Since each assembly is a manifestation of the Kingdom of Christ on earth, each assembly is to function as a full-fledged representation of that kingdom; which includes the wielding of governmental authority

by the subjects of the kingdom, the members of the church. One assembly is not dependent on another assembly's governing; rather, each is sufficient to govern itself.

[16]Connectionalism is a form of church polity in which multiple churches share a common church government. It is the opposite of congregationalism and a denial of local church autonomy.

[17]For an account of how Baptist congregationalists shifted from a serious emphasis on church government (especially church discipline) to a preoccupation with efficiency and progress see Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 131-34.

[18]For an account of this remarkable story see Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist's Journey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999); Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

[19]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird list the following benefits to multi-site church structure: "Accountability, [s]haring of resources (stewardship), [i]nfusion of trained workers, [s]hared DNA (vision and core values), [g]reater prayer support, [p]reestablished network of problem solving, [n]ot needing to 'reinvent the wheel,' [and] [c]onnection with others doing the same thing (*The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 51; original given in bullet points).

May/June 2009

Theological Critique of Multi-Site: What Exactly Is a "Church"?
By Jonathan Leeman

In your mind, what are the necessary elements which must be present for a group of Christians to become a local church? I assume you don't think that three Christians throwing a Frisbee at the park constitutes a local church. So what would?

What if the three friends leave the park, head down to the local diner, and pray before their meal? Are they a church then? What if they pull out their Bibles and exhort one another? Agree to meet weekly? Serve communion? Make some sort of covenant? Get the local city officials to recognize them as a church with a legal document? Stop meeting in a diner booth and find a building with a steeple? What's the tipping point between "three Christian friends hanging out" and "three Christians who together constitute a church"?

In short, what constitutes a local church as a church? This is a question raised by the multi-site church phenomenon. The cleanest and simplest argument against multi-site churches, I think, is the semantic argument. *Ekklesia* means assembly, it's said, and so one assembly is one church. But operating behind the semantic argument is the slightly more complex theological question of what constitutes a local church as a church.

Though exceptions may exist, multi-site churches generally do not refer to their sites or campuses as "churches." For instance, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minnesota, a ministry for which I'm profoundly grateful, refers to its three "campuses" together as a single "church." Campus A is not a church, or at least they don't call it that. Campus B is not a church. Campus C is not a church. But campuses A, B, and C together, they say, constitute a church.

Again, this raises the question, what's the tipping point between a campus (or site) and a church? How come it's said that the group of Christians gathered at a campus *is not a church*, while the collection of campuses *is a church*? After all, all those people gathered together at a campus seem to be doing the sort of churchy stuff which makes a church a church, like singing and serving communion and hearing God's Word. How come they don't get to be called "a church"?

In what follows, we'll first look at the multi-site answer to these questions. Next, we'll consider the biblical case which multi-site advocates present for multi-site church. Then, I'll offer an alternative answer to the question of what constitutes the local church, followed by a brief word concerning non-congregationalists. Finally, I'll draw four conclusions about multi-site churches.

Throughout, I hope the reader trusts that, though I may offer these challenges in the area of church polity, I do praise God for the good gospel work many multi-site churches do for Christ's kingdom. In fact, I'm typically humbled by their zeal for his work, and hope they will expend some of that zeal on correcting me where it needs to be done.

THE MULTI-SITE DEFINITION OF EKKLESIA

What do multi-site and multi-service advocates say constitute them as "one church"? As far as I can tell, it seems to be something like a common corporate structure. In the book *Multi-site Church Revolution,* the authors write,

> A multi-site church is *one church* meeting in multiple locations—different rooms on the same campus, different locations in the same region, or in some instances, different cities, states, or nations. *A multi-site church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board* (Zondervan, 2006, p. 18; italics mine).

If I understand the argument correctly, this means that a group of Christians can cross the tipping point from "not a church" to "a church" only once they have a shared vision, budget, and leadership. No doubt,

these writers would say that other elements are essential to be a church as well, like the preaching of the Word and the practice of the ordinances. But in addition to the Word and the ordinances, it appears, one needs leadership, a budget, and a corporate structure generally. That's the necessary implication of saying that the folks gathered at any one location for preaching and the ordinances are *not* a church and that all the locations together constitute "one church."

The website of the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, says almost the same thing.

> We are *a multi-site church*. As part of the Treasuring Christ Together Strategy, we aim to multiply campuses. Therefore, from our Downtown Minneapolis campus which was established in 1871, we have launched a North Campus in 2002 and a South Site in 2006. Unlike new church plants, the campuses are all part of Bethlehem with *a single vision, a single strategy, a single theological foundation, a single eldership, a single constitution, a single band of missionaries, and a single budget*. (reference here; italics mine)

Notice, these are not "new church plants," that it, not new churches. They are new sites or campuses. Making the case for multiple campuses, Pastor John Piper writes in his blog,

> I think the essence of biblical church community and unity hangs on a unity of eldership, a unity of teaching, and a unity of philosophy of ministry. And then, within the church, it hangs on very significant clusters of relationships that are biblically life-giving and involve all of the "one another" commands of the Bible.

Now, Piper uses the phrase "biblical church community and unity." I hope I'm not being unfair by assuming that what he means is, these are the things that constitute the different services and campuses of Bethlehem as "one church," namely, a unity of leaders, teaching, and philosophy. He mentions "various clusters of relationships" as well, but it's hard to see how those apply since, at least in principle, those are separate clusters of relationships—one or more clusters at one campus, more and different clusters at other campuses, and so forth. After all, he's talking about the relationships which are life-giving, which would mean they are the relationships of people *being together* and *known* to one another.

What is a little unclear to me about the multi-site understanding of a church is what role *gathering* or *assembling* plays in constituting a church as a church. On the one hand, it seems like a multi-site advocate could say, "Of course a Christian must gather with other Christians. Scripture commands it (Heb. 10:25). And we would say that a Christian must gather at *some* location or site with other believers. If there were absolutely no one gathering anywhere, we couldn't have a church."

On the other hand, strictly speaking, they do seem to take the idea of *gathering* or *assembling* out of the definition of a church. Campus A and campus B are not gathered together, plain and simple. But they are still a "church." In practice, multi-siters *do gather*, at least separately. But in definition, I think we have to say they've taken the assembly out of the *ekklesia.* At best, there's a tension here, which is why I say I'm unclear. They can say that Christians have to be gathering together *somewhere* for a church to exist, but then they're calling a "church" something which, strictly speaking, is not gathered.

If what I'm saying is correct, then the multi-site definition of *ekklesia* is not so much "assembly" or "gathering" as it is "leadership," "ministry philosophy," or "corporate structure"; or maybe it's "Christians bound together by a common leadership structure and ministry philosophy, though not necessarily gathered."

THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR MULTI-SITE

Let's turn to the biblical discussion for a moment. In their biblical justifications for the multi-site conception of "church," proponents will generally point to the flexibility of the idea of "church" found in the New Testament. For instance, Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, referring to the churches in the New

Testament, write, “the variety of venues there indicates that the early church was quite flexible, meeting and worship in distinctive situations to meet the needs and opportunities of their time” (*Vintage Church*, Crossway, 2008, 244). Driscoll and Breshears point to “networks of churches scattered throughout a particular city (e.g. Corinth, Galatia, Thessalonica, and Philippi).”

The problem with this argument is, Paul does not write to a “network of churches.” He writes to the “church” (singular) in the city of Corinth and the “churches” (plural) in the region of Galatia. I’m not sure why these would be lumped together. Driscoll and Breshears also refer to “the churches in the areas of ‘Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia’” (1 Peter 1:1), which they characterize as “linked networks of congregations.” Of course, the text itself refers to “saints,” not “churches.” Either way, I am unable to see a multi-site “church” comprised of various “campuses,” “services,” or “sites” anywhere in this text.

The more compelling scriptural justification given by multi-site advocates comes from references to house churches in Romans and Colossians. So Paul writes Romans to “all those in Rome who are loved by God” (1:7), which must either refer to one church or a network of churches. Then, at the conclusion of the letter, he tells his readers to greet Prisca and Aquila and “the church in their house” (16:5), which might suggest that, if there is one “church” in Rome to whom he’s writing, that one “church” is comprised of many house “churches.” The same thing shows up in the letter to “the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae” (1:2). Paul later refers to one particular house church (4:15), which in turn seems to be a different house church from the church which met in Philemon’s house, since we know that Philemon also lived in Colossae (Phil. 1:2).

The basic idea here—the argument goes—is that the house church can be referred to as a “church,” while all those networks of churches can also be referred to as “a church,” just like an individual branch of Citibank can be called a “bank” while the corporate aggregation of those banks can also be called a “bank.” And this argument might work if the term for “church” were indeed flexible enough, or if the essential nature of a “church” somehow allowed for it, or if Scripture clearly used it in this way.

It is a little strange to me that multi-site advocates would make this argument from Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15 since they *don’t actually refer to their different sites or campuses as “churches,”* the way these two verses explicitly refer to house churches as “churches.” Multi-siters don’t “flex” the word the way they say Scripture does. If the Roman gathering which meets in the house Prisca and Aquila is a “church,” as Paul says, and if this house church is part of the larger “church” in Rome, why not call each campus or site a church? Furthermore, what theological explanation can be given for how the house church is a church and the city church is a church comprised of multiple churches? What would the difference between the two be? If the house church was really a church, why would they need to gather with the big city church? In short, there’s a lot of explaining which multi-site advocates need to do if they are going to use these two passages as illustrations of their point.

The larger difficulty for this line of argument, however, is that nowhere does Paul refer to the church (singular) of Rome or Colossae, nor does he refer to house “churches” in Jerusalem. Even if there is reason to think he was writing to a single church in Rome or Colossae, as some commentators argue, there’s absolutely no reason to think that said house churches also belong to (or constitute) the single city church. Maybe there is one major church in Rome to whom he’s writing, and maybe Prisca and Aquila happen to have their own little church on the outskirts of the city. Who knows! The point is, the Scriptures do not speak to any of this. It only speaks of “those in Rome loved by God” in chapter 1 and the “church in their house” in chapter 16. Everything else, we might say, we have to make up.

Another place where multi-site advocates look for scriptural warrant is in the book of Acts’ account of the church in Jerusalem. At least two arguments are made here. First, some will say that the church in Jerusalem *must* have met in different house churches given its size. They could not have all met together. The trouble with this point, of course, is that Acts says that the Jerusalem church did all gather together—all thousands of them (see Acts 2:44; 5:12; 6:1-2).

Second, multi-site advocates will say that the one church in Jerusalem is still considered "one church" even amidst its different gatherings in different houses. The two verses usually cited along these lines both come from Acts:

- "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they [the Jerusalem church] received their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46).
- "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." (Acts 8:3)

I do confess to having been a little surprised by this argument. Before technology enabled the multi-site church phenomenon, no one ever, so far as I know, read these verses this way. The most natural way to read them, I believe, is to say that the church in Jerusalem is still the "church" even when it's spread out from house to house. In the same way, I would say a basketball "team" is still a "team" even when its members are spending the night in different hotel rooms or cities. And they are a team in the first place, of course, because they consistently come together and do the things which constitute them as a basketball team.

