

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

What Does the Research Say About Multisite Health? (Q&A with Warren Bird)

- Episode 264

Answering your frequently asked questions

About 60% of churches that have in-person attendance of a thousand or more people are using a multisite strategy. For the 40% of churches that are *not* multisite, many of their questions are around the validity of that strategy: “Is this something that we should be considering? Why are churches considering it? For the churches that have considered it, is it really working or not?”

In today’s conversation, we’re joined by Warren Bird, Senior Vice President of Research for the ECFA and author of several books on multisite and mergers, to discuss these questions and explore some of the [recently released data on multisite](#).

Multisite Q&A with Warren Bird

Do you expect the number of multisite churches and the launch of new locations to decline on this side of COVID? And when it comes to new churches or new location launches, how did the pandemic impact the size of those new churches?

Warren: No, overall I don’t see it slowing down, even though the expressions of it are new and different in many ways. In terms of attendance and size, the only dip was in 2020. And depending on how you look at it, it was not that much of a dip. So I don't see that the pandemic impacted launch size in a way that's going to be long term.

When we work with churches that are launching a new location, we encourage them to shoot for a minimum of 200 people at launch to increase the likelihood of long-term health and success. And, if they can start with more people, that's even better. Do you agree?

Warren: Yes, for several reasons. There's a momentum factor, a visibility factor, and a volunteer factor. Having that momentum through launching large also often means having financial sustainability. One of our charts shows that, on average, you're able to be self-supporting if you have 76 people or more. So for many different reasons, the larger the launch, the more momentum and faster growth. (And we're assuming in all this that it's not just sheep reshuffling, but a sizable percentage of new life in Jesus Christ.)

Your research looked at the differences between single-location churches with no intentions of multiplying and churches that have a big multiplication vision. It looks like multiplying churches are seeing more conversions and people saying "yes" to Jesus. Why do you think there's a correlation between multiplication and more people becoming Christ-followers?

Warren: It's the size of faith expressed at this moment that, in a lot of ways, influences your trajectory. Now, did the people who were seeing spiritual fruitfulness already say, "God, please multiply this?" Yes, I'm sure that's a part of it. But I know that with the first church I planted, if I could just get to the next Sunday, that was success. And I think that impacted our conversion growth because I thought so small—I thought too much about survival and too little about deploying God's people and doing crazy things to keep relaunching the church and keep impacting our community.

But the question "Do you see yourself multiplying?" was an open-ended question to fill in. So I took those who wrote in the number zero and said "We are not going to reproduce at all in the next five years" versus those who wrote in the number 10 or more, and I compared them. Yes, they both had spiritual fruit, but there were far more reported conversions in those that have the bigger dream and faith for what they believe God is doing and is going to do.

If churches with multiple locations are experiencing more growth, do you think it's because churches that are growing tend to expand in multiple locations—or is that because there's something about multisite strategy specifically that helps drive growth?

Warren: As someone who's been on staff and helped start both multisite and church plants, I have a passion for both. The answer is that if you do one that fuels the other, and if you do the other that fuels the one. So in other words, if you are a church planting church, you are far more likely to become multisite. If you are a multisite church, you are far more likely to plant new churches than if you were just a single site church. So they fuel each other in a wonderful way. There isn't a competition.

A lot of pastors who listen to this podcast want to continue to improve how they're engaging their mission in multiple locations. Is there anything else from your research that might help us improve the outcomes that we're experiencing with our multisite strategies?

Warren: I want to affirm that this is the best time in our lifetime to dream creatively. Before the pandemic, it may have taken us years to be able to make a change or to conduct an experiment. And when the pandemic happened, we just couldn't do that anymore. We had to consolidate, we had to reorganize, we had to try new things. That openness to experiment is wonderful.

I have a whole open-ended survey question where I ask: "Besides the models we've discussed, are there other things you've done?" And the fill-in answers to that were so exciting. A lot of

people are experimenting with ways to make more and better disciples of Jesus—and this is the time to do it. Dream big. You have a spiritually receptive world as never before, and even though there are many other places they're looking for answers, we can be that place as well.

Learn more about the [Multisite Unstuck process](#) and the [Church Mergers process](#).

Listen to the full episode on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or at theunstuckgroup.com/episode264.

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