

Multisite church model still vital, study shows

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [April 16, 2014](#) issue

The vast majority of multisite churches are growing, according to a new study, and they are seeing more involvement from laypeople and newcomers after they open an additional location.

Nearly one in ten U.S. Protestants attends a congregation with multiple campuses, according to findings released March 11 in the “Leadership Network/Generis Multisite Church Scorecard.”

The report cites new data from the National Congregations Study, which found there were 8,000 multisite churches in the United States in 2012—up from 5,000 in 2010—including churches with more than one gathering on the same campus. Churches that have created additional worship space in a separate setting now exist in almost every state, several Canadian provinces, and dozens of other countries.

Multisite churches typically operate with a main campus headed by the senior minister and one or more satellite locations. In some settings, attendees at the satellite location watch the same sermon, which is beamed in from the central location, but have their own dedicated on-site pastor, music, or small group meetings.

The scorecard examined 535 responses to a survey of multisite churches that had created worship space in a separate setting. Among the findings:

- By the end of 2013, the average church has grown 14 percent since it went multisite.
- The vast majority (88 percent) report increased lay participation after having multiple locations.
- It’s still a relatively new phenomenon: 60 percent had opted for the multisite model in the past five years.

- Almost half (47 percent) have a location in a rural area or a small town.
- One in three (37 percent) started being multisite through a merger of different congregations.

Although megachurches (congregations with 2,000 or more weekly attendees) were pioneers of the multisite concept, churches with as few as 50 people and as many as 15,000 have tried this approach, said Warren Bird, director of research at Leadership Network, a Dallas-based church think tank.

Multisite is also an international phenomenon: one-third of the congregations on Bird's list of international megachurches are multisite.

The report points out some of the challenges of juggling more than one campus for worship. Researchers found in 2010 that one in ten multisite churches they surveyed had closed a location.

In this new survey, some said rented space in public schools—a popular option for multisite churches—is “one of the toughest places to launch” an additional site.

“I can only guess that the climate of churches renting public facilities is getting more and more difficult with the number of school boards that are declining to rent either on Sundays or to religious groups on the increase,” Bird said.

Jim Sheppard, CEO of Generis, an Atlanta-based consulting firm that sponsored the report, warned that it is important to have a “good, sound contract” in whatever location a church picks to set up a temporary worship space.

“If your initial location is a public school, don't overestimate the relationship,” he wrote. “People can change, politics can get involved, and you might be forced out sooner than expected.”

Multisite church leaders report that they are finding a greater percentage of “unchurched” people in their new locations than at the original location.

“Historically, a church's greatest impact on the community is in its early years, and so the same thing is happening with a new campus,” Bird said.

Both independent congregations and those affiliated with denominations are embracing the multisite concept. Some regional denominational groups, including the United Methodists, consider mergers and other multisite options as part of their

revitalization strategies.

“One of them is vibrant but needs facilities,” Sheppard said of some merging congregations in a webinar about the report. “The other one lacks vibrancy but has facilities.” —RNS

This article was edited March 31, 2014.