Likewise, in Acts 2 the church comes together in the temple to do that which constitutes them as a church, and then it scatters to break bread and share fellowship in smaller groups. They're constituted as a church not by what they do when they're scattered, but by what they do when they're gathered together. Then in Acts 8, we read that Paul goes from house to house persecuting the members of the Jerusalem church. It would be like saying, "The coach went from room to room, alerting the team that basketball game had been postponed."

There is a key idea here worth recognizing. The word "church" in the New Testament, especially in Acts, does begin to be used to identify the members of a church, even when they are not gathered together and doing churchy things. So when Paul "landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church" (Acts 18:22). Does that mean he just happened to land on Sunday morning and was able to walk into their assembly and say hello? Or does it mean he went around and greeted a number of the church's members? I assume the latter. The example of Acts 8 is even clearer.

Most of us today use the term "church" in the same way, as when we talk about praying for our "church" throughout the week. We may not be gathered with our church on Tuesday, but we'll still refer to the church as an existing thing on Tuesday because at this point we're identifying the church with its members. But can you be a member of a church on Tuesday, and so be a part of the "church," even if you never gather with the church on Sunday?

Well, in the United States over the last few decades, yes, and in my own denomination, certainly. But in the Bible? This brings us back to the question of what constitutes the local church as a church. When do you cross the tipping point from a group of Christians to a church?

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE CHURCH AS A CHURCH?

What shall we say constitutes a local church on earth? The answer which the Bible gives, I think, is simple and straightforward: a local church is constituted by *a group of Christians gathering together bearing Christ's own authority to exercise the power of the keys of binding and loosing*. Three things, then, are necessary for a church to be a church: you need Christians, a gathering that bears Christ's authority, and the exercise of that authority in the keys.

Membership in a local church doesn't make you a Christian. Faith and repentance do. Still, just because Christ has made us Christians, we should not assume that he give individual Christians the same authority he gives to us corporately. In Matthew 16 and 18, in fact, we see that he grants the apostolic local church (apostles in 16; the local church in 18) the authority of the keys of the kingdom. This is not an authority granted to individual Christians or even to church elders. It's granted to the church as a whole.

I'm not going to take the time here to both unpack and defend how I interpret the phrase "the keys of the kingdom" for "binding and loosing" (see my biblical and theological argument in the first half of chapter 4 of *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*). But Michael Horton provides a tidy definition of the power of the keys, I think, when he writes, "Through preaching, baptism, and admission (or refusal of admission) to the Communion, the keys of the kingdom are exercised" (*People and Place*, WJK, 2008, p. 243). Similarly, I would say that the church on earth has the power of the keys to preach the gospel and to bind and loose people to that gospel, according to their credible professions of faith (an un-credible profession will result either in refusal of admission or church discipline).

So Jesus authorizes every Christian on earth to represent him and his kingdom authority. But he authorizes the local or institutional church to publicly affirm or deny who should be regarded as a citizen of Christ's kingdom. The local church is authorized to make these public affirmations or denials visible as it gives or withholds baptism and the Lord's Supper. In that sense, the local church is like the White House press secretary who is formally authorized to declare what the president did or did not say, whereas the average citizen is not so authorized.

What's interesting, furthermore, is how Scripture refers to the keys and their use through the ordinances in the context of gatherings, and gatherings which are specifically identified with Jesus. Consider the following examples.

> *Jesus*:
>
> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are *gathered in my name, there am I among them.* (Matt. 18:17-20)
>
> *Paul*:
>
> When you are *assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit* [perhaps meaning, his spirit as an authority-conferring apostle] *is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus*, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. (1 Cor. 5:4-5)
>
> For, in the first place, *when you come together as a church*, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. (1 Cor. 11:18-19)

Notice, first, that these believers are gathering in the name (by the authority) of Christ. In Matthew 18, they will use that authority to exclude an individual. The same is true in 1 Corinthians 5. Then in 1 Corinthians 11, they celebrate the Lord's Supper because they bear that same authority. Indeed, to eat in an unworthy manner is to "profane the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27), because they are doing what they are doing representing him and in his authority.

Second, Christians do comprise "a church" such that we are a church whether together or apart, just like a team is a team whether together or apart. This is a matter of identity, as we said earlier. But Paul can also use the term "church" a little more precisely and even institutionally, as he does in 1 Corinthians 11. He speaks of gathering "as a church" in a manner that we Christians are not "the church" or at least "a church," apparently, when we are not gathered. In other words, this formal gathering has an existence and an authority that none of us has separately. It's like Paul is saying, "When you gather together *as a team*, play well." He's no longer speaking just in terms of identity; he's speaking technically in terms of

what constitutes a team, or a church. *It's the whole gathering which constitutes the church*. You can't be a church if you don't gather and gather bearing his authority to exercise the power of the keys.

Missional and *Communio* authors understandably react against institutionalism in churches. Yet their critique of church as a place, an event, or a set of activities misses the distinction between a local church and a group of Christians gathered at the park. They miss the fact that Christ established an earthly organization with the formal authority to declare who does and does not belong to him, and the members of this organization don't have the authority to use the company credit card whenever and however they please. When can members use it? They can use it whenever they have formally gathered together in his name and the Spirit of Christ is present through Word and ordinance (cf. Acts 4:31, 6:2, 14:27; 15:30; 20:7). This is what both Jesus and Paul say.

NOT JUST CONGREGATIONALISTS

It's not only congregationalists who have historically seen the necessity of a gathering for a church to be a church. The nineteenth article of the Anglican 39 Articles reads, "The visible Church of Christ is *a congregation* of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." Article 7 of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession similarly reads, "The Church is *the congregation* of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered."

Portions of the argument being made here, in other words, are congregational. But the overall gist of what I'm saying is not. That's why the multi-site church offers us something relatively unique in the history of the church. Yes, there may be odd circumstances here or there whereby a group of people decided to call multiple gatherings one church. But whether we're talking early and medieval episcopalian structures, Reformation Lutheran, Anglican, and Presbyterian structures, and certainly free church structures all along the way, just about everyone has referred to different gatherings as different churches, not different sites or services.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE MULTI-SITE AND MULTI-SERVICE CHURCH

What then shall we make of the multi-site church? I see four lessons.

1. Not a Church, but Multiple Churches. First, the multi-site church which never gathers all together simply is not a church, because gathering is one element constitutes a church. Instead, it's an association of several churches—as many churches as there are campuses and sites. And in case it's not clear, I thank God for the work of each one of those separate churches, as well as for my partnership in the gospel with all of them!

Now, some multi-site churches *do* gather all their sites together three or four times a year. What do we make of that? Well, if in their separate weekly gatherings, each separate gathering is exercising the power of the keys through preaching and the ordinances, thereby binding and loosing people to themselves, then those separate gatherings are churches. When this is the case, then the quarterly gathering of all those churches is…I don't know…something else—probably an assembly of churches, who can then be said to be usurping the power of the keys insofar as they exercise them in that larger assembly.

If, on the other hand, those separate weekly gatherings preach the Word, but never take the ordinances, because they reserve baptism, the Lord's Supper, admission, and discipline for the quarterly meeting, then maybe there's some technical sense in which the quarterly gathering is a church. But then the whole thing strikes me as fairly anemic, not to mention disobedient, at least by their own rationale, since the New Testament seems to suggest that a church should gather weekly, not quarterly. Also, if exercising the power of the keys means affirming credible professions of faith, and preventing and excluding

fraudulent professions of faith, how meaningfully can a church who meets four times a year do this? And can it do it with integrity since members of the different campuses, by design, cannot know one another?

Finally, notice that exercising the power of the keys in large quarterly meetings means that the exercise of the keys, to some extent, will be separated from the ministry of the Word. In other words, if my campus is being shaped by one preacher of the Word, and another campus is being shaped by another preacher of the Word, the quarterly gatherings of all our campuses as a "church" will be undertaking some of a church's most sensitive work, like church discipline or elder nomination, we won't quite share the "one mind" that a single service, single-campus church has by sitting under one preacher together week after week.

2. Usurping the Keys. Second, insofar as different sites or services (that is, different churches) do exercise the power of the keys over one another, they are guilty of usurpation. If it's two or three gathered in his name who know Christ's presence and authority, what should we make of another gathering or body which then imposes itself on the first gathering? It seems to me that they are trespassing in a place they do not belong. Since the congregation's own apostolic authority is itself premised, I believe, on the priesthood of all believers, any group (whether another congregation, a body of elders, a bishop, or a corporate structure) which imposes itself on an assembly of believers is guilty of wrongly standing between a believer and God. Admittedly, this particular critique is a congregationalist's critique.

3. Giving the Leaders Apostolic Authority. The church's power of the keys is an apostolic power. It's the power to bind and loose, and it's effectual. For instance, a church which disciplines an individual effectually accomplishes the intended end. Its action does not depend upon the individual's consent. On the other hand, an elder's biblical authority, as I understand it, is not apostolic and not effectual. Neither an elder nor the elders are given unilateral authority in the Scriptures to include individuals in or discipline individuals from the church. To use the older terms, the church has the authority of command, while the elders only have the authority of counsel. One of the reasons for this difference lies with the fact that a gathering is of the *esse* (essence) of the church, while the elders are only of the *bene esse* (benefit) of the church.

Another way of stating critique 2 above (usurpation) is to say that a multi-site church effectively places the apostolic power of the keys, not in the hands of the church, but in the hands of the leadership. Listen to Piper again:

> I think the essence of biblical church community and unity hangs on a unity of eldership, a unity of teaching, and a unity of philosophy of ministry. And then, within the church, it hangs on very significant clusters of relationships that are biblically life-giving and involve all of the "one another" commands of the Bible.

Piper's argument works if he wants to invest the elders of his congregation with apostolic authority. The "significant clusters of relationships" aren't doing any work here since those relationships are divided among different assemblies or services. No, the unifying force here is the elders and the overall corporate structure. The elders and their corporate structure are the common factor which all the assemblies uniquely share. (But don't they all share the gospel as well? Yes, but so does every other true church in the world. It's the corporate structure here which is making their “church” the Bethlehem “church.”) And since it's the elders and their program which constitute this "church," it's the elders who are now of an apostolic status. They have inserted themselves into the church's *esse*. This, I believe, is what every multi-site church has effectively done.

4. Multiple services? A thoughtful reader will have noticed that what I’m contesting about multiple campuses applies equally to multiple-services. In effect, there is no substantive difference between multi-site and multi-service. One spreads the congregations out geographically; the other spreads them out chronologically. It’s hardly surprising then that, after several decades of employing multiple services, church leaders would take the next step and promote multiple sites.

Am I saying that a multiple-service church is not a church? Correct. I'm saying that if you are pastoring a church with two services, you are in fact pastoring two churches. Those churches may well be twins because you're pastoring both, but they are different *ekklesias*. The funny thing is, a number of multi-service pastors with whom I've spoken will sheepishly admit that it often "feels" that way.

CONCLUSIONS

The advocates of multi-site and multi-service churches often respond to critiques against them by observing that church members cannot all know one another once a church reaches a certain size, so dividing up a church between services or sites does nothing to hurt church community that size hasn't already. Besides, the church in Jerusalem was really large.

But what I'm arguing here is that a particular church on earth is *not* constituted simply by relationships or fellowship. It's constituted by Christ's authority, exercised and given to a gathering. Therefore, this particular argument misses the point of what constitutes the church. A regular gathering of 20,000 people, gathered for preaching and the celebration of the ordinances, is *in principle* a church in a way that two services of 10 persons a piece who all know one another is not.

