

Daughter Church Planting: The Multi-site Approach by Glenn Lucas

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Several years ago Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Santa Clarita, California, north of Los Angeles, considered planting a daughter church in a fast-growing area nearby. But Rev. Marty Brauer, Bethlehem's pastor, soon realized the church could not afford to buy land and build a new structure. "At this point," Brauer says, "we realized we had to think outside the box. We were landlocked, but our ministry was growing and there were still a lot of people in our valley who needed the good news of our Savior. So we wondered: what if we started a church without walls?" This thinking led Bethlehem's leadership to the multi-site church model. They leased space in a school in the area they wanted to serve, and Bethlehem opened its second site, the east campus, in November 2003.

As they planned this second site, the leadership was committed to what Brauer calls "Sunday best"—a high quality worship experience in a comfortable setting. They invested \$80,000 in equipment and a portable storage trailer. Professional musicians lead the music ministry. Greeters are in place before and after the service. A host couple starts worship with a warm welcome and closes it with a sending out. Coffee and doughnuts can be enjoyed on small café-style tables. Trained caregivers staff a Nursery. An age-appropriate worship experience is offered for children. Currently, the same message is proclaimed by whoever is preaching that weekend in Bethlehem's four services.

Brauer sees Bethlehem's multi-site ministry expanding in the future, with preaching done via video in each venue. His vision is that the Saturday evening service will nurture and equip believers for Sunday morning service in seeker oriented satellite services.

Bethlehem's multi-site ministry experience is not unique. More congregations of all sizes are starting multi-site daughter churches. Interestingly, many such churches did not originally plan it that way. Like Bethlehem, they often were landlocked and wanted to move to a new location or were planning a traditional daughter church plant. But as they explored options, a multi-site ministry seemed the most practical.

Should your church develop a multi-site ministry? Consider these factors.

Property/Site: Leasing or renting is often more practical than purchasing land and building. The new site may be in a specialized setting or context--near hospital cancer units, at nightclubs where 20-something's and singles gather, or across town in a school or theater. The deciding factor for location is often whom the congregation is trying to reach.

Staffing: The ability to leverage staff and resources for effective ministry across multiple sites is significant. Many multi-site ministries have a senior pastor, with other pastors and staff who serve the various sites. The campus pastor might not be the preacher but, as the

one who creates and builds relationships with those who experience that site's ministry, he is key in bringing credibility and stability. He must be someone that others will follow.

Administration/Organization: Administration is often centralized in a multi-site ministry. One church office in a central location reduces costs and improves staff communication and networking. As to organization, there are various approaches. Some have unified budgets and boards; others have individual budgets and boards. Some expect the satellite to eventually spin off as a separate congregation, while others expect the ministry to continue as a part of the whole.

Leadership: Congregations in multi-site ministry list leadership as the most significant factor in healthy multi-site ministry. Paid staff need the support of trained, well-placed leaders. The challenge of a multi-site ministry provides an incubator for raising new leaders in a congregation.

Mission: Moving to a multi-site ministry usually enhances the congregation's vision and mission. At Bethlehem, members became excited as they explored the church's mission in the context of starting a satellite ministry. In the midst of the conversation, someone stated in wonderment, "If we can do that kind of outreach over there, we can do it right here, too!" The focus on a new mission ministry expanded the congregation's overall sense of reaching new people with the gospel of Jesus.

A congregation may move to the multi-site church model because it allows them to reach cultural, ethnic or generational audiences it is not currently reaching. Bethlehem saw members who worshiped irregularly become active and regular in their worship attendance at the new site.

A church's values are reaffirmed as it explores planting a new site. Research consistently shows that multi-site churches emphasize the value of excellence in their ministries. They ensure the ministry is well executed with the highest quality, as Bethlehem did with their concept of "Sunday Best."

Multi-site ministry is exciting and challenging. As congregations seek to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ, there will always be a place for traditional daughter church planting. But multi-site ministry is an important alternative when the timing and circumstance are right. A healthy church focused on the Great Commission, with strong supportive leadership, may very well find that multi-site ministry is the best way to reproduce itself. ■

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