

THE UNSTUCK CHURCH REPORT

TRENDS IN U.S. MULTISITE CHURCHES

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Q4 2023

Introduction

NOVEMBER 2023

Every quarter, The Unstuck Group compiles all the data we've collected to monitor trends in churches in the United States. For this quarter's report, we are specifically focusing on trends in multisite churches. The report is a reflection of more than 100 multisite churches that The Unstuck Group has served through the years and more than 80 ministries that participated in a multisite survey conducted in October 2023. This provides a very current snapshot of multisite churches of all shapes and sizes.

We received survey responses from churches that ranged in size from under 500 to over 20,000 in physical attendance for worship gatherings. The churches that participated have as few as two locations and as many as 10 locations. The average in-person attendance of churches that responded is 2,722 people.

We intend to repeat this focus on multisite strategy in one of the quarterly reports each year so that we can monitor trends over time. Though we know that the percentage of churches engaging a multisite strategy is relatively low in ministries around the world, a high percentage of churches The Unstuck Group serves are either currently multisite or considering additional locations in the near future. Because of that, we understand this needs to be a continuing focus of our team's research and shared experience.

Read on for some characteristics and strategies multisite churches use, including the key differences between churches with more identical campuses compared to churches with more autonomous campuses.

Snapshot of Multisite Churches Included in This Month's Report

CATEGORY	AVERAGE
Annual In-Person Weekly Attendance Growth	+19%
Number of Locations	3.3
Total Baptisms in the Last 12 Months	181
Attendees Per Volunteer Leaders	12:1
Staffing Budget as Percentage of Total Budget	52%
Average Year When the First Multisite Campus Launched	2015

First, let's talk about the most important metric in this report ...

It's this number: **95%**.


That's the percentage of churches that were experiencing attendance growth before they launched their first multisite location. I share that stat because it confirms what our team at The Unstuck Group has learned through the years—**multisite is a great strategy for healthy, thriving, growing churches to reach more people for Jesus**. However...

- **Multisite is not a growth strategy.** If a church has plateaued or is in decline, multisite will not turn that trend around. In fact, what we've noticed is that, if anything, multisite will actually *accelerate* decline and "stuckness."
- **Multisite is not a strategy to initiate needed ministry changes.** (Not that churches haven't tried this.) For many pastors, launching a multisite location feels like the only option available when change can't happen at the original location. Pastors conclude, "If we can't change our reach strategy, our worship services, our spiritual formation strategy, our brand, etc., then we'll launch a second location that will give us the freedom to make those changes." In case you're wondering, that rarely works (unless your real goal is to plant a new independent church).
- **Multisite is not a strategy for easy growth.** Ask any senior pastor if ministry was easier or harder when they were a single-location church. I can guarantee you that almost every pastor leading a multisite church has probably wished they could go back to leading a one-location church. Multisite is *complex*. Even with the clearest strategy and the cleanest structure, it's going to be messy and lead to ongoing organizational tension.

And that's why "95%" is so important. These churches were fulfilling their mission *before* they launched a multisite location. These churches were effectively reaching people for Jesus *before* they opened their first multisite campus. These churches had teaching and services that were drawing new people *before* they ventured into multisite strategy. These churches were multiplying disciples of Christ *before* they decided to open an additional location.

There's a lot more that we will cover in this quarter's report, but I wanted to start there because **multisite is not for every church**. In fact, if the data we collected is accurate, it's probably not for the majority of churches who currently find themselves on the declining side of the church life cycle.

Because of that, I hope this summary spurs some healthy conversations among the leaders on your team. If your church is experiencing growth, I hope it causes you to consider whether or not it's time to open a new multisite location and expand your reach. If your church is stuck, I hope it causes you to consider the changes that would have to take place for your church to experience health again. In either case, I hope this report helps more people meet and follow Jesus.



Tony Morgan
Founder & Lead Strategist of The Unstuck Group

Multisite General Characteristics

The average in-person attendance over the previous 12 months increased by 19%.

The average weekly attendance for the last 12 months increased from 2,282 people to 2,722. This is the total of all people, including children.

Multisite churches are reaching people for Jesus.

The number of people who went public with their faith by being baptized was 7% of this year's average in-person attendance. The average church in this survey had 181 baptisms in the last 12 months.

Multisite churches tend to be nondenominational churches.

Close to 60% of the multisite churches surveyed are not connected to a denomination. That may be a reflection of the plateau and decline that many churches are experiencing within various denominations rather than a lack of interest in multisite strategy.

The average multisite church that participated in the survey has more than three locations.

Of the churches that participated, about 30% had four or more locations with the highest number of locations being 10.

Churches have been in multiple locations for an average of eight years.