Now, I readily admit that that a twenty thousand member congregation will have difficulty exercising the power of the keys responsibly and with integrity, just like the "church" that meets four times a year. In fact, I'm even willing to say that a point can come in which a single gathering does *fail* to fulfill what Jesus commands in Matthew 16 and 18, because twenty thousand people who meet once a week in a stadium are probably going to fail to exercise the keys with any integrity. Sure enough, we see massive disputes cropping up in the Jerusalem church by the time we reach chapter 6 that required new solutions. A large church can be just as negligent *in practice* as the multi-campus is *in principle.*

But there's the point. The multi-campus church in principle can no longer fulfill Jesus' Matthew 16 intention because the members of each campus are simply not gathered. The irony, of course, is that multi-siters are taking what we can see in the New Testament (very large churches) to claim that what we can't see (a multi-site church) exists. In so doing, they miss what the New Testament says constitutes a church—both on earth and in heaven.

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May/June 2009

Historical Critique of Multi-Site: Not Over My Dead Body
By Bobby Jamieson

Congregationalists and Baptists have spilled a lot of ink during the past five centuries arguing about church government. Whether they've been fending off Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, or those within their own ranks, Congregationalists and Baptists have dug deep into both Scripture and their inkwells in order to discover, declare, and argue for a biblical church polity.[1]

But what could centuries-old arguments have to do with cutting-edge conversations like the one we're trying to have about multi-site churches? See for yourself. In what follows, I'll simply list a few well-worn arguments that turn up again and again in Congregationalist and Baptist writings and try to let the dead guys speak for themselves.

So what do they say?

1. Scripture is sufficient for the church. If any practice or church structure has no explicit biblical warrant, it's out of the question.

Baptist J.L. Reynolds wrote in 1849, "The Scriptures are a sufficient rule of faith and practice. The principles of ecclesiastical polity are prescribed in them with all necessary comprehensiveness and clearness. The founder of the Church has provided better for its interests, than to commit its affairs to the control of fallible men."[2]

Reynolds goes on to cite Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, who wrote, "Whatever ways of constituting the church may to us seem fit, proper, and reasonable, the question is, not what constitution of Christ's church seems convenient to human wisdom, but what constitution is actually established by Christ's infinite wisdom."[3]

2. *Ekklesia*, the New Testament Greek word for church, means "assembly."

Baptist John Gill, a master of the biblical languages, wrote, "The word *ekklesia*, always used for *church*, signifies an *assembly* called and met together."[4]

J.L. Reynolds wrote, "The word Church (in the original Greek of the New Testament, *ekklesia*), means a congregation, or assembly."[5]

Baptist John Dagg wrote, "But whenever the word *ekklesia* is used, we are sure of an assembly; *and the term is not applicable to bodies or societies of men that do not literally assemble*."[6]

3. Except when it refers to a secular assembly, *ekklesia* is always used in the New Testament to refer to either the universal or local church, with nothing in between.

J.L. Reynolds wrote, "In its sacred use, [*ekklesia*] is confined to two meanings, referring either to a particular local society of Christians, or to the whole body of God's redeemed people."[7]

Congregationalist George Punchard, noting that *ekklesia* can also refer to a secular assembly, wrote, "The Greek word *ekklesia*…is used in the New Testament, for the most part, to designate either the whole body of Christians, or a single congregation of professed believers, united together for religious purposes."[8]

4. There are no examples of "churches" made up of multiple congregations in the New Testament. *Ekklesia* never refers to a church composed of multiple congregations.

Baptist William B. Johnson wrote concerning several texts about the church in Acts, "The first nine quotations relate to the church in Jerusalem, and very satisfactorily shew, that the term church indicates

one church, one body of the Lord's people, meeting together in one place, *and not several congregations, forming one church*."[9]

J.L. Reynolds wrote, "We read in the New Testament of "the Church" in a particular city, village, and even house, and of "the Churches" of certain regions; *but never of a Church involving a plurality of congregations*."[10]

5. So, a local church is by definition—and therefore should only be—a single congregation.

Reasoning from the necessary bond between elders and a single flock, the Congregationalist confession of faith *The Cambridge Platform* (1648) says simply, "Therefore there is no greater church than a congregation, which may ordinarily meet in one place."[11]

6. Each local congregation has authority over its discipline and doctrine

Seventeenth-century American Congregationalist John Cotton wrote, "A particular Church or Congregation of Saints, professing the faith…is the first subject of all the Church offices, with all their spirituall gifts and power."[12]

Baptist founding father John Smyth wrote in his *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles* (1609), "That the church of Christ has power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren or body of the church."[13]

7. There is no court of appeal higher than the local *congregation*. Therefore, to set up any authority above the local congregation is to go beyond Scripture and remove from the local congregation its Christ-given prerogatives.

Seventeenth-century Congregationalist Thomas Goodwin wrote, "These instituted bodies of churches we humbly conceive to be, for the bounds and proportion, or measure of them, *only congregational*, which are the fixed seat and subject of all ordinances of worship, and who are…the sole seat of that government, and the acts thereof…from which, rightly administered, *there can be no appeal*, nor of which no act of repeal *can be made by any supreme court on earth*."[14]

William B. Johnson wrote, "In both cases [Matt. 18:15-17 and 1 Cor. 5], the church whose member commits the offence or the trespass, is made the last resort in the final adjustment of the matter, without the right of appeal on the part of the offender or trespasser, to any other tribunal on earth."[15]

In other words, the local congregation as such is the seat of the church's human government. Anything beyond that is an unbiblical human invention.

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[1] I'm speaking about Baptists and Congregationalists in the same breath like this because as far as church polity is concerned, Baptists are simply Congregationalists who don't baptize babies.
[2] J.L. Reynolds, *Church Polity or The Kingdom of Christ* in Mark Dever, ed., *Polity* (Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 305.
[3] *Polity*, 305. The Edwards quote can be found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 12 (New Haven: Yale, 1994), 265.
[4] John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Paris, AR: 1984; orig. pub. 1769-70), 853.
[5] *Polity*, 311.
[6] J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology. Second Part. A Treatise of Church Order*, (Harrisburg: Gano, 1990; orig. pub. 1858), 77; emphasis mine.
[7] *Polity*, 311.
[8] George Punchard, *A View of Congregationalism, its Principles and Doctrines* (Boston: MA: Congregational Board of Publication: 1860), 41.
[9] William Bullein Johnson, *The Gospel Developed* (orig. pub. 1849), in *Polity*, 171; emphasis mine.
[10] *Polity*, 321; emphasis mine.
[11] *The Cambridge Platform (1648)* in Iain Murray, *The Reformation of the Church* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 247.
[12] John Cotton, *The Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven* (Boston: S.K. Whipple & Co., 1852; orig. pub. 1644), 67.
[13] William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 101.

[14] Thomas Goodwin, *Of the Constitution, Right Order, and Government of the Churches of Christ* in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 11 (Eureka: Tanski, 1996), 6; emphasis mine.
[15] *Polity*, 173.

May/June 2009

Nine Reasons I Don't Like Multi-site Churches, from a Guy Who Should
By Thomas White

I am 35 years old. I have up to four laptops at any given time connected to my home wireless network and a data phone permanently attached to my pocket. I use Twitter, Facebook, Gmail, shoot home videos in HD, my X-Box Halo gamer rank is 31, I was among the first to own a Wii, and I have a Second Life account. So my fears of the multi-site church movement are not technological; they are principled.[1]

I don't wish to question anyone's motives. I sincerely believe the basic desire of the multi-site movement is to reach more people with the Gospel. While the motive may be admirable, the methods may be unprofitable. We know that manipulative altar calls and emotional decisions rarely result in mature believers, and I fear that the masses filling those multiple locations do not constitute healthy assemblies.

1. A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS

Please allow me to give just a few of the pitfalls of the multi-site church movement. Pitfall number one is giving up the church as the assembly or gathered congregation. The Greek word *ecclesia* most often translated as "church" means assembly or gathering. The oft heard mantra "one church many locations" is a contradiction in terms. An un-gathered "church" cannot know one another, love another or bear one another's burdens in the same way a single assembly can.

2. SPIRITUAL COLONIZATION

The multi-site methodology also forms mini-dioceses. The head pastor serves as the "virtual" bishop, the founding location as the headquarters, and the locations as the affiliated members. Most examples destroy the autonomy of the individual assemblies over the musical style, the atmosphere, and the message.

This methodology also negates the biblical principle of congregational polity because the founding location sets the budget, hires the staff, and determines the membership. Americans, who once declared "no taxation without representation," now apathetically accept this spiritual colonization which amounts to "offerings without input."

3. ENCOURAGING CONSUMERISM

With varying degrees of guilt, the multi-site method encourages consumerism. In the best scenarios, screens display messages from the most gifted communicators. Most locations have campus pastors who are theologically sound or they would not have been hired. They must be able to teach or they do not fit the biblical qualifications (1 Tim. 3:2). They may not, however, communicate as effectively or in such an entertaining manner as the video preacher. Perceptive audiences get the message when the more entertaining speaker has the spotlight.

In a worse scenario, North Coast Church offers multiple styles with the same teaching in the same facility.[2] The options include "North Coast Live" with a human preacher, "video café" with Starbucks coffee and pastries, "the edge" with large subwoofers, "country Gospel" with bluegrass worship, "frontlines" with a military focus and acoustic worship, and "traditions" with a mix of classic hymns and old favorites. A family may arrive in one car and never see each other until they return to the car.

I fear that catering to worship styles and atmosphere preferences create purveyors of religious products serving spiritual consumers without creating substantive life change. This can lead to internet churches like LifeChurch.TV with a virtual campus in SecondLife.com. Parishioners never leave their homes. They

[1] For a more complete treatment, see *Franchising McChurch* reviewed in this same journal.
[2] http://www.northcoastchurch.com/north_coast_melrose/.

simply turn on computers to watch a different screen, experiencing virtual community through discussion boards, contributing offerings through PayPal, and taking communion with saltine crackers and cool-aid.

4. CANNIBALIZING THE BODY OF CHRIST

The worst example of this spiritual colonization I found occurred when a large multi-site church with debt encouraged a smaller church with valuable assets to partner with them. In this "partnership" the larger church replaced the pastor with someone who understood the DNA of the founding location, eventually closed that campus, sold the assets, and encouraged the members of the smaller church to attend another convenient location. Such cannibalizing of the body of Christ has no place among true brothers.

5. SHEPHERDS WHO DON'T KNOW THE SHEEP

Hebrews 13:17 says that leaders will give account for their actions and those under their charge. I wonder if video ministers will give account for those multi-site members—people who have never prayed with their pastor at the steps of an altar, shaken his hand on the way out the door, or ever seen him in person.

The sheep may know the sound of their shepherd's voice but does the shepherd know anything about these sheep?

6. UNDERMINING PLANTING AND PREACHER TRAINING

An additional pitfall is that multi-site churches undermine church planting and the training of future preachers. The use of video lessens the urgency for our best pastors to replicate themselves. The immediate takes precedence over the important, and finding future leaders becomes the next generation's problem. One wonders if such ministries can outlast the personality driving the train or if derailment lies around the corner. New church plants also suffer as congregations funnel money to the multiple locations rather than start new congregations or help revitalize dying ones. Even multi-site churches with intentional church planting strategies must recognize that resources are divided.

