

Governing multi-site churches like franchising a business

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As some congregations reach out to minister beyond their church campus, many have chosen to begin second or third or more sites under the church umbrella. Adding more sites usually means adjusting the congregation's governing structure.

Glenn Akins, assistant executive director of the [Baptist General Association of Virginia](#), works with multi-site congregations. Currently on sabbatical to study multi-site governance, Akins favors a business model form of church polity.

In addition to his state role, Akins also is a member of [Bon Air Baptist Church](#) in Richmond that has four campuses.

The multi-site approach to church growth has three advantages over establishing independent congregations, Akins believes. Multi-sites are more cost effective. They build on a "recognized brand"—the church already is known in a community or city. Also, "there is a synergy of resources that the satellite has access to," he said.

Akins sees governance in multi-site churches as akin to franchising. Most sites remain as part of the whole rather than become independent congregations because of their "shared DNA," he said. "They are so integratedly woven, so there is no obvious way to cut them apart."

Governance has been the last piece of multi-site work to receive much attention, he explained. Congregations concentrate on ministry first. Business franchises operate from a plan that spells out the relationship and the financial agreements between the parent company and the franchisee.

“I haven’t seen one for multi-sites yet. There are pieces but no complete document,” Akins said.

Eugenia Freiburger addressed the topic at a recent [Southern Baptist Research Fellowship](#) conference. An adjunct instructor on leadership at the Baptist Seminary at Richmond and at Union Theological Seminary, she stresses the importance of developing a framework within which a satellite will be launched.

“The framework allows the church to make intentional choices—to determine what’s negotiable and what’s non-negotiable for all aspects of church life, including governance,” explained Freiburger, also a freelance consultant on leadership. “The framework helps the congregation to talk through the issues before the launch takes place.”

The church and the satellite would determine the form of governance based upon identity, organizational design and ministry strategy.

“You must answer the question: Does the governance facilitate the strategy or can it change?” she said. “I believe form follows function.”

Other patterns

As new ways to minister develop, likely church governance will take different forms. The missional movement already has affected polity issues in some areas.

For example, the California-based [Ecclesia Network](#), of which New Life Christian Fellowship in Blacksburg, Va., is a part, uses an equipping team composed of individuals each gifted with one of the “basic gifts” listed in Ephesians 4.

And a handful of congregations scattered across the country still follow a

very old polity—union. During western expansion and the days of circuit-riding preachers, diverse congregations shared a building and often gathered to hear one another's minister.

Hopewell Union Church near High Point, Mo., retains that flavor. Southern Baptist, Presbyterian and Independent Christian congregations have shared the building since 1829. They have shared the last two pastors who together have served for about 20 years.

"There are theological differences," explained current Pastor Randy Smith. "But there hasn't been a problem."

Members of each denomination determine issues that affect themselves, and each denomination is represented on the full congregation's trustee board. Items such as building and grounds or participation in community events are simply brought up for a vote following a worship service.