

North Texas megachurch's decision spurs talk of trends

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HIGHLAND VILLAGE (BP)—The decision of a Dallas-area megachurch to transition its six campuses into autonomous churches illustrates what some see as a trend in the multisite model.

Still, analysts who study multisite ministry say it remains a viable missions and evangelism strategy for healthy churches.

Matt Chandler, pastor of The Village Church, announced Sept. 24 the church's five campuses will all become autonomous congregations by 2022 to maximize the "capacity to contextually reach the city of Dallas with the gospel of Jesus Christ."

The Village Church—which has draws about 11,400 in attendance—previously transitioned one campus to an independent congregation in 2015, *Christianity Today* reported.

"We're all a bit anxious right now ... because the church's current ministry model really is beautiful, and God has done some stunning and spectacular things," Chandler, president of the Acts 29 church-planting network, said in a video. "We're just compelled that there are better days ahead."

In addition to congregational autonomy, the transition will entail moving to onsite preaching all the time at former satellite campuses rather than video messages by Chandler 38 to 40 Sundays per year.

The transition is driven by The Village Church's commitment to local ministry and church planting, *Christianity Today* reported

Tennessee church makes transition

Multisite churches in Nashville and Kansas City have adopted a similar strategy.

Over the past year, Nashville-area Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., transitioned three of its four satellite campuses to autonomous churches. Pastor Robby Gallaty cited a desire to “develop and deploy” localized pastors as a motivation for the transition.

Previously, Gallaty delivered the sermon at satellite campuses via video while other elements of the service were conducted onsite.

The discipleship model at Long Hollow is to “develop and deploy people to be disciples who make disciples,” Gallaty said. “I felt like we were replicating every position but the senior pastor, the preaching pastor at the church” and therefore not fully executing the discipleship strategy.

Each campus pastor needed the freedom to lead through his preaching and cast a vision for contextualized local ministry, Gallaty explained.

Long Hollow still has one satellite campus 15 minutes from its main campus, and Gallaty plans to “rotate back and forth between the campuses” and preach live.

“I’m hearing more and more pastors” speak of converting satellite campuses into autonomous churches, Gallaty noted.

Kansas City church at ‘a fork in the road’

In Kansas City, Mo., Lenexa Baptist Church announced in August plans to transition three campuses to autonomous churches.

“We’re at a fork in the road,” Pastor Chad McDonald told the congregation in a sermon. “We can hold (and) control” the campuses, “or we can release them and unleash them for the glory of God.”

Lenexa’s campuses, McDonald explained, were birthed from a desire to help struggling churches revitalize. Now that three campuses, which began as partnerships with declining congregations, are able to sustain themselves financially and in terms of leadership, it makes sense to commission them as independent churches, he said.

A fourth campus will become a church plant, with continuing financial and leadership help from Lenexa, said McDonald, who is conducting a doctor of ministry research project at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary on the multisite model as a means of church revitalization and church planting.

McDonald hopes unleashing thriving satellite campuses as autonomous churches “will become a trend.”

“Certainly, what The Village Church and Matt Chandler are doing will go a long way in driving this as a trend, and I praise God for their faithfulness and example,” McDonald said via email.

“I believe that this method of bringing churches in and unleashing them back out is one of the best methods for church planting and revitalization, and I pray it grows in popularity and pervasiveness in our denomination.”

Trend? Not so fast

Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research and author of a 2009 book on multisite churches, said while “there have been several examples of multisite churches making campuses independent churches ... overall, we do not see this as a trend.” The number of multisite churches in

America is not declining, he said.

“Multisite is a tool,” McConnell said in an email. “It is not a goal or a destination. It is still an effective tool for healthy churches to use to reach more people in more places. When factors that made multisite make sense change (such as leadership changes), then it is something the church should reevaluate.

“Many multisite churches start campuses and help plant churches. So it is not an either/or decision.”

Rick Wheeler, lead missional strategist for the Jacksonville (Fla.) Baptist Association, has advised about half a dozen churches considering the multisite model. Among them was Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church, a predominantly African-American congregation, which adopted a struggling, predominantly white church as a satellite campus in 2015.

“Multisite is going to be one of many church multiplication strategies that churches are going to continue to use to extend their reach in a community or across a region,” Wheeler said.

The multisite model is “not a good idea” when “you’re just trying to grow,” Wheeler said. “You have to have a sense of calling to a particular community, a particular people group that you’re trying to reach. All of the churches I know that have gone multisite successfully made a considerable effort to understand from a missionary standpoint the people that they were trying to reach in this new community where they were entering.”

Interest in the multisite model remains high, Wheeler said, noting representatives of about 20 churches in the Jacksonville Association attended a luncheon on the topic earlier this year.

The multisite model “is something that’s not going to go away,” Wheeler said.