7. NO SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT!!!

Perhaps most importantly, I find no scriptural support for the methodology. I've heard the argument that all 3,000 saved at Pentecost couldn't gather together, but Acts 2:44-46 indicates they did. The next report on growth in Acts 4:4 is followed by a statement in Acts 5:12 indicating they "were all together in Solomon's Portico." Solomon's Portico was over 1,500 feet in length—five football fields long, which could have held many people—and we know the large group at Pentecost heard Peter's message.

Others claim that Paul circulated letters to various churches and would have used video had it been available. Perhaps, but a video message is far different than a video minister, and even in Paul's letters he upheld congregational authority. In 1 Corinthians 5:4 and 5:13 Paul upholds the necessity of congregational action and governance, which I do not see in the multi-site methodology.

The meaning of *ecclesia*, the commands to bear one another's burdens, and congregational polity outweigh arguments from silence about congregation size or anachronistic arguments about Paul and technology. Thus, Scripture provides no firm foundation for the multi-site methodology.

8. UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Ominous questions loom on the horizon. What happens when this generation's gifted communicators leave? When they retire or pass to heaven, will these franchised churches of today lead to the disenfranchised religious of tomorrow? Will these locations stand vacant symbolizing a failed religious experiment? What if one location wants to call its own live preacher? Will that be allowed or does the founding assembly own the property and make the decisions? Could a remote location choose to begin piping in a new rising star with no connection to the current branches?

These represent a few of the unanswered questions concerning the multi-site methodology. Perhaps the best question is “Why not just plant churches?”

9. PRIORITIES?

Numerical growth without life change does not equal success. We can look more like Christ with healthy churches of 1,000 than with entertained crowds of 10,000. I believe a healthy church distinct from the world glorifies God more than spreading ourselves too thin with larger crowds, never assembling together, with no church discipline, and little accountability. I dislike the multi-site methodology because I fear the pragmatic question of “Does it work?” matters more than the theological question of “Do these assemblies glorify God?”

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The Alternative Case: Why Don't We Plant?
By Jonathan Leeman

Instead of adding new services or new sites when the numbers grow, why not simply plant new churches? The only reason not to plant churches stems from one of two failures: either the church has failed to do the discipling work of raising up more elders and pastors; or the church has decided to accommodate celebrity and consumeristic culture. Let me start with the second failure.

ACCOMODATING CULTURE

People today demand excellence. We dismiss mediocrity—the clunky piano player; the thread-bare pew cushions; the average preacher. Sony Studios has set our expectations of sound quality. Pottery Barn has elevated our sense of tasteful décor. And everyone from Chris Rock to Ronald Reagan have taught us what it means to be an effective communicator. Anything less isn't just aesthetically objectionable, though it's that; it actually distracts us at an emotional level. When the professionally recorded music of the car radio sets the standard of music "should sound like" for me throughout the week, it becomes more difficult, emotionally and consciously, to sing praises to God when my only accompaniment is a pianist who can only plunk out basic hymn chords—at least it's harder for me than (I assume) it would have been for my great grandfather. All week long I'm surrounded by savvy speakers on television commercials, in the business world, on the news talk shows. Then, when I attend church on Sunday, you're asking me to listen to an unattractive, middle-aged man who says "um" ten times a minute and who's lack of humor or colorful illustrations puts me to sleep? That's hard to do. So given a choice between him and a charismatic, thirty-five-year-old, television-quality phenom, I'm going to go with the phenom, even if it means watching him on a screen.

I take it that these are sociological realities. People today are consumeristic—end of story. Like or dislike it, it's hard-wired into the social conscious of the visitors and members walking into our church buildings.

Still, choosing multi-campus church over the church plant is the decision to accommodate this consumeristic mindset. It's saying to these consumers walking through the door, "Yes, you have the authority to say what church should be like. Never mind repentance and Christ's Lordship, at least in this area of your life. You tell me what you want!"

And so, planting efforts fail because everyone prefers the preaching phenom to his disciple. Who's going to buy season tickets for the minor-league farm team when you get them for the major league team for the same price?

Now, to give the multi-site and multi-service process a little credibility, God clearly gives some preachers greater gifts than others, just like some players can step up to the plate and hit the ball farther than others. And faithful churches should look for ways to allow their home-run hitters to make the best use of their gifts and hit as many home-runs as possible. Who's going to argue with Jesus when he says that the man with five talents should be given the opportunity to turn them into ten, compared to the man with one or two talents?

What's particularly challenging in our day and age is that, modern media being what it is, everyone demands a home-run hitter for their own franchise. Result? Mega-churches. Fewer and fewer of us actually join baseball leagues to play ourselves. We're content to watch the professionals. (Ask any music professional about the general public's music literacy today compared to fifty years ago, and you'll hear the same thing: fewer people today are able to sing or play an instrument because the standards of professionalism and performance cause us to back away from participating in music ourselves.)

The problem is, Christianity, by which I mean church membership, is a participatory sport, not a spectator sport. It's not about just showing up on Sundays and watching the sluggers knock 'em out of the park. From my perspective, Christian is about showing up on Sundays and giving praise to God as *I encourage* my brothers and sisters by lending my singing voice to theirs, and *I reinforce* our congregation's corporate

prayers to God, and *I actively work* in applying God's Word to my life as the preacher preaches it. Christianity is about *my* getting involved with the other members of my church throughout the week as we echo Sunday's ministry of the Word back and forth in our lives together. From your perspective, Christianity is about *you* doing all these things. In other words, your and my own active-involvement with the Little League team, with our forty-five errors per game, is actually far more important for our discipleship to Christ than our sitting in the stands and watching the all-stars perform without error.

Yet when church leaders decide to add services or campuses instead of new plants, it very well could be the case that they have failed to teach their members these very lessons.

But can't people attend a church with major league players *and* still become actively involved? Of course, they can. Active church involvement should characterize the members of big and small churches alike. My only point is this: when the building which accommodates 500 people is full, there should be enough mature believers and elders among those 500, because of the elders' good teaching and discipling over time, to recognize that everyone will actually benefit and Christ's kingdom will actually advance if 100 or 200 of those 500 break off and form a new plant in another region of the city. In other words, members Joe and Suzy might enjoy sitting under Pastor Mike's fantastic preaching and the praise band's snappy music, but they should also have been taught by Mike and the other elders that they will actually grow more as Christians, and that Christ's witness will extend to further reaches of the earth, if they leave with 100 others to plant a church in their own neighborhood, led by Pastor Mike's less talented associate Mark. Now, 100 seats are freed up, and Pastor Mike has room to grow again. Not only that, the city now has two light-house beacons shining, not just one. The church is spreading. The Great Commission is being fulfilled. Now, for the really talented preachers and churches, repeat this process 40 times over the course of 40 years, and pepper the city with 40 new churches filled with elders and deacons and engaged members. Is this not preferable to one-multi-campus, multi-service megalith which all stands or falls upon the shoulders of one super-star pastor?

FAILING TO RAISE UP LEADERS

This brings us to the first failure I described at the beginning—the failure to raise up more elders and preachers. Our own church made another wonderful discovery after our first plant a couple of years ago: members who were peripheral players in our church joined the plant and were able to become central players in the plant. I'm thinking of one brother, for instance, who was not an elder in our church, but when placed in the planting situation, stepped up and became an elder. And now he, his family, and (I trust) even his non-Christian neighbors are benefitting from the more intense spiritual responsibilities he's undertaken as an elder of that church. In other words, church plants do more to raise up future elders and preachers than multi-site churches.

Ah, but how do we wisely steward the super-star preacher with five talents? Well, if his preaching really is *that* good, *that* accompanied by the Holy Spirit, then it will transform young believers into mature believers who will happily welcome the challenges associated with a church plant (at least if he's teaching them in this fashion). If, however, his preaching is just seemingly good *because he relies on the devices of the flesh*, that is, if he's only an entertainer, then, no, it won't be transformative; people won't be willing to go with the church plant; and the church won't find an easy solution to its "growth." The people will love *him*, and *his* humor, and *his* charisma. The problem is, they won't have learned to love Jesus.

Pastor, if you think a plant won't work out of your church, because they love *you*, then you just might be right. They do love you, and it may not work. The problem is, you might not be quite the pastor you thought you were, because it's you they love.

PLANT OFTEN

So a church can wisely-steward the talents of their super-star pastor, first, by planting often. With at least some of its plants, the church should try to empty seats, so that non-Christians and weaker sheep may come and fill them again. This, I think, is what God finally had to do to the church in Jerusalem. He had to force their hand to fulfill the Great Commission by scattering them through persecution. Life in the one

church in Jerusalem, no doubt, was comparatively comfortable, like life inside a nest. The apostles were super-star pastors if there ever were some. Problems arose, as with the distribution of food, but solutions were quickly found with more mature men filled with the Spirit and wisdom. No, we can't let go of *them*, can we, men like Philip or Stephen? Apparently, God had other plans: "Church, do you think I *need* Stephen to do my work? No, I don't. I'm taking him home. Church, do you think you *need* Philip? No, you don't. I'm sending him away."

Church-planting, admittedly, can be hugely disruptive to the life of the body. It's not easy to cut off an arm. But the pattern of the *entire Bible* tells me that God isn't afraid to do a little disrupting from time to time to provoke his people into the obedience of mission. Thomas Jefferson famously said, "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." When it comes to the Great Commission, I dare say, God has a similar philosophy. Should we, therefore, seek to preserve the safety of our church cocoons at all costs?

BUILD A BIGGER BUILDING

Second, a church can wisely steward the talents of their super-star pastor by building a bigger building. If it has the financial resources, and if it has a reasonable plan for continuing to elder *all the flock* with its increased size, great! It will become a bigger heart to pump out even more blood (a Mark Dever phrase).

USE TECHNOLOGY

Third, a church can wisely steward the talents of a super-star pastor by, well, in the seventies it would have been a tape and radio ministry, in the nineties a c.d. ministry, and today a Mp3 ministry.

There were several semesters in seminary when I listened to one or two John Piper sermons a week on my portable c.d. player. My discipleship to Christ, physically located at that point in Louisville, Kentucky, benefitted immensely from this man's unusual gifting. But then I took those benefits and put them to work in my comparatively small, inconsequential local church. I didn't need to attend his church to grow through his teaching. That said, I do not personally believe that most mega-church, multi-site pastors have the same Holy Spirit gifting and power as John Piper. In too many cases, I fear that other things are propagating their popularity. Not only that, they implicitly fall back on a spectator-performance driven conception of Christianity.

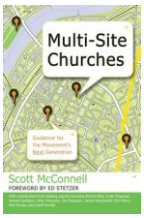
Jonathan Leeman is the director of communications for 9Marks.

May/June 2009

Book Review: *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation*, by Scott McConnell
Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

B&H Books, 2009. 256 pages. $16.99

Me reviewing this book is like a PETA employee reviewing a hunting manual.



Let me explain. I don't think churches should be multi-site. I think that the New Testament church's example, the meaning and use of the word *ekklesia*, and the nature of congregational authority all indicate that a church is by definition, and therefore should only be, a single assembly that meets in one place. Strictly speaking, I don't think that multi-site churches even exist. I think that each site or campus or venue is by definition a separate church, at least if we use the word "church" the way the New Testament does.

