

A Multi-Site Strategy

Mark Conner – November 2005

Our Mission and Vision

CityLife Church has a clear **mission** – “to raise up fervent followers of Jesus Christ who will reach out and impact communities, cities and nations for the kingdom of God.” This mission clearly articulates who we are and we are making good progress towards seeing it become a reality.

CityLife Church also has a clear **vision** – our vision by the year 2010 is to become a vibrant multi-generational congregation of over 12,000 people ... growing together in close relationships, discipleship and ministry experience in six hundred Life Groups; reaching out with compassion, care and support to five thousand people annually through our counselling and community ministries; educating one thousand students annually in our Christian school and working with local churches to present a Christian influence to the students of every primary and secondary state school in our region; planting and establishing fifteen church-planting churches in strategic places in Melbourne, Australia and overseas; sending eight hundred people on World Impact teams and investing three million dollars annually to impact the unreached, the persecuted and the poor in fifteen nations. We believe this will honor God and bring glory to His name.

Our **mission** provides a clear sense of **purpose** for our church (“Why are we here?”) while our **vision** provides a clear sense of **direction** as we move towards the future (“Where are we going?”).

Our Strategy – Church Growth

Our current **strategy** to become a church of 12,000 people involves seeking to do more outreach and evangelism centered on our current single site in the suburb of Knox. With a newly expanded 2,000 seat auditorium, our capacity for growth has increased. With four church services on a weekend of full capacity, we have the ‘potential’ to have 8,000 people attending (which would more than equal our current ratios of attendance for an overall congregation size of 12,000 people), enabling us to achieve that aspect of Vision 2010. However, the practical reality is that it is unlikely that each meeting will grow at the same rate. It is more likely that we will become full at ‘optimal hours’ before we will ever be full at slightly less popular times. Needless to say, achieving our vision of becoming a congregation of 12,000 people is a ‘big ask’ from a church growth point of view *and* it has practical challenges as far as where we would fit them all in multiple services on a weekend.

A New Strategy – a ‘Multi-Site Model’

Up until this time, the primary two ways of fulfilling the Great Commission have been ‘**church growth**’ and ‘**church planting**’. ‘**Church growth**’ has focused on growing a congregation on one site, often through the use of multiple services. ‘**Church Planting**’ has focused on starting new churches in different locations with the intention of reaching new people for Christ. Both church growth and church planting have had a relative measure of success over recent decades. A new emerging model is the ‘**multi-site church**’, which is somewhat of a blend of the two.

A multi-site church is simply ‘**one church in multiple locations**’. All sites share the same governing Board of Elders, budget, staff and administration. In most cases, the name of the church indicates both the broader church name and the particular site location (e.g. Grace Church North and Grace Church South). Each location develops its own set of volunteers for ministry areas but there is one leadership team and one teaching team that oversee and are involved in all sites.

Elmer Towns, a church growth analyst, describes the multi-site church as “one church meeting in many locations ... a multi-staffed church, meeting in multi-locations, offering multi-ministries, with a single identity, single organization, single purpose and single force of leadership.” Each site usually develops its own unique personality (it is not a ‘clone’) yet all sites share an overall ‘identity’ or ‘DNA’ through their common mission, vision, values and leadership team. The multi-site model is ‘a new way of re-assigning the physical boundaries of a church’. The church ‘happens’ at more than one location. Geography is no longer the defining factor.

Here are some of the potential benefits of a multi-site strategy:

1. It enables a church to reach a larger number of people through their presence in various parts of the city. Multi-site allows a regional church to take the church to the people rather than asking them to drive in from farther and farther distances. The further a person travels to their church the less likely they are to attend a second meeting, volunteer for a ministry or invite a friend. By bringing a church site closer to people living further away you provide an opportunity for them to increase their level of commitment and participation. Also, existing members don't have to 'leave' the church they have chosen to attend. They are able to stay connected to their church but simply be part of the launch of a new site in their locality.
2. It allows churches to leverage all of the ministry strengths they already have (teaching, worship, children's ministry, small groups, etc). Most new churches do not have the resources to excel in all of these areas from the beginning. Multi-site provides all the benefits of a neighborhood church with all the backing and resources of a regional church.
3. It potentially eliminates the need for continually building bigger and bigger church buildings. This can also save money. For instance, a 3500-4000 seat auditorium on our current site could cost around \$20 million. Multi-site is about 'more' instead of 'bigger'.
4. It provides small church intimacy with large church resources. Multi-site churches can feel like smaller churches in smaller venues but at the same time offer the quality of worship, teaching and ministry of a larger church. Churches can grow larger and smaller simultaneously, blending the strength that size offers with the comfort and convenience of smaller, closer venues.
5. Starting a new site from an existing church allows you to build on the spiritual momentum you already have which is much better than starting something from scratch. Multi-site enables you to build on the credibility and reputation of the existing church in a new location. This is unlike a new church plant which does not yet have a reputation as it is unproven (think of Starbucks vs. a new unknown coffee shop launching). In one sense it enables a church to spread its 'corporate anointing' to new areas.
6. It enables a church to move to areas of new growth *and* stay at their current site at the same time. It is not that a multi-site strategy grows the church but it can keep it growing. It is just like multiple services – they can fuel growth but they rarely create it. Multi-site is a 'means' towards an 'end' not an 'end' in itself. It keeps a church from capping the growth it is already experiencing. Multi-site isn't a vision by itself but rather a vehicle or strategy to achieve the vision.
7. It can mobilize more people into ministry. The new site requires a host of new volunteers and people living close to that site are likely to get involved. This enables them to experience the feeling of 'pioneering' something new, something not possible in the existing site which has often been going for many years. Launching a new site potentially creates some ministry gaps in the original site and this vacuum can provide an opportunity to challenge more people to get involved in areas where there may not have been as much opportunity beforehand. Many multi-site churches have been surprised by the increased number of people willing to serve at new sites and the number of people who have re-engaged because the church is now closer to their neighborhood.
8. It can create a climate for diversity, creativity and innovation in ministry.

The driving impetus for a multi-site strategy has to be evangelism and the fulfilment of our God-given mission. It is about reaching new people for Christ, not just creating a more convenient location for people who live further away from the church. However, starting a new site with a solid core of existing members is a tremendous strength and a site nearer to their home can help them in seeking to win their friends and neighbours for Christ. The aim is to multiply the spiritual impact of the church not just the location. It is primarily about mission not convenience.

Has This Model Been Proven?

There are over 1000 churches now using a multi-site model in the USA and also quite a number of churches in Australia. Churches of all sizes, not just mega-churches, are adopting this strategy. The overall results have been very positive with the vast majority of these churches experiencing exponential growth in a very short

period of time, even with the use of video teaching. Multi-site is being seen by church growth analysts as a potential revolution that could change the future of the church. Dave Ferguson, pastor of Community Christian Church in Chicago with 15 different celebration services in 6 different locations says, “Multi-site strategies reach more people faster, with higher quality, greater results and lower costs.”

A Strategy for Vision 2010

We would like to adopt a multi-site strategy for the achievement of Vision 2010. The vision remains the same. The only thing that changes is *how* we go about pursuing this vision. Instead of a focus on one site here in Knox we shift to a focus on multiple locations in our wider city of Melbourne. Over the next five years we would like to start a number of new sites in different geographical areas across our city with the aim of reaching more people for Christ and providing a CityLife Church within a 25-30 minutes drive of everyone in our city.

We can continue to pursue church planting internationally. Eventually we could plant churches in other cities across Australia. However, our local focus will be on reaching greater parts of Melbourne over the next five years through a multi-site strategy.

Prophetic Directives – Past and Recent

We have been blessed with many inspiring and encouraging prophetic directives over the years. Here are a few that have some relevance to this particular strategy to achieve our vision:

“The vision will be unfolded, magnified, clarified and written so clear and plain that all who run can read it. Everyone is to be involved. It is to be one vision not many, but with many parts ... It is to be not just a local church vision (inward focused) but a national and international burden. Send men and women to other places. Be a launching pad, a tactical headquarters for this region. Your roots and branches will spread ... Increase, enlargement and expansion are coming. Take the limits off your minds and embrace an expanded vision ... You will be ‘a church of many thousands in many buildings’. What lies ahead will swallow up all that has gone before because of its magnitude and its significance (1990) ... There will be new frontiers, new forms, new things and new seasons in God ... Increase your vision and spill out like Joseph’s bough beyond the walls. Do not put a cap on the vision - let it be refined and modified by God ... Apostolic foundations - new foundations added to the old ones ... As you give out more, more will rise up within. As one rises to leave, others will fill the vacuum. Sow money, talents and gifts to other places ... Do not hoard the blessing or hold on to it or try to keep it within the four walls of this building. Be generous.”

Recently I felt the Lord speak to me from the life of Abraham. I sense that God’s promise to Abraham is also God’s promise to our church: “*Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land you see I will give you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you Gen.13:14-17.*”

Faith always involves RISK yet the redemptive potential for kingdom advancement is high.