The average launch date for the original location was in 1977, and the first multisite location opened on average in 2015.

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“It's possible that this was the biggest surprise for me in the survey data. I expected multisite strategy to be something that was primarily embraced by newer churches. I did not expect the average multisite church to be nearly 40 years old before launching their first additional campus.”

-- Tony

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Multisite Leadership

Multisite churches have a span of care of one volunteer leader for every 12 people in attendance.

Leaders include adults and students who are serving in roles where they are responsible for leading a team or a group of other people (e.g., team leaders or group leaders). By comparison, in last quarter's report, all churches, including primarily single-location churches, had one volunteer leader for every 17 people in attendance. It appears multisite churches are empowering more lay leaders.

Leadership development is part of the multisite strategy.

More than half of the churches surveyed indicated that they have a formal development strategy to increase the number of ministry leaders.

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“**Multiplying leaders is the essential ingredient of healthy multisite churches.** We've worked with many churches who have had to press pause on opening a new location...and it wasn't because there wasn't an opportunity for a new campus in a new community. It wasn't even because they didn't have the financial resources to pull it off. The primary reason why they had to delay multisite expansion was because they didn't have enough leaders to open a new location.”

-- Tony

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Multisite increases volunteer engagement.

In fact, 97% of the churches indicated that volunteer engagement increased with the launch of a new multisite location. In our experience at The Unstuck Group, that increase in serving happens at both the original and new locations.

Insights from Darren Key (CFP), CEO of [Christian Financial Resources](#):



Managing staffing budgets for multisite campuses can be complicated depending on how the funds of the campus are managed—either independently or through a central office. Christian Financial Resources recommends staff expenses below 50% of their actual income (not their budget). One way to do this is using the conservative percentages below, plus setting aside at-risk/performance-based money:

- 35 - 50% Staffing
- 10 - 20% Missions
- 10 - 20% Programming
- 20 - 45% Administration (debt, facilities, insurance, office, etc.)

Staffing for growth may put staffing expenses slightly higher than the 50% mark, which should even out as the church grows. However, staff reductions could be required if the necessary growth doesn't happen. Ensure your ministry plans accordingly and consider the financial impact additional employees will make in the first year and for years to come.

Being conservative with your staffing also creates opportunities for your members to become involved in ministry. Churches who do that encourage spiritual growth and maturity.

Multisite Staffing & Structure

Staffing levels are about the same as single-location churches.

In last quarter's report, we learned the average church employs one full-time equivalent (FTE) staff person for every 53 attendees. Multisite churches surveyed for this report employ one FTE staff person for every 55 attendees. This number includes all ministry and support staff. By comparison, The Unstuck Group recommends one FTE for every 75 people in attendance.

Multisite churches are investing more than half of their ministry budget into ministry staff.

The average staff budget is 52% of the overall ministry budget. This includes the cost of all salaries and benefits. We recommend that churches try to keep staffing budgets between 45% and 55% of the overall budget. The Unstuck Group does not collect salary information for individual employees.

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“Though there is minimal difference between single-location churches and multisite churches when it comes to staffing budgets, my experience indicates this is one of the advantages of multisite in the long run. As churches continue to grow and add new locations, the efficiencies of central teams start to impact staffing requirements. In other words, large multisite churches with many locations tend to spend a smaller percentage of their overall ministry budget on staff expenses, especially if they try to maintain an identical model of ministry across all locations.”

-- Tony

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Multisite churches have dedicated central ministry teams to support all of the locations.

On average, nearly two-thirds of the churches that responded to the survey indicated that they have central teams—staff paid to support the success of all locations but who do not have any specific campus responsibilities.

Central teams tend to form when a church prepares to open its third location.

This was confirmed by the data collected in the recent survey. Prior to opening a third location, it's not uncommon for multisite churches to maintain staff structure as if they are a single-location church with the addition of a new “department” that runs the second location.

Most of the staffing is on campus teams rather than central teams.

The survey indicated that churches have about 60% of their staff members in campus roles for all locations and 40% of their staff in central ministry roles. The Unstuck Group recommends a two-to-one allocation between campus and central ministry roles. In other words, we recommend more staffing for campuses and less for central teams as compared to the surveyed multisite churches.

Multiplication Strategy

Generally, churches grow to between 1,500 and 2,000 people before they launch their first location.

The median size of the churches was just over 1,500 in in-person attendance at their original location before they launched an additional location. The average attendance was over 2,000 people.

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“This data is consistent with what our team has recognized through the years: Churches need to be large enough that they can afford to send out 10% of their congregation, volunteers, leaders, giving, etc., to launch a healthy new location while still maintaining health at their original location. Because of that, we typically recommend that churches reach a minimum of 1,000 people in attendance before they consider multisite. And, the more growth they can get at their original location before multisite, the healthier both their original and new locations will likely be postlaunch.”

