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MULTI-SITE SELECTION OPTIONS

By Ed Van Herik

## Multi-Site CAN BE MADDENING...

It's not an easy question to answer.

*How does a growing church best serve its  
expanding congregation?*

without careful  
consideration and  
optimal site selection.

by Ed Van Herik

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For many churches faced with internal growth or a pending “merger,” the multisite model is appealing. But first, there are dozens of questions—and a lot of issues—that need to be addressed before any expansion can be successful.

Among them are:

- Why are we doing this?
- How do we pick a location?
- Should we rent, lease or own?
- What should we be looking for in an expansion facility?
- How will we successfully transplant our church’s DNA in a new location?

Consultants say that a church needs to be clear on why it wants a satellite campus before tackling the operational issues of establishing one.

### First things first

Nick McKinney, principal with CNL Specialty Real Estate Services in Orlando, Fla., says churches first need to ask, “Why do we want to do this? If the vision is not very clear up front, it will be very difficult to be successful.”

Jim Tomberlin, lead strategist of the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based consulting firm Multisite Solutions, concurs. In his ebook, “125 Tips for Multisite Churches and Those Who Want to Be,” Tomberlin points out several good reasons to create new venues, including solving a space problem, serving as part of a growth strategy for a healthy church and revitalizing a stuck congregation.

Once that question is addressed, the basic issues remain the same, including picking a site.

### **Site selection considerations**

Tomberlin reports that pastors need to realize that, “At least 50% of the attenders of their congregation live within a 15-minute drive of their church.” His recommendation, then, is to pick a new site within 10-20 minutes driving time of the existing site.

In addition, a multi-site expansion “allows a church to move into an area that doesn’t look like them,” says Bill Couchenour, CEO of Cogun in North Lima, Ohio, a building and design firm. “They can move into a new demographic.”

Once an area is chosen, a church needs to decide what type of facility to pick. According to McKinney, renting from an existing church is by far the easiest. The church will already have the building infrastructure— audio-visual and lighting (A/V/L), classrooms, parking—that a congregation needs. Still, an expansion into an existing church has several drawbacks, including limited branding opportunities and an inability to make aesthetic modifications.

“The majority of multi-site facilities start out meeting in rented facilities,” says Tomberlin. “Schools and theaters are a good starting place to launch because they are the lowest cost and risk to a church.”

Tomberlin adds, though, that schools and theaters are only available Sundays and offer little or no office and storage space. And while they are often the cheapest expansion to implement, they require equipment and an experienced crew for swift Sunday service set-up and breakdown.

Theaters and schools also generally have ample parking and good locations, though theaters often lack the classroom space that many churches require and may not have a stage that serves well as a focal point for worship. Theaters do have excellent A/V/L equipment, although a church may have to hire a staffer to run it.

A deeper financial commitment is usually needed for a church that wants to expand by moving into a commercial space, an option that is easily implemented as the nation struggles through the final stages of a deep recession.

Still, leasing a commercial space has its pros and cons, McKinney says. “Getting into a leasing structure is often for 3-5 years, and it really cranks up the financial obligations of a church,” he says.

Few commercial buildings are designed to the structural specifications of a church, even though Tenant Improvement dollars—a sum that a landlord allocates to each leasee to modify the basic rental space—can help customize a retail or commercial space.

The advantages of renting or leasing a commercial space include 24-hour access and the option to create office or classroom space.

For some churches, purchasing a site might be the best approach, yet consultants say congregations need to be extremely cautious. “I’ve seen many churches suffocated by mortgage payments,” says McKinney. “Sometimes it’s the right strategy, but sometimes it’s not.”

In some cases, the ready availability of existing space can create unique opportunities, Couchenour says. Element Church in Cheyenne, Wyo., for example, has purchased a 76,000-square-foot facility and is renovating 40,000 square feet for its new church. It plans to lease the rest to cover the cost of its mortgage.

### **Reflections on mergers, mortgages, and questions of ministry**

Merging churches face a special situation. There, existing mortgages and other financial obligations need to be carefully assessed. In the case of a failing church donating its facilities, routine maintenance may have been neglected, making a building inspection a good idea.

“Merging with another congregation can be an unbelievable gift and blessing for both congregations, but it can also turn into a financial hardship if the proper due diligence is not completed,” says McKinney. Several key decisions hinge on the church’s concept of how they want to develop a multi-site congregation.

In some cases, churches will broadcast a Sunday sermon live to all sites simultaneously. Others will use DVD copies, or will coordinate messages among the preaching ministers at each site. Still others create separate approaches to appeal to a variety of demographics and music styles.

For some churches, high-quality A/V/L equipment will be crucial, especially if a sermon is being simulcast. While that will involve a cable system for distant sites, a church with several buildings in proximity may be able to handle their needs, both A/V/L and HVAC, through a wireless connection, says Ken Noppinger of Autani Corp. in Columbia, Md.

Beyond the facilities, says East Campus Pastor Mitch McKinney of the Real Life Christian Church in Central Florida, are the issues of replicating the spirit of the original church.

Real Life was recently gifted with the infrastructure of two other churches near Orlando. Last year, they opened their east campus and are preparing to open their south campus later this year.

“We learned patience in a way we never expected,” says Mitch McKinney, brother of Nick McKinney. “It takes time to replicate a church culture and DNA.”

The church created a team of staff and ministers to spearhead the new ministry and strives to keep its unified vision in the forefront. Each campus pastor works out of the home office a couple of days a week, and the church strives to reproduce its worship service, including sermons and A/V/L experiences, at both sites.

For churches that want to spread the word of God, the multi-site model offers several advantages, Couchenour concludes: “It’s a way to take advantage of great leadership and the resources of a large church and leverage it.”

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