Yet this book by Scott McConnell, associate director of LifeWay Research, was not written to persuade people like me about the biblical legitimacy of multi-site churches. It was written to give practical help to those who are considering going multi-site or have already done so.

OVERVIEW

In order to provide this practical help, McConnell interviewed dozens of pastors of multi-site churches and both synthesized their perspectives and allowed them to speak for themselves. Nine of the twelve chapters feature advice from multi-site pastors such as James MacDonald, Geoff Surratt, Dino Rizzo, and Jon Ferguson. The rest of the book is largely made up of anecdotes, advice, and practices from the first- and second-generation multi-site churches McConnell investigated.

In its twelve chapters the book covers the reasons for multi-site (Ch. 1), the things a church should have in place before going multi-site (Chs. 2-3), how to define your multi-site church (Ch. 4), finding a campus pastor (Ch. 5), developing other leaders (Ch. 6), deciding where to launch (Ch. 7), how to communicate with the different sites (Ch. 8), how to adapt your staff and continue developing leaders (Chs. 9-10), and how to keep the sites connected (Ch. 11). The book's final chapter addresses two special types of new sites: an ethnic or multi-cultural site, and merging with or absorbing an existing church (Ch. 12).

Multi-Site Churches is straightforward, practical, and fairly comprehensive. If you're a pastor set on leading your church to become a multi-site church, you'll probably benefit from this book's collection of the ideas and experiences of dozens of pastors who have gone that way in the past few years. And there are some things about the book I would commend, especially the evident evangelistic zeal of all of the pastors interviewed for the book. These brothers are clearly pursuing multi-site ministry out of a genuine desire to reach more people with the gospel. So, while I have serious problems with the method they're using, I rejoice that these men are laboring to reach others with the good news about Christ.

But if you're a pastor intending to embrace multi-site, there are a few problems with this book that I think should cause you concern about the thinking behind this promising new "tool" for doing church.

PRAGMATISM

The first problem is pragmatism. This pragmatism comes across in two ways. First, the book never seriously wrestles with the question, "Is multi-site biblical?" I know that this book is meant to be a how-to guide, not a theological treatise, but it is troubling that the book never provides a scriptural justification for multi-site, although a few of the pastors who contribute to the book at least raise the issue. James MacDonald, for example, writes, "Theologically I have no hesitation with multi-site… There is definitely a multilocation dynamic to the church in Acts. And I don't see anything in Scripture that forbids it" (22). And that's about it: a multi-location dynamic in the book of Acts and no apparent command against it. I'm sure that the brothers interviewed for this book have spent a lot of time examining what the Bible teaches about God's holiness and man's sinfulness and Christ's person and work and our need to repent of our

sins and trust in Christ. And perhaps these brothers have given similarly serious thought to whether or not the Bible supports multi-site. But whether they have or not, this book almost entirely ignores the question, "Is multi-site biblical?"

Second, McConnell and the pastors he draws from endorse the multi-site method not because it is faithful to God's Word but because it works. How do they know it works? Because more people are coming to church. Throughout the book there is a running appeal to the number of attenders as the test of a church's success (see pp. 20, 68, 152, 153, 230). And in the book's epilogue McConnell writes, "Naysayers shake their heads at the multi-site movement, wondering…if somehow multi-site is bad" (235). He then cites Jesus' saying, "For each tree is known by its own fruit," (Luke 6:44) and responds, "The fruit has been abundantly good" (235). This is classic pragmatism. The ends justify the means. Good things are happening, so what we're doing must be right.

While I don't doubt that people are coming to Christ in multi-site churches, the point is that an appeal to pragmatic results in order to justify a practice undermines the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. If our question is not, "What does God's Word say we can and cannot do as a church?" but "What will bring the most people through the door?" then we have rejected Scripture as our authority and decided that we have enough wisdom to decide what's right for ourselves.

NUMBERS

The second problem is an overwhelming concern for church growth as defined by the number of people attending. I mentioned the book's running appeal to numbers as the all-sufficient test of success above, but it's worth pointing out again. Throughout the book, churches are defined by the number of attenders. Success equals lots of people attending. Failure equals fewer people attending, or even the dreaded "plateau." While I do think that a biblically healthy church should grow, numerical increase in attendance is by no means a surefire guide to a church's success. Pastors must actively resist the temptation to covet numbers, not justify their methods by an appeal to them.

GOD TOLD ME TO GO MULTI-SITE

The third problem is an unbiblical accent on subjective experiences of God's guidance. I don't deny that God can lead his people in specific ways through subjective guidance, but I *do* think that a reliance upon "God's leadership" (4) as experienced through a subjective sense of guidance is a dangerous thing to put a lot of weight on. At the end of the day, how do you know when it's God talking and when it's just your own thoughts? How do you know when it's God talking or Satan talking? Weigh it in the balance of Scripture? Exactly. But the irony is that this book is full of "God led us to…" (see, for example, pp. 1, 4, 6, 16, 18, 19, 32, 34, 44, 103, and 114) with very little about what God has concretely said to us in his Word.

STARBUCKS, MCDONALD'S AND QUARTERBACKS

The fourth problem with this book is an uncritical reliance on the corporate world as a model for the church. Like so much literature on the church today, *Multi-Site Churches* looks to the corporate world as if it holds a magic key for success. How can churches determine which are the essential aspects of their ministry they need to replicate at each new site? Dave Ferguson tells churches to take a good look at McDonalds and Starbucks (69). They seem to have figured it out. Or what makes a good campus pastor? Geoff Surratt writes, "I think the best example of what an effective campus pastor should look like is an NFL quarterback." (101). While these kind of examples can be useful as illustrations or analogies, the pastors in *Multi-Site Churches* place far too much weight on worldly examples of success, rather than building their philosophy of ministry on Scripture.

WHAT ABOUT MEMBERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE?

The fifth problem is that this book entirely ignores church membership and discipline. This is especially disappointing because not only are membership and discipline crucial biblical components of the life of the church, they are two of the issues (particularly discipline) that would most strain multi-site ministry.

How does a multi-site church welcome in and see off members? Do members who go to one site have any responsibility to the members who go to other sites? Whose responsibility is it when a church member who goes to campus number five is living in open, unrepentant sin? While this book has a whole lot to say about team teaching and video broadcasting and restructuring your staff and budget, it has nothing at all to say about church membership and discipline.

But my point in these five critiques is not to convince you that this is a bad book. My point in highlighting these weaknesses is to challenge you to develop a conviction and then have a conversation.

A CONVICTION AND A CONVERSATION

The conviction? That Scripture is not only authoritative, but *sufficient*. While I'm sure the pastors represented in this book intend to take Scripture seriously, they don't seem to think it has much to say to multi-site churches one way or another. But in order to obey God and faithfully carry out the Great Commission, as these pastors are commendably eager to do, we must believe that Scripture is both authoritative and sufficient. We must believe that it is true and that it is all we need in order to faithfully preach the gospel and shepherd God's church. If we don't believe that Scripture is sufficient for the church, we'll constantly be looking to the next trend, the next method, the next model, the next technique, or the next tool as if it offered us the success we could obtain in no other way. Yet if you believe in the sufficiency of Scripture you'll not only test all of these enticing models and methods and techniques in the light of God's word, you'll constantly turn back to Scripture in order to understand it better and better. And in this way your ministry will bear increasingly better fruit as you teach God's Word, live in obedience to God's Word, and lead your church in increasing conformity to God's Word.

And the conversation? Before we talk about multiple services or sites or venues or anything else, we need to have a conversation about what the Bible teaches about the church. What does the New Testament word for church mean? How is it used? Does it ever refer to multiple gatherings in different locations? Does the Bible provide a pattern for church government and church structure today? If so, what does it look like? Who has authority in the church? Can a body outside of a local congregation exercise authority over it? What makes the church different from any other gathering of Christians?

This conversation is both important and neglected. And while *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation* contains plenty of good advice and even some biblical wisdom, I think it would serve pastors better to back the train up about six stops, affirm that Scripture is sufficient, and have a conversation about what the Bible teaches about the church. I hope this review has been a small step in that direction.

Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks.

May/June 2009

Book Review: *Franchising McChurch*, by Thomas White & John M. Yeats
Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

David C. Cook, 2009. 238 pages. $14.99

How do you review a book when you pretty much agree with everything it says? Book reviewers, after all, often feel the need to demonstrate that they can think critically and aren't entirely "taken in" by any one book. There's a temptation to comb through the haystack, looking for that one needle of disagreement. Inevitably, you find yourself falling into some kind of picayune pedantry.

Which is basically all I can do with Thomas White and John Yeats' *Franchising McChurch*. I have a few petty points of disagreement on various practical matters. And there are a couple of things I wish they did better. But honestly, the biggest problem with this book is that they didn't write it thirty years ago, before most evangelical churches decided to pull their car into the drive thru of consumerism.

The book's title says it all. Too many Evangelical churches have adopted a philosophy of ministry which reads suspiciously like the McDonald's corporate guidebook. Efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control are the prized virtues in running a successful franchise restaurant. There's a reason I've eaten McDonalds in Brazil, Greece, and South Africa. I know what I'm going to get! Churches, apparently, assume they have much to learn from this organizational paradigm.

For all the books presently on the market which discuss the role of consumerism in religion generally (e.g. *Consuming Religion*, *Selling God*, *Shopping for God, In Pursuit of the Almighty Dollar,* or *More Money, More Ministry*), very few, surprisingly, consider consumerism's affect on the local church. *This Little Church Went to Market*, *The Market Driven Church*, and the David Wells oeuvre are several exceptions. And just as each of these books makes its own contribution, *Franchising McChurch* does, too. First, it's written at a "pop" level that may better appeal to pastors who are intimidated by Wells' books.

Second, the authors clearly mean to persuade seminarians and pastors that there's a more biblical way to approach the local church. So they present something of a positive philosophy of ministry—particularly grounded in preaching the Word of God.

Third, and most significantly, this is the first book I've encountered which offers a sustained critique of the multi-site church movement. Several times I have heard of a pastor who went looking for a biblical or theological critique of a multi-site structure, but who, finding none, proceeded to split up his church into multiple churches yet strangely decide to call them "one church." White and Yeats do us all the service of offering the evangelical church one of its first critiques of the multi-site movement.

The first seven out of eleven chapters don't focus on the multi-site phenomenon, but on the consumer-driven mindset out of which the multi-site franchise ultimately flowers. Chapters 8 to 10 then focus on the "flower." Chapter 11, entitled "Quitting McChurch," offers a way out.

Pastor, whether you've already moved multi-site or not, you should, for the sake of your church, take the time to read this material, especially chapters 8 to 10. Here are a few of the thoughts they offer against a multi-site "church":

- The multi-site entity typically centralizes power in the pastor and those closest to him. After all, he's the constant in every venue (80-81).
- In this post-denominational era, people primarily identify themselves with the name of the pastor (81).
- Ironically, many of these churches call themselves "free churches," even though they really have something closer to an Episcopal structure with a bishop. Instead of learning how to submit to one another, campuses become subject to the external control of a centralized business structure (81; 192-99).

