

Multisite churches are outpacing growth of megachurches

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [September 19, 2012](#) issue

The number of congregations that host worship services at more than one physical location has grown to more than 5,000 in the last decade, according to a new report. Researchers say these multisite churches, which may share worshipers across town or many miles apart, are growing at a much more rapid pace than traditional megachurches.

Without the burden of additional expensive buildings, congregations find they grow faster in new places, said Warren Bird, research director of Leadership Network, who recently announced his conclusions.

“It’s a combination of both evangelism and saying, ‘People may not come to this particular building. How can we take where we are to where they are?’” he told Religion News Service on August 21. Bird, the author of books on the multisite trend, has tracked the number of churches meeting in more than one place for his Dallas-based church think tank; he combined his findings with Faith Communities Today surveys.

Multisite churches have grown from fewer than 200 in 2001 to 1,500 in 2006 to an estimated 3,000 in 2009 to more than 5,000 today. In comparison, the number of megachurches in North America has grown from about 50 in 1970 to about 1,650 in 2012.

Multisite churches come in all kinds of models: some congregations speak different languages at different locations; some hear from different “campus pastors” on-site and others are preached to by a senior pastor who speaks live or via video. “The more campuses you have, the more likely you are to use video teaching,” said Bird.

Sergio De La Mora, senior pastor of Cornerstone Church of San Diego, preaches five times every Sunday on its main campus in National City, California, with one service in Spanish and another translated into Japanese. After morning services, he hops in

his car and drives to the La Jolla campus for a 5 p.m. service before returning to National City for its last service at 6:30 p.m.

Meanwhile, videos of his 8:30 a.m. sermon are played at satellite campuses in Escondido, California, and across the border in Tijuana and Mexico City. A campus pastor runs the service at a location in Tucson, Arizona.

So is one of the disadvantages of multiple sites a tendency for them to exhaust their pastor?

“You got to remember we’re born to do this,” said De La Mora, comparing his leadership of his “franchised” church to an Apple store manager who works from opening until 10 p.m. “This is the new generation of preachers. People are in transit, so they want options when they come to church.” In all, his nondenominational evangelical church is attended by about 6,500 people.

“Our philosophy is I do the speaking but my campus pastor, with his leaders, they do the reaching into the community,” De La Mora said.

At Community Christian Church in the Chicago area, Pastor Dave Ferguson has taken a different approach with its dozen sites. “I can only be at one location at a time,” he said.

Each week he meets with a team of campus pastors to develop a “big idea” into a sermon. A video featuring one of them is created, but the pastors can choose whether to speak from the original manuscript, a version of it they edited or show the video.

In the end, the general message reaches about 10,000 people worshiping at sites that include a community center, a college theater, reopened churches and office parks.

While the vast majority of multisite churches are in the same town or at least in the same region, there are exceptions. The Bridge Community Church, a congregation based in rural Indiana, has campuses in Anderson, Decatur and Muncie but also one in Bihar, India.

Bird said churches that have at least 500 members tend to be the ones that start a second campus, but smaller churches have also done so. “It was the megachurches that pioneered it, and because megachurches tend to be ones people glean ideas

from, pretty soon churches said, 'Why couldn't we do that? You don't have to be really big to do that,'" Bird said. —RNS