

Key Learnings from a Massively Multisite Church

In the early 2000s, I started on my multisite journey. **In those days, we were just trying to solve a space problem at our growing church.** We had some innovative volunteers at our church who asked if they could take the video that we were using to run an “overflow” and host a small group, 45 minutes away from where we were meeting. It was an incredibly simple idea that flourished to the point where I’ve seen thousands of people connected to the churches I’ve served at through this approach to “doing church”.

Since then, I’ve had the honor of being at the forefront of fourteen campus launches. We’ve seen around 1,500 volunteers join our mission and actively work to see those campuses launched. Today, over 9,000 people attend the campuses that sprung from our efforts. **It has been a privilege to have a front row seat to this amazing approach to reaching new people with the message of Jesus.** Seeing a revolution from the inside gives one a perspective that is second to no other!

As incredible as it’s been to see this movement from the inside, there are some lessons I wished I had known before we started this journey. **These facts have been birthed over years of launching different sites and I wanted to share them with you here. These tips will help to save you time, effort and energy as you launch new locations!** Lean in on these lessons and you are bound to find a few shortcuts to reaching more people in your community.

I’m still as much of a “fan” of the multisite church approach today as I was all those years ago when I was setting out to launch with so much hope in the first campus. **I really do think that every growing church should consider this approach to multiplication.** It’s been breathtaking to see this movement in a few churches grow to the point where one in six churchgoers in North America now attend a multisite church! Wowsers! I would have never predicted that back when we started sharing our video with that small group 45 minutes away!

The size and health of your launch core is the critical success factor.

Having watched so many different dynamics associated with these launches up close, I am convinced that the campuses that launch strong have a large and healthy group of volunteers kicking it off. In fact, when I talk with churches who have struggling campuses the problems can often be linked back to a lack of passionate people on the launch team. Moreover, it indicates that the volunteers weren’t trained enough before the campus started.

Yes, you can launch too quickly.

The best volunteers are not early adopters but are, counter-intuitively, the “late majority” folks because they are most likely to stick with the campus long term. The problem with that is that most church leaders are more “innovative” than the people they need to make that campus work. Innovators love the pressure of getting the campus out of the door but the vast majority of

volunteers prefer to take time and need to be “wooded” into the process. Once you win these folks over, they will stick and stay for the long haul. Too many churches rush the launch process and miss the opportunity to build long-term leadership teams.

Campus Pastors are hard to find ... but are most likely found within.

I wish I could get back all the hours I wasted worrying about where we were going to recruit campus pastors from. There is a clear evidence that campus pastors are being found within the church that is launching the campuses. In fact, 87% of campus pastors are found internally. [\[ref\]](#) This means you should get busy considering that fact that your next campus pastor is most likely already attending your church. Instead of looking far afield for them, invest your energy in identifying them and bringing them up.

It's not about video-driven campuses.

Too many times people assume that all multisite churches are just pumping video from one campus to others. However, what we're seeing is the majority of multisite churches are doing some combination of both local live and centralized video teaching. [\[ref\]](#) It's healthy and good for local campuses to get a chance to teach on a regular basis in “video-driven” multisite churches. (Of course, “regular” is up for discussion and debate.) In churches that do some form of “team teaching” where the campus pastors do most of the communication, it's valuable to have occasional video messages to keep the church rowing together. The fact is, the bigger the church and the more campuses you have the more video you are going to use among your locations. [\[ref\]](#)

Student ministry is hard in multisite.

At its core, the idea of multisite church is about delivering a smaller and “closer to home” experience. For adults, if there are 150 or 1,500 people in the room, the experience is a close approximation. For most kids, the small group leader is the key to delivering the best experience possible. For students, *critical mass matters*. If there are 20 people at an event or 100 people at the event, it's not 5 times better but more like 50 times cooler! This is challenging in multisite because it tends to subdivide your church into small communities. Lots of churches struggle providing student ministry in this approach.

