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The Multisite Church

by Michelle Makariak

There are currently 5,000 multisite churches in North America, according to a recent survey from Leadership Network, compared to 1,650 megachurches. Seventy-five of the largest 100 houses of worship in North America have multiple campuses, and over six million people attend a multisite church. It's obvious from these numbers that multisite ministry—which

started with little fanfare in the 90s—has become a force to be reckoned with. But why are multisite churches so popular—and how do you know if going multisite is right for you?

Karen Johnson, Vice-President of Marketing for Ka You Communications, shares some great insight on what churches need to be aware of before moving forward with multisite broadcasting, from a technical perspective. What's your game plan? Think about what your growth process will be, the trajectory, whether you are going to have multiple campuses or not. The decisions you make when you start moving from one campus to another also affect your bottom line. If your plan is to continue growing, look at the technology you plan on using and try to "future-proof" it so it won't need to be replaced with every campus you set-up. If you are planning on broadcasting your service, either via cable, over the internet or by satellite, look at all your costs – not only for one church, but for each additional campus you plan on adding and determine how your costs change as you continue to grow. Remember, the higher quality your broadcast, the greater the impact. You want your campuses to feel like the pastor is right in the room with them, which will make your message more immediate and effective. Think about access to your campus. Is it in an urban or rural setting? Located in buildings you own or rent? Permanent facilities or mobile? All these things determine how you would get the message from site to site. Lastly, are you looking at HD or SD broadcast? Will it be live or pre-taped? Multi-screen or single screen? All of this will come into play with your delivery system, and will also determine how much bandwidth you'll need when contemplating satellite, cable and streaming delivery options.

A Critical Look

The first thing you need to do before jumping into multisite is look critically at your current house of worship. Multisite is more than just integrating a second (or third, or fourth, or more!) location, it's also about the people and logistics you'll need to have for it to work. Do you have, or will you be able to find, the leadership you need to start a new location, the volunteers you'll need to be successful and, most importantly, the people your new campus will serve? Will your multisite campuses be video-venue, with one pastor delivering the message and having it broadcast to the other facilities, pre-taped for play during worship, or have its own pastor delivering a message unique to that campus only? Do you have the technology in place to support video services?

Shane Rushik, the technical director at Legacy Christian Church, which currently has four sites, says their leadership team worked through a variety of processes before establishing their first multisite campus, including making sure the curriculum would work for multiple sites, and determining how they wanted to present their message. "It was important for us to establish our brand. We wanted to be like a 'virus' in the city, with smaller, neighborhood-sized campuses instead of one huge megachurch. We wanted Legacy to be part of the neighborhood, and provide a family-focused atmosphere where members wouldn't just be a body taking a seat, but become a member of the Legacy community."

Brad Stewart, the Director of Technology at Highlands Fellowship, which has five facilities plus an online campus, agrees that creating a community with your multisites is key. "Our church is our people, not the building we worship in!"

Share the Experience

Both Legacy and Highlands determined early on that they were going to have one lead pastor teaching to all sites. This did not preclude them having campus pastors, but allowed them to



The Mica 2000 from Broadcast Pix shows all the video sources and graphics the Highlands Fellowship broadcast team sends to the switching system.

immediately have a shared commonality. Legacy initially recorded their Saturday night service and delivered it to their first multisite, which meant they were running on a one-day delay. However, the tapes weren't always reliable, and running a delay meant that the congregants at the second church weren't seeing the same message those at the main facility got on Sunday. When Legacy started planning their next facility, they were determined to live stream so each site would share the experience together, despite being in different facilities.

"We really wanted to find a way to get the Sunday morning service to the other campuses, so we engineered a Streambox and Grass Valley Turbo DDRs to live stream to the other facilities, using standard cable modems to send a 3m video stream to both sites," says Rushik.

Highlands Fellowship followed a similar route, prerecording the weekly message on Thursday and delivering it in advance to their other facilities. It wasn't an ideal situation. "There's more of a disconnect when the message is pretaped," states Stewart. "The message just isn't as organic, or as compelling, when speaking to an empty room. We wanted our members to connect with us on an emotional and visceral level, and decided pretty quickly that we needed to live broadcast our services."

Unlike Legacy, Highlands didn't choose to live stream. "We're in the mountains, so streaming isn't the best option for us. Instead, we choose satellite broadcast for practical reasons – it's more beneficial because of where we're located, and from a cost perspective it made more sense. "



Teaching Pastor Reggie L. Epps preaches on-site at Overland Park, Legacy Christian Church's main campus, during Sunday worship.

Be Consistent

Whether your HoW chooses to live stream or broadcast via cable or satellite, it's important to ensure that all facilities are functioning on the same level. Both Rushik and Stewart agree that keeping your gear consistent across the board just makes things easier.

"During worship you want things to be as flawless as possible, with no distractions," Stewart offers. "We want to provide worship that allows people to focus on God and be in the moment, without worrying about them being distracted by glitches in the system. Our bar is HIGH. We train our volunteers at each location and recruit all the time, building them up and empowering them to serve effectively. And, if the need arises, we can send them to other campuses to help out because they already know the system!"

To foster the sense of community between the different sites, both Legacy Christian Church and Highlands Fellowship work with their campuses to put together all elements for each service, including not only the look and feel of the lesson, but also the songs the worship teams perform.

"One of the great things about multisite," says Rushik, "is that all our churches combined form a very large congregation. This allows us to produce things on the same scale as larger

mega-churches, but for smaller facilities. We combine resources from all campuses and implement and distribute content across the board."

Ensuring that worship runs seamlessly requires organization and a significant amount of preparation. "Particularly in the broadcast part, you need to make sure everything works properly – the audio is coming through, router is working, lamps are good, etc. [Legacy] has a pre-flight check list that all our campuses use. The list is web-based so everyone sees the same thing, and we can track each site as they check things off. By 8:15 on Sunday morning, we know that the campuses are operational, and if there is a problem we normally know about it before it becomes too late to fix."

Whether multisite is right for your House of Worship or not, there's no denying the impact it has had, and continues to have, on the church. When set-up properly, a multisite is more than just a McChurch – it's a new point of light for sharing the good news. And there are thousands of them. ♦

Michelle Makariak is the editor of Technologies for Worship Magazine. While the church she attends isn't multisite (yet!), she wouldn't be surprised if adding a new campus fits into future planning.