



Birthing Congregations in Nontraditional Spaces

Rodney Thomas Smothers

A ride through any city or town will reveal ministries that now occupy spaces that we once referred to as storefronts. Today these storefronts have grown from former stores, offices, and mom and pop businesses into mega ministry centers that are now found in former theaters, big box stores, schools, and factories. The once easily recognizable facade of a church has been replaced by creative designs born out of convenience, zoning laws, and creative accommodations. Practical facility use and function are also driving this new look of ministry facilities. Vital churches today are so much more than Sunday morning worship centers only. The seven-day-a-week church provides space for worship, education, small group ministries, child care, senior care, youth activities, family athletics, and other ministries and services like Christian schools, bookstores, banquet facilities, and, in some

cases, retail outlets that often provide additional streams of income to the ministry.

New ministries are particularly attracted to these multiple use buildings because they often come with ample off-street parking, an affordable lease arrangement that provides for additional space

as the ministry grows, and zoning that is easier for church start-ups than acquiring new property. Often these spaces are found in locations where the infrastructure is already in place so that scarce start-up funding can be utilized for the greater ministry needs. For a new ministry, the more flexible the space—the better the facility. For many years in

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church development our goal was to define a successful new church start by the speed at which the first unit was built. Today our thinking has evolved. We understand that by leasing space we can grow into or move away from the rented space if growth

exceeds the capacity of the present facility. Other factors that favor facility flexibility are the changing socioeconomic conditions that may shift the demographics of a new church start in such a way that its starting location may not be the best location for its permanent facilities. Another benefit of beginning new ministries in nontraditional spaces is the psychological impact that nontraditional spaces have on people who are not familiar with the church. Flexible creative space that is high on hospitality and low on tradition makes church a less imposing place for newcomers to new faith communities. Innovative facilities that provide for open access, emerging technology, and space where people can gather before and after the worship settings invite people to interact and build new community.

Mothering and Multi-Site Models

Nontraditional facilities are also becoming popular among existing congregations that are “mothering” new congregations or launching multiple ministry sites.

Congregations that pursue the birthing of a new congregation must be spiritual healthy, financially viable, and missionally minded. They see the expansion of the kingdom of God as a calling that can be met through their commitment of resources, knowing that they have been chosen and equipped to bring multiplication to the Body of Christ. This approach to kingdom expansion has various approaches. Daughtering, satellites, multicampuses, and adoption are just a few of the methods that have been used successfully.

Multicampus ministry is often used to extend a congregation’s current capacity. Though the additional site might have as its primary target group another demographic or seek to extend capacity to the same demographic by physically replicating itself in another location, its central administrative control remains with the mother congregation. Mothering new congregations, however, has as its long-term goal the sponsorship of a new congregation that will become healthy

enough to become a fully self-sustaining ministry on its own.

First United Methodist Church and Windsor Village, both located in Houston, Texas, stand as models that are working well. In First Church’s case, a new campus in an outlying area was sponsored and has become a fully self-supporting congregation. In Windsor Village’s case, it has used the multicampus model and the adoption model of daughtering a church. These approaches have also provided great models for kingdom expansion.

Who Will Do Ministry With Us?

In the Baltimore-Washington Conference, we are approaching facility use with a different model in mind. We are inviting existing congregations that are geographically close to one another to share creative ministry options that utilize their existing campuses and all of the pastoral leadership in shared mission and ministry. In the past, a single pastor was assigned to a single charge and served multiple congregations; this new model

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promotes sharing of pastors and resources around shared vision, spiritual gifts, competencies, and joint use of facilities in an extended campus arrangement where facility use is determined by ministry need rather than a single congregation’s desire alone. The benefits are numerous. The congregations benefit from the shared leadership of a team of pastors, and the laity begin to think about ministry as something that they do with others rather than something that they do with a silo-type mentality.

The congregations that need additional space most are not just large congregations. In fact, it could be said

that our small- and medium-size congregations’ greatest obstacle to growth is lack of expandable ministry space. What options are available? We begin our quest for additional ministry space by asking the question, “Who will do ministry with us?” Are there other congregations willing to share space? Are there potential partners in the community that are willing to share space like educational and civic organizations or county, city, or state-sponsored facilities? There are food establishments in our communities that would welcome our use of their meeting rooms and there are professional offices including funeral homes that are usually willing to partner with us to share space. And don’t forget other religious organizations that don’t use their worship or ministry space on the same days and times where we might wish to expand our ministry. And please don’t underestimate the value of empowering house church meetings in your community.

Our creativity and focus on the changing landscape of ministry provides us with more options for ministry than we’ve had in the past. No longer is the church defined by its buildings alone. Affordable, user friendly space where relevant life-changing worship takes place, effective small groups can meet, and efficient systems of nurture and care are enabled, works for most ministries. Rapidly changing ministry conditions make temporary space a good option for growing ministries. Some

of our existing churches should consider sharing current sites or swapping ministry sites so that vibrant and growing ministries can be expanded. Any permanent new building should be developed with projected ministry needs in mind so that future ministry needs can be met at that location. Birthing new faith communities in nontraditional spaces requires strategic visioning, creative implementation and courageous commitments to try new methods. Every large ministry has used creative temporary ministry space to expand its ministry—it’s good for evangelism and good for missional outreach.

Needs-Based Evangelism

Becoming New Churches for a New Generation



Planting a Garden: Growing the Church Beyond Traditional Models, by Linda S. McCoy. Offers church leaders insights into how to think outside the box—not just a different way to “do” worship, but an entirely new way of being the church.
UZ6-0687343143.
Paper, **\$15.00**

Needs-Based Evangelism: Becoming a Good Samaritan Church, by Robert D. Pierson. By meeting the needs of people, churches will fulfill their biblical mandate to care for those who are hurting and suffering.
UZ6-0687332486.
Paper, **\$14.00**

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WHERE TO LEARN MORE

Some recommended sources are:

BreakOut Churches by Thomas S. Rainer (Zondervan 2005)

Church Marketing 101: Preparing Your Church For Greater Growth by Richard L. Reising (Baker 2006)

Inside The Organic Church by Bob Whitesel (Abingdon Press 2006)

Starting A New Church by Ralph Moore (Regal 2002)

The Multi-Site Church Revolution by Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird (Zondervan 2006)

The Ripple Church: Multiply Your Ministry by Parenting New Churches by Phil Stevenson (Wesleyan 2002).

See page 19 to order.

Cultural Contexts

Changing ministry needs, changing demographics and changing socio-economics are not the only factors that influence a congregation's decision to stay at its present location or move to another location. While we talk a great deal about multicultural and multiethnic congregations, we still have a long way to go in mainstreaming our congregational response to this reality. With our communities becoming more diverse every day, opportunities for us to minister to people from multiple cultural contexts is going to drive greater understanding of how new faith communities can thrive in the midst of diversity.

In mainline denominations, Anglo new church developments have a much better track record of starting in temporary facilities while African-American new church developments seem to do better in established facilities while Korean and Hispanic new church developments thrive in house church models, but expand rapidly once facilities are made available. The point is one size does not fit all. Cultural, economic, social and political contexts also play a significant role in the

birthing of new faith communities in nontraditional spaces.

The growing conversation around the “organic church movement” would suggest that purpose, passion, and innovation are more important than specific spaces. More than mere marketing, nontraditional ministry space should be first and foremost mission-responsive, hospitality-attractive, and Christ-encounter intentional. □



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