It's way more financially efficient.

Multiple times over the years I've been in the situation where we are building a large box to house one of our campuses; at the same time as working on new “portable” locations. When you do a side by side financial comparisons of “cost per seat” to launch a new “big box” versus launching new campuses, the new portable locations are in an entirely different language on the cost structure. Many churches are driven to launch new campuses rather than build a bigger “box” because the cost structures are just so compelling. In fact, when talking with organizations that build a lot of churches they just aren't seeing people building the “big box”

churches anymore as a direct impact of the multisite movement.

Think Regional not National.

There are a few churches that have used this model to launch campuses across the country. These should be seen as an exception, not a guideline for you to follow. Those churches usually have a uniquely gifted communicator with a national platform that can speak to that audience. Most multisite churches should be thinking about how they can use this strategy to saturate the region they are from. As a rule of thumb, that region usually extends to where people cheer for the same sports teams. First, figure out how to reach people in that region before jumping to national aspirations. (By the way, why do so many multisite churches in the north have campuses in Florida?)

Nail it before you scale it.

You'll get more of whatever you multiply through going multisite. If you have problems with parts of what you do, those parts will just grow. If there are aspects of your ministry that are full of pain in the process, you'll just have more pain. Before you head out to launch make sure there is a modicum of health.

Teaching is the biggest “non-issue” long term.

There is a lot of conversation and discussion up front about how to deliver teaching at most multisite churches. Teaching pastors do a lot soul-searching around them being the “face on the screen” all over town. Campus pastors jockey for more stage time and want to get in the saddle and teach. However, long-term this becomes the smallest issue in launching, sustaining, and growing a multisite campus. All of the “people” issues are much more pressing realities in making this approach work. Developing teams, connecting people to the community, raising financial resources and attracting new guests are far more pressing issues for campuses than how you're going to deliver teaching.

Don't launch a campus but launch a system for launching campuses.

At last survey, 85% of multisite churches are stuck with less than two campuses. [\[ref\]](#) This is a shame for kingdom impact. These churches have started down the road of multiplication but stalled out. Imagine the impact this movement would have if we could move all of those churches to launch a few more sites! My conviction is that the reason that most churches are stuck at that point is because they just launched a campus or two but didn't build a system for regularly launching new locations. They need a multisite church launch flywheel to help them in this endeavor!

Small towns are the horizon for multisite.

This movement started in relatively densely populated suburban areas but I'm seeing a new movement among churches reaching small towns and rural contexts. These communities are often places where no viable gospel oriented church exists and so these new multisite churches are leading the way to inject the message of Jesus back into these locations. I look forward to learning from these trailblazing churches in the coming years!

There is no better way to drive engagement at your church than launching new locations.

Campus expansion is a robust way to engage new volunteers at your church. Typically, we've seen that 2/3rds of the volunteers in new campuses haven't served in the church before. I'm convinced that there is no better recruiting tool than to launch new locations. In fact, I haven't seen anything in all these years that comes close to driving up volunteer engagement at a church than launching new locations. If you are wanting to see more people engaged in what your church does, get busy launching new campuses!

Fall is the best time to launch new campuses.

Generally, there are three windows that we see new campuses publically launch, sometime in the fall, early in the New Year and at Easter. The best time to launch is in the fall because you get a few "growth periods" before that next summer season comes along. The first summer can be a tough time in the life of a new campus as attendance and momentum naturally wane a little bit. When you launch in the fall, you are maximizing your ability to see momentum built before that happens.

Again, the size and health of your launch core is the critical success factor.

I can't overstate how important this factor is. Your launch process needs to be built around the single factor of building a large and healthy volunteer team. Everything else is secondary to that decision. In fact, I would suggest that every decision during the launch process needs to be made in light of this one overall driving factor. Build a big and healthy team and your campus will thrive for years to come. If your team is small and weak the campus is almost certainly destined to limp for a long time.

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