- Campuses/congregations become chained "to the demands of a consumer culture. In order to keep up the calculability and meet the demands of predictability, the congregations are forced to become more efficient and sacrifice people on the altar of success" (82-83).
- For all their talk of reaching postmodern culture, most of these churches are thoroughly modern. "[H]ow authentic can a pastor be if he never shows up in your church except via video?" (87).
- The failure rate of church plants is used an excuse to go multi-site, instead of turning to the power of God in prayer (152). A video stream is easier to set up than faithful saints praying for the success of new churches.
- The idea that the lead pastor cannot be replicated in plants undermines the very idea of discipleship, which entirely depends on replication (152). It's a good thing Jesus didn't take this view in order to put off discipleship (153).
- To argue that church plants fail because their planters are never as talented as the main pastor diminishes the gospel as the power of God (153).
- A multi-site structure undermines congregational responsibility (154).
- It also tempts leaders toward puffed-up egos and a reliance on their personalities (155-56).
- It robs from smaller churches (159f). More to the point, all the talk of "Multi-site churches displaying greater unity!" rings hollow when what they really mean is the unity of their franchise brand. After all, the brand is being pitched over and against all the alternatives in the neighborhood. Why would a multi-site church plant in a new neighborhood instead of supporting and praying for the churches already in that neighborhood? It's not Christ's kingdom they want to see expanded; it's their franchise brand (167-168; 180-83). Multi-site churches focus on independent kingdoms rather than on God's kingdom (185).
- What happens when the pastor leaves (183)?
- Biblical arguments for multi-site from Acts 2 and 15 are weak (172-78).
- Church planting is the biblical model, and the evidence is abundant (178-180; 185).
- Multi-site churches are just mini-denominations (190-91).
- The multi-site structure makes it impossible for churches to fulfill their biblical responsibilities in a meaningful fashion, such as choose their leaders or discipline their members (199-203).

And the list keeps going. White and Yeats present a strong and sustained case against the multi-site church. Whether you agree or not, every Christian should be grateful that these two men are finally taking on the subject and introducing substance into the conversation.

Of course, I do agree with them. That said, here's my fear concerning White and Yeats' *Franchising McChurch*: I wonder if it will persuade those who are not already persuaded. We can use that ugly word "consumerism" and all agree that it just sounds just horrible. But I've watched the very men who criticize consumerism, cheap grace, and nominalism turn around and promote the very practices (like a multi-site structure) which in and of themselves inculcate consumerism and nominalism in a church. They don't *get it*, even if they think they *get it*.

If you've been eating fast food all your life, you simply may not know what healthy food tastes like. Even if you have tasted it once or twice, you may not have found it immediately appealing and so never give it the chance to experience a steady diet of it. So the junk food continues.

Maybe there is one thing White and Yeats could have done that they didn't do: They could have painted a picture of the many men and women we have all personally known who have floated along anonymously in today's consumer-driven churches, churches both multi- and single-site, into places of great danger. These friends and loved ones have been taught all their lives that, like consumers, they are the authority over what constitutes good preaching, singing, and programs. So they sit in judgment over one church, then another, never submitting their discipleship to any. Milk is what they want, never meat, and their spiritual health shows as much—like an adult man who never moved beyond the food he was given as an infant.

The tragedy of the church today is that so many leaders are so thrilled by the "success" of their congregations, they don't take time to see the countless sheep wandering into crevices or eaten by

wolves. I see them because they are the friends that I have known over the years. Now they're divorced from their spouses, or alcoholics in-denial, or lost from the faith forever. I've known many lost and crippled sheep, and I cannot help but get angry when I consider how their churches and pastors failed them as those pastors became enamored, not with God's Word, but with some new technique that they hoped would attract the sheep.

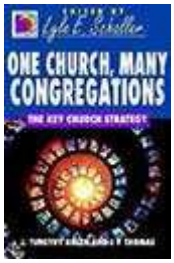
White and Yeats offer an alternative and excellent course for our generation. Yet I wonder if we have the palettes for it.

Jonathan Leeman is the director of communications for 9Marks.

May/June 2009

Book Review: *One Church, Many Congregations: The Key Church Strategy*, by J. Timothy Ahlen and J. V. Thomas
Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

Abingdon Press, 1999. 156 pages. $18.00



A United Methodist publishing house asked two Baptists to write a book about how churches can revolutionize their ministries by becoming one church with many congregations. Kind of sounds like the beginning of a joke or maybe a logic puzzle, doesn't it?

In fact, it's the story behind J. Timothy Ahlen and J. V. Thomas's book *One Church, Many Congregations.* Ahlen and Thomas wrote their book in order to explain and help other churches implement what they call the "Key Church Strategy." The Key Church Strategy is an evangelism strategy. One church starts other congregations primarily composed of a particular ethnic or cultural group, which may or may not remain a part of the one "Key Church."

The authors spend the first two chapters of the book explaining the biblical and practical foundations of this idea. The last three chapters explain how the "Key Church Strategy" relates to community ministry and how Key Church practitioners can best reach out to those who live in "mulitihousing," that is, apartments.

So while the book's title indicates that it's primarily about multi-site churches, much of the book focuses on community ministry and evangelistic work in lower-income areas. We're told that churches should start community outreach "missions" and evangelistic meetings that may develop into "churches" that either remain under the umbrella of the Key Church or eventually become independent, but little is actually said that's unique to a multi-site church strategy.

Now, apart from the idea that multiple churches can somehow remain one local church, this is a great idea. Churches should work to cross cultural and ethnic boundaries for the sake of the gospel. And if we're willing to take the gospel overseas, we should certainly be willing to do this down the street. Also, Ahlen and Thomas rightly insist that the goal of such evangelistic labors should not merely be individual converts, but local churches.

Yet despite the good intentions behind at least some of it, this book is mostly a jumbled collection of personal anecdotes, strategies for community outreach, and practical suggestions about how churches can grow by starting lots of new evangelistic meetings that become churches.

So, rather than criticize the book's handling of Scripture and understanding of the church, let's just get to the bottom line: should you read this book? No.

You shouldn't read this book if…

- You're looking for a general introduction to multi-site churches. For that, try *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, reviewed in this eJournal by John Hammett.

- You're looking for a comprehensive "how to" guide for multi-site churches. For that, try *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation*, which I review in the present eJournal.
- You're looking for biblical arguments for or against multi-site churches. For that, see the pieces by Allison, Greear, Gaines, and Leeman in the present eJournal.

Does that seem too harsh? I'll make a couple of exceptions:

1. You might want to read pages 24-32 of this book if you want to read a somewhat thoughtful treatment of Scripture by a multi-site advocate. Still, you might be disappointed by what you find. Baptists Ahlen and Thomas appeal to the apostles' authority over all the churches to justify the practice of one church having authority over others. They apparently fail to consider whether or not there is any difference between an apostle's authority and the authority of any church leader who has ever lived since. Yet if you have an insatiable curiosity to see how multi-site advocates handle Scripture, those nine pages are for you. I'll leave it to you to decide whether they're worth eighteen dollars.
2. You might want to read portions of this book if you are inordinately interested in the historical roots of the multi-site movement. This book will provide you a practitioner's perspective on some early examples of multi-site churches.

I know, hardly a ringing endorsement. You should feel safe in passing this one by.

Bobby Jamieson is the assistant editor for 9Marks.

May/June 2009

Book Review: *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, by Geoff Surrat, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird
Reviewed by John Hammett

The Multi-Site Church Revolution is the second book in the Leadership Network Innovation Series, which seeks to energize, equip, and inspire Christian leaders. These books are designed for practitioners, offering "*real* stories, about *real* leaders, in *real* churches, doing *real* ministry" (224) and utilizing innovative and transferable principles. The three authors of this book have all been involved in multi-site church ministry and in the Leadership Network.

BOOK SUMMARY

The book begins with a foreword and preface, includes fifteen chapters divided into four parts, and concludes with three appendices, endnotes, and subject and Scripture indices.

According to the preface, the movement toward multi-site churches is a revolution already taking hold. The authors cite one study that claims one in three churches is considering developing a new service in a new location. And they foresee the day when, like chain hotels and chain restaurants, "multi-site extensions of trusted-name churches" will be the norm (10).

Part 1 introduces the multi-site movement. Chapter 1 defines a multi-site church as "one church meeting in multiple locations," sharing "a common vision, budget, leadership, and board" (18). A number of growing multi-site churches are profiled, and the five most prominent models within this diverse movement are described: video-venture, regional-campus, teaching-team, partnership, and low-risk. In practice, the authors note that most multi-site churches are a blend of these models.

Part 2 is the longest section of the book, addressing the "how to" question. It begins with the question, "would it work for you?" The authors list numerous advantages they see in going multi-site as opposed to planting new "stand-alone" churches. They give churches "A Self-Diagnostic Tool" (57) at the end of the chapter to assess their readiness. Chapter 4 looks at the motivations for developing multiple venues. The two most common seem to be overcrowding of a growing church's facility and a desire to reach out into new areas. Further chapters discuss how to discern opportunities, and promote and finance a second location. Each of the six chapters in this part includes practical exercises—called "Workouts"—designed to help churches with the nuts and bolts of developing a multi-site church.

Part 3 continues in the same practical vein, highlighting elements crucial in the success of a multi-site church. Becoming a multi-site church, rather than merely planting a new church, requires identifying and transferring the original church's "DNA" to additional locations. Multi-site churches also raise difficult questions of structure and leadership, which are considered in chapters ten and eleven. The final chapter in part three deals with technology, an important element for multi-site churches because a major feature of many multi-site churches is the use of videocast preaching. One-third of multi-site churches use videocast preaching exclusively, and another third use a combination of videocast and in-person preaching.

The last two chapters comprise Part 4, which looks at some of the key barriers to adding locations, and seeks to inspire churches to "be part of turning the tide in a battle being lost by current approaches to doing church" (195). Appendices direct the readers to internet links for more practical tools and list some multi-site churches, both internationally and in North America.

EVALUATION

The authors present a passionate case for multi-site churches. They clearly believe this model is the wave of the future, and see its evangelistic fruitfulness as evidence of the blessing of God upon it. They present dozens of positive examples, and believe most churches should join this revolution. For growing churches facing limitations of space, becoming multi-site seems preferable to building ever bigger

buildings and becoming ever bigger megachurches. Multi-site churches have been effective in extending ministry into previously unchurched or underchurched areas.

But this model raises numerous theological and ecclesiological questions that are not acknowledged or are treated superficially. Perhaps this is due to the fact that its intended audience is practitioners rather than theologians, but practitioners should also be theologians.

Biblical Basis?

For example, is there a biblical basis for the idea of a multi-site church? If so, it is not developed very thoroughly in this book. The Scripture index contains only twenty-three references to biblical texts in the book, and in a number of places, the references that are used are very much out of place. For example, is it really accurate to say that when Moses put leaders over the people of Israel (Ex. 18:21-23), he "created the first multi-site church" (143)? Attention to Scripture is minimal throughout. For example, how can the authors devote an entire chapter to leadership and never consider what Scripture says about the qualifications for leaders in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5?

Another example of an unrecognized issue occurs on page 28, which gives definitions for six key multi-site terms, but the critical term "church" is not one of them. If "church" by definition involves a local body of believers who gather, then a multi-site church is an impossibility. The authors assert that "Corinth and other first-century churches were multi-site, as a number of multi-site house churches were considered to be part of one citywide church" (17). But that goes beyond what the evidence actually shows. Paul does use the singular "church" to refer to the church in a city, but whether there were multiple house churches in those cities or not, we do not know. There may have been both small group and large group meetings of a body of believers that considered themselves one church and occasionally gathered as one, but multi-site churches do not have any large group meeting where all the multiple sites of the one church gather. Moreover, when Paul spoke of the churches in an area, he consistently used the plural (the churches of Asia, Macedonia, Galatia, Judea). The multi-site model sees one church extending over a region and even internationally. Finally, the seven churches in Revelation 2 to 3 are relatively near one another geographically, yet they are not regarded as multiple sites of one church but as distinct local churches.

Pastoral Care?

Another question regards those who use videocast preaching. The authors emphasize the importance of each location having a "campus pastor," who offers pastoral care but does not preach and teach his people. But can pastoral care and preaching be so easily separated? Can the elders of a church routinely give over the feeding of the flock to someone who has no relationship to them? One of the tasks most clearly associated with the office of pastor in the New Testament is that of teaching the flock. This separation of pastoral care and preaching is a serious question raised by the growing use of videocasts that needs more careful consideration.

Episcopalian?

A final question lies in the area of polity. One of the marks of a multi-site church is sharing a common leadership and board. At one point, the authors give an organizational chart of what a multi-site church would look like under such leadership (137). The lead pastor in this model closely resembles the bishop of episcopal polity. That is fine, if one happens to follow that polity. But those of presbyterian and congregational polities should be aware of the implicit polity in multi-site churches.

BOTTOM LINE: WHY NOT PLANT INDEPENDENT CHURCHES?

One question considered but never answered to my satisfaction is why developing multiple sites of the "same" church is preferable to planting new independent churches. The authors list what they see as

eight advantages of developing multi-site churches over planting new churches (see 51: Accountability; Sharing of resources; Infusion of trained workers; Shared DNA; Greater prayer support; Preestablished network for problem solving; Not needing to ‘reinvent the wheel’; Connection with others doing the same thing). But all these supposed advantages could and should happen in any healthy new church plant. In fact, the authors acknowledge that multi-site can also be an effective church planting model, with the multiple sites eventually becoming "stand-alone churches" (53). Using this model for church planting or seeing multi-site churches as networks of churches would resolve a number of the questions raised above, and would be, in this reviewer’s opinion, a better use of the model.

This book is not designed to answer these questions, and so it is somewhat unfair to criticize it for not answering them. As I said, it is addressed to practitioners, especially pastors of growing churches who face space problems. However, if multi-site is to become the norm for churches of the future, the questions raised above need serious discussion. For any evangelical, the biblical basis of an idea is paramount. The authors claim that "Corinth and other first-century churches were multi-site" (17). But a one paragraph discussion is not a sufficient justification for a movement they call "revolutionary." The leaders of this movement need to show more clearly that a multi-site church fits within the biblical meaning of *ekklesia* before recommending it as fervently as they do. A respect for history should cause them to ponder why earlier theologians never saw this model in the pages of the New Testament. Before adopting a pragmatic solution in response to the need for additional seating, considering the theological implications of the solution is imperative. This book *should be* building upon a previous work making the theological, exegetical, and ecclesiological case for multi-site churches. But that work has not yet been written. I am not sure that a convincing case can be made; perhaps it can. But before urging multitudes of churches to join the movement, the implications of the multi-site model need to be considered.

Perhaps multi-site churches are a preferable option to building bigger buildings for bigger megachurches. But why adopt what is as of now biblically questionable when the better option of planting new churches is clearly biblical? Much of what this book contains can be easily transferred to a strong and supportive church planting model, which would accomplish many of the same goals as the multi-site church while relieving many of the troubling ecclesiological questions.

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Book Review: *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion,* by Robert Wuthnow
Reviewed by Matt McCullough

Princeton University Press, 2007. 298 pp. $29.95

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow thinks the future of American religion could be in doubt "unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously" (p. 17). And he teaches at Princeton, so obviously you should listen to him, right?

WHY THE FUTURE LOOKS BLEAK

Before discussing how and why his argument matters, let me first tell you a bit about why he believes the future looks so bleak.

To ground his analysis Wuthnow looks at a collection of major surveys, isolating the data on adults between the ages of twenty one and forty five. And I should begin with a friendly word of warning: trying to follow the argument here can be really frustrating. For one thing, Wuthnow's a sociologist, and reading a sociologist means slogging through an almost unbearable sequence of numbers, percentages, and graphs.

And, like a good social scientist, he follows the evidence where it leads him, which means that not everything fits into a nice clear picture. Some areas of religious involvement he tests don't reveal anything unique about young adults, and other conclusions can be just plain obvious. (Readers of chapter 7 will hardly be shocked to find that young adults use the internet a lot to get information, and email helps people stay connected!)

But this book rewards perseverance with some significant insights. Here I want to focus on the two that Wuthnow believes have the most overarching impact on the shape of American religion: changing family dynamics, and what he calls spiritual "tinkering."

Changing Family Dynamics

Perhaps this book's most important contribution is its attempt to explain why surveys show that young adults today are less likely to attend church than young adults of the previous generation (chapters 2-3). Without boring you (and me!) with the specifics of Wuthnow's argument in all its mathematical glory, his point is that young adults aren't attending church as much because they're waiting longer than their parents did to get married and have children. His numbers show that in both periods under comparison, 1972-76 and 1998-2002, married young adults were far more likely to attend church than their unmarried counterparts. And the percentage of married couples who participated in a local church remained constant over both periods. This means that the decline in attendance numbers has come almost entirely from the ranks of the unmarried. This correlation between being married and going to church spells trouble for Wuthnow given that, in the early 1970s, 74 percent of adults age 21 to 45 were married, while in the latter period it was only 45 percent (p. 55).

He also found that other measures of stability correspond to church attendance. Those who have children, and presumably become more interested in passing their values along to their children, go to church more than those who don't have kids. And having a steady, long-term job, which presumably comes with a deeper investment in one's community, also means one is more likely to participate in church.

But like marriage these are things young adults are waiting longer to achieve, if at all. In short, "the influences that *reinforce* religious participation are weaker than they were a generation ago," so fewer young adults are contributing to and receiving from the influences of local congregations (70; emphasis original).

Spiritual Tinkering

If these changing family and work dynamics are what most distinguish the religious world of young adults, that world is also largely defined by a characteristic inherited from the previous generation: spiritual "tinkering."

What Wuthnow means by "tinkering" is simply building a life, a practice, a worldview using whatever resources may be available. Classic television fans among you, think MacGyver here. If all the guy had handy was a roll of duct tape, a paper clip, a 9-volt battery, and a old can of root beer, he could still make a bomb. According to Wuthnow, each generation, really each individual, takes the ideas and practices handed down to them as well as the values and opportunities of their unique culture and uses them to build a distinctive religiosity.

As Wuthnow himself admits, to some extent every generation does tinkering of its own. Even Jonathan Edwards, for example, defended the Great Awakening and the traditional doctrines of Calvinism using philosophical language he picked up from the best minds of his era, men like Isaac Newton and John Locke.

What makes today's young adults a "generation of tinkerers" is the unprecedented number of options they have to work with and the scale of the tinkering they do with these options. Edwards had Newton and Locke; this generation has television and the internet and self-help bestsellers in paperback. What's more, globalization and immigration have brought the world's religions to American doorsteps. This list of environmental factors could go on and on, and I would refer you to the second half of the book for some important examples of tinkering in action.

Overall, and most importantly, Wuthnow argues that the declining commitment to local churches does not mean young adults are any less interested in spiritual issues. The numbers make that very clear. What it does mean is that outside the context and accountability of traditional religious institutions, the quest for spiritual fulfillment becomes much more fluid and unpredictable. Any religious resource, at least in theory, becomes an acceptable resource. But no resource is permanent.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Of course, the main question about Wuthnow's findings has to be, quite simply, why should I care? What difference does it make what young adults are interested in, or how their religious choices are different from their parents'? Or, more broadly, how can the sociological study of American religion help my ministry?

Wuthnow's answer is a good one, so far as it goes. In short, theology (or ministry) "manifests itself in the concrete realities of human life" (xiii). Our social context shapes how we think and act whether we realize it or not. Better, then, to be self-aware by learning as much as we can about our environment than to minister in ignorance of our surroundings.

WHAT SHOULD A PASTOR DO WITH THIS INFORMATION?

The minister must also ask the question: once we know our environment, what should we do with the information? At the risk of reductionism, I see a couple options. You can either shape your ministry to address the needs and desires of young adults, or you can shape your prophetic challenge to the specific weaknesses of your context.

For example, let's take Wuthnow's two overarching characteristics of today's young adults. Young adults are waiting longer to settle down in marriage, parenthood, and work, and perhaps as a result they're coming to church less and less. Wuthnow suggests a reason for this decline is that churches typically offer strong programs for youth and young families, but offer no institutional support for young singles. And of course, who wouldn't want the church to teach godly singleness and offer guidance through some of life's most important decisions? But knowing that young adults are willingly delaying key responsibilities

of adulthood also helps shape your biblical challenge to that group. As a pastor you should urge them to take responsibility sooner rather than later as God gives opportunity.

Or take spiritual tinkering. Wuthnow suggests appealing to these seekers with strong community, certainly a biblical component of healthy church life, rather than firm answers that might be repulsive (e.g., pp. 231-32). But knowing this tinkering tendency, the minister's responsibility under God is to call individuals to recognize an authority beyond themselves and their shifting desires, an authority rooted in Scripture and communicated through the local church.

CONCLUSION

So why do studies like this one matter? Because, though the biblical truth at center of your ministry remains the same, you must unpack the implications of that truth as they relate to each generation. That's application. And that's why this book is worth your time.

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Book Review: *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity…and Why it Matters* by Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons
Reveiwed by Owen Strachan

Baker, 2007. $17.99.

"Christianity has an image problem." (11)

So say researcher Dave Kinnaman and market innovator Gabe Lyons in the recently published *unChristian*. A Barna Group research project commissioned by Lyons and led by Kinnaman, *unChristian* seeks to address this "image problem" by speaking frankly to believers about young people who "admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and [who] reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians" (11).

No small matter, this. And the book is winning no small audience. It is currently ranked very highly on the Amazon booklist, it garnered a starred review from *Publisher's Weekly*, and it was recently cited in the *New York Times*. Seeking to be a movement-shaping text, it calls for discernment on the part of its reader (and reviewer).

ARE WE HYPOCRITICAL?

unChristian considers six problematic areas of Christian behavior, each of which we will briefly analyze. The first area is that too many Christians are "Hypocritical." Kinnaman and Lyons write, "So how did Christians acquire a hypocritical image in America today? Let's start with the most obvious reason: our lives don't match our beliefs. In many ways, our lifestyles and perspectives are no different from those of anyone around us." (46)

This is true. Though redeemed, we still carry sin within us. When one adds to this problem the many scandals caused by professing Christians in recent decades, along with the fact that many people claim to be Christians who are not, we have a weighty problem on our hands. We need to be honest with unbelievers about our own shortcomings and the different factors that contribute to our hypocritical image.

Then again, are Christians really more hypocritical than most non-Christians? Could it be the world has a vested interest in making much of one and not the other?

ARE WE UNCARING?

The next area of evangelical weakness is covered in "Get Saved!" Kinnaman and Lyons believe that many well-meaning believers prioritize gospel witness so much that they often fail to cultivate meaningful relationships with unbelievers. The authors provide a story from one New Yorker that makes the point well:

> A young guy approached me in a subway station once, friendly, full of questions, interested in talking. He seemed really nice, and I couldn't believe a New Yorker was being so, well, nice!...Next time I heard from him, he invited me to a Bible study, and that was all he wanted to talk about. When I said, 'No thanks,' I never heard from him again.

This account resonated with me because I have acted like this young man on a number of occasions. As with many passionate Christians, I have sometimes failed to love those to whom I am witnessing and have thought of them as evangelistic statistics, not people. This is regrettable, and *unChristian* challenged me to change.

Having noted this, though, I also wonder whether it isn't a simple consequence of gospel witness that many people feel put upon, especially in an age that is determinedly anti-preachy (except when it comes to global warming, same-sex marriage, and other popular concerns in our culture).

ARE WE ANTI-HOMOSEXUAL?

The next problem area is that Christians are "Antihomosexual." In this chapter, the reader is challenged to avoid shunning and stigmatizing homosexuals, a practice the authors allege is quite common among Christians. "When we raise young people to shun their 'different' peers," they opine, "we are actually limiting the spiritual influence they can have, and we force them to create a false barrier that leads them to question their faith in more significant ways" (99). In addition, they point out that if "we don't work at developing meaningful relationships with our co-workers, whether gay or straight, how can we expect them to respect us and our beliefs?" (105)

There is certainly much work to be done on this point by evangelical Christians and churches. Knowing the biblical stance on this sin, we sometimes privilege this sin above others and end up being far less loving to homosexual people than our faith demands.

However, the fact that Christians call homosexuality a sin automatically brands us in today's permissive sexual culture. The hard reality here may be that even the most compassionate Bible-believing Christians will find this image hard to shed in our day.

ARE WE SHELTERED FROM THE WORLD?

The fourth problem with many Christians, say Kinnaman and Lyons, is that they shelter themselves from the outside world. Here the authors provide an incisive comment from one Christian on the life many believers lead:

> In our interviews, a twenty-eight-year-old Christian described this lifestyle: "So many Christians are caught up in the Christian subculture and are completely closed off from the world. We go to church on Wednesdays, Sundays, and sometimes on Saturdays. We attend small group on Tuesday night and serve on the Sunday school advisory board, the financial committee, and the welcoming committee. We go to barbeques with our Christian friends and plan group outings. We are closed off from the world. Even if we wanted to reach out to nonChristians, we don't have time and we don't know how. The only way we know how to reach out is to invite people to join in our Christian social circle. (130)

It is this point that I believe is the book's strongest. The robust calendar of many churches is a sign of health. It does seem, though, that many churches have so emphasized the life of the congregation that they leave their members with relatively little time to fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. Perhaps our "missional" friends have discovered a helpful emphasis in their ecclesial identity. Surely, the cloistered life of many evangelicals contrasts sharply with the example of Christ, who spent a great deal of time with unbelievers.

ARE WE TOO POLITICAL?

Kinnaman and Lyons want Christians to avoid being "Too Political" as well. Christianity, they assert, is linked with politics to the extent that it is identified with a party. The church's gospel ends up being confused by its political concerns. The authors suggest several improvements toward this end. They do not want Christians to place too much emphasis on politics; they want Christians to realize that there's nothing gained by winning elections if we lose our soul; they want Christians to respect their enemies rather than demonizing them; and they want Christians to respect, pray for, and listen to all leaders (168-9).

There is wisdom here. Many of us struggle at times to keep politics in proper perspective.

At the same time, I wonder if it is not unavoidable that we Christians, to some extent, will be identified as "too political." We have to be political in a country in which major moral questions are debated—and enacted—on a legislative level. Messy as it may be, it is only right that we work on a very public level to

protect the life of the unborn, for example. Though we must not identify God's kingdom with political agendas, we must also speak and act prophetically and boldly in our culture.

In addition, many of our unsaved friends have little hitch in their souls about championing political causes they believe in. The same people who critique Christians for being too political will themselves invest deeply in a political cause they care about (the Obama campaign and election shows this in abundance). If we still must work hard to avoid an overly political faith, we need to remember that there may be a little bluff-calling to do on this point with our critics.

ARE WE JUDGMENTAL?

The last area of concern for Kinnaman and Lyons centers in the perception of many unbelievers that Christians are "Judgmental." "Nearly nine out of ten young outsiders (87 percent)," the authors report without giving hard data, "said the term *judgmental* accurately describes present-day Christianity." (182) The authors then remark that "With young people, *how* we communicate is as important as *what* we communicate." (183)

This is surely true, and many of us need to hear this counsel and heed it. We should attempt to speak truth in love to the lost around us.

Yet it also seems inevitable that the church and its people will be judged for taking firm stands against sin. **Jesus** judged sin, and so did his followers, and they were killed for their stances. Even if we are friendly and loving, I wonder if Christians can easily avoid this label.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF CHRISTIANS CHANGE THEIR IMAGE?

Several other problems crop up during a critical reading of this book. What, exactly, will happen if Christians change their "image"? The authors are of two minds throughout the text. Early on, they strike the right balance on this point by noting that Christians cannot change the destinies of unbelievers by changing their own behavior: "We are not responsible for outsiders' decisions, but we are accountable when our actions and attitudes—misrepresenting a holy, just, and loving God—have pushed outsiders away." (14)

At other points, however, the tone shifts: "Because they [unbelievers] felt as though Christians had listened and cared about them," the authors argue in the last chapter, "they were less likely to reject Jesus." (209) Such logic inflates the importance of image and seems to make the conversion of lost people dependent on their impression of the actions of believers. Christians certainly must preach the gospel to others in order for them to be saved, but the Bible asserts that finally God saves whom he wills (Jn. 3:8, Rom. 9:16). This incongruity seems to undermine the book's **earlier** contention.

IS IMAGE-MANAGEMENT REALLY THE GOAL?

There is another key problem with *unChristian*, namely, that no matter how we Christians think we should position ourselves culturally, God blesses those whom the world hates (Matt. 5:11). Christians certainly can use this teaching to excuse all kinds of problematic, sinful behavior. However, this text in Matthew seems to relieve believers of exactly the kind of reputation management that *unChristian* calls for. After all, if image is to be a chief concern of the Christian, our predecessors—Christ, Stephen, Paul, and many others—have done a pretty poor job of burnishing the brand.

As a counter-cultural movement in the world, I would suggest that our central question is not "How do we manage our image in this world," but "How do we represent our Lord and obey his radical call on our lives?"

WHAT'S THE REAL PROBLEM?

Beyond this, even with radical self-examination of the most helpful Kierkegaardian kind, I am skeptical about the ability of believers to avoid unbelievers' condemning caricatures and stereotypes. Unbelievers, we learn in the Bible, are not prevented from faith in God by the people of God, but by the human heart, which is "desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). While our "good works" are to be "conspicuous" (1 Tim. 5:25) before the lost and so demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel, unbelievers hate the gospel and, in many cases, the people who believe it. In an image-obsessed world, we must keep ours in proper perspective.

Further problems show up throughout the book, among them

- the frequent lack of hard data to back up the published study results,
- the rather weak definition of "born-again" that factors heavily into numerous surveys and assessments,
- and the propensity of the authors to take the testimony of unbelievers about Christians as if it carries no ideological bias or personal prejudice.

A GOOD CHALLENGE

With these points noted, however, I would not hesitate to recommend *unChristian* to believers who wish to think hard about Christian life in a pagan culture. The text frequently convicted me about certain sins and tendencies in my own life. In addition, the testimony of certain pastors and thinkers at the conclusion of each chapter challenged me to love God and people more than I do.

If *unChristian* falls short of being the kind of movement-shaping text in the model of works like David Wells's recent *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Eerdmans, 2008), it does offer good food for thought on pet Christian sins and attitudes that can—and must—be addressed by those of us who so easily fall prey to them.

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Book Review: *Kindled Fire: How the Methods of C. H. Spurgeon Can Help Your Preaching*, by Zack Eswine
Reviewed by Kevin McFadden

Mentor, 2006. $17.99

What can Spurgeon teach us about preaching? To answer this question, you could spend the rest of your life reading the many volumes from Spurgeon's pen. Or, you could pick up a book that combs through all that material and distills Spurgeon's thinking about preaching into a single volume.

That is what Jack Eswine's *Kindled Fire* does. The subtitle may mislead some to think that the book applies the mechanics of Spurgeon's personal *practices* to preaching—for example, Spurgeon's well-known habit of choosing the Sunday morning sermon text on Saturday night. But actually Eswine wants to put his readers into Spurgeon's *classroom* and thus "enable preachers to 'apprentice' with Spurgeon for a season in order to learn from him about preaching" (17).

OVERVIEW

The book divides into four parts that each begin with a clear overview. Part one, "The Preacher's Story," focuses on God's providential calling and gifting of each preacher. To Spurgeon, the "special calling" to this "sacred office" must express itself in an all-absorbing personal desire for the work with no other motive than "the glory of God and the good of souls" (44). Further, this calling is one-sided until demonstrated in practice and confirmed by the church.

In part two, "The Preacher's Practice," we learn to "talk in Scriptural language" and use a Scriptural manner, by speaking plainly as the Scriptures do. Here, we also learn of Spurgeon's categories for preaching—preaching is not only explaining, illustrating, and applying, but *testifying* personally of the gospel in order to persuade the hearers.

In part three, "The Preacher's Power," Spurgeon teaches us both to trust in the Spirit's appointed means—the Bible and prayer—and to bow before the Spirit's mysteries. "The Holy Ghost uses means," Spurgeon said, "yet my trust is not in the word itself…but in the quickening Spirit who works by it" (168). Eswine observes that "for Spurgeon the antidote for church infection was the igniting of the 'old truth' with a 'fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit'" (177).

Finally, part four, "The Preachers Limitations," teaches us how to handle criticism, depression, physical malady, and the accompanying attack of the enemy. In these times, Spurgeon said, "I have found it a blessed thing in my own experience, to plead before God that I am His child" (208). The chapter also teaches us of the importance of fellow workers in the ministry. When asked once about the secret of his success, Spurgeon replied, "My people pray for me" (223).

ENCOURAGING AND CHALLENGING PREACHERS

This book is full of powerful quotes from Spurgeon, like this charge to Sunday School teachers:

> To stand up in a Sunday-school and say, 'Now be good boys and girls and God will love you,' is telling lies…. Dear teachers of the school, whatever you do not know, do know your Lord… and do make it a matter of prayer that you may get a knowledge of Christ and his atoning blood into their young hearts by the Holy Ghost" (142).

The book also contains several interesting anecdotes. For example, Spurgeon had the students of his Pastor's College live with families who were members of the Tabernacle to keep the young men from the "levity" which often arises from separating a man from "common social life" (215).

There may be better books on Spurgeon, and a preacher may find it more beneficial to spend his limited time in the primary sources, but Eswine has done us a great service by drawing together so much material on Spurgeon into one place. And he has drawn it together in a way that will both encourage and challenge preachers in their work.

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