-- Tony

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Many multisite churches are also committed to church planting.

Almost half of the churches indicated they are also involved in church planting outside of their multisite strategy. That's a strong indication that multisite churches are committed to multiplication with whatever strategy is most effective for a particular community.

New locations are in the pipeline.

One-third of the churches surveyed indicated that they anticipate launching another campus in the next 12 months.

Multisite churches lean more toward identical locations with some campus autonomy.

Less than 1 in 10 multisite churches flips that model, giving campuses autonomy with some central influence.

Video teaching is the primary method for message delivery across locations.

Of the churches surveyed, 38% deliver teaching primarily through video (with rare exceptions) and 25% use a combination of video and in-person teaching. Only 27% of churches use a teaching model where the campus pastors teach at their locations.

Multiplication Strategy, cont.

Debt Insights from [Christian Financial Resources](#):

Not too long ago, interest rates were much lower for commercial lending. However, rates have quickly climbed in the last 12 months. As a result, ministry leaders should seriously consider the impact of taking on new debt when launching a new location. An alternative to new debt would be starting a capital campaign this coming spring.

That approach empowers a church to pay off existing debt or use the new funding to save for future projects. Then, when lending rates and material costs have come down, the church's stewardship will result in increased church's financial strength.

If your ministry could benefit from a campaign, please scan to learn more:



The Alignment Priority: Identical vs. Autonomous Campuses

When analyzing the data from this multisite survey, we looked at several key factors that might distinguish the churches that were experiencing the *most* health from their multisite strategy, as measured by growth and baptisms. As the general characteristics on page 3 indicate, the vast majority of multisite churches are experiencing both. Attendance is increasing and people are saying “yes” to Jesus.

However, it does appear that *how* churches approach their multisite strategy does make a difference. And the biggest differentiator appears to be the degree to which campuses are identical or autonomous.

Multisite churches that have more identical campuses could be compared to your favorite franchise restaurant. No matter the location, the various restaurants have the same branding, relatively similar building design and familiar dining room environments. The menu is the same. The customer service experience is the same. The quality of the meal and how it is delivered to the customer is almost identical from location to location.

More autonomous campuses are like independent coffee shops. They all sell coffee, but the branding is different. The vibe in the shop is unique. The menu is a little bit different. And the experience for the customers may be distinctive from one coffee shop to the next. Most importantly, there’s no central headquarters providing support to the independent shops.

With that in mind, these are the key differences we found between churches that identified themselves as having more **identical** campuses compared to those multisite churches that indicated they had more autonomous campuses:

- **Faster growth** - Churches with more identical campuses have experienced attendance growth of 25% when compared to attendance one year ago. Churches with more autonomous campuses have grown by 13% in the last year. In other words, churches with identical campuses are growing almost twice as fast.
- **More baptisms** - Churches with more identical campuses are baptizing a higher percentage of people when compared to in-person attendance.
- **More volunteer leaders** - Churches with more identical campuses have twice as many volunteers in leadership roles over teams or small groups compared to churches with more autonomous campuses.
- **More intentional leadership development** - Churches with more identical campuses were also much more likely to have a formal leadership development strategy for volunteers. For churches with more identical campuses, 67% of those ministries indicated that they had a formal leadership development program. On the other hand, only 38% of churches with more autonomous campuses had a formal leadership development effort.
- **More central staff** - It stands to reason that churches with more identical campuses have more central staff supporting all locations when compared to churches with more autonomous campuses.
- **More video teaching** - Churches are three times more likely to use video teaching for message delivery in the more identical model. That doesn’t mean that video teaching causes faster growth and more baptisms, but there’s certainly a correlation when looking at the data.

In some of our [previous podcast content](#), we’ve talked about the fact that there are many ways to do multisite but **not all multisite strategies produce the same results.**

It would be like saying that there are many ways to parent our kids. That's true. But all parenting approaches don't produce the same results. Some parenting approaches increase the odds that we will raise kids and equip them to become healthy, successful, thriving adults. They don't guarantee that, but they do increase the probability. Likewise, some multisite approaches increase the odds that we will have a healthy, thriving ministry that will reproduce disciples of Jesus.

But, to put it bluntly, some multisite approaches increase the odds that you will create more complexity, overburden existing staff and volunteer leaders, experience overstaffing, spend more money, foster division, create confusion about who you are in your community and, maybe most importantly, get the church off mission.

Key Results: Thriving vs. Failed Multisite Campuses

At The Unstuck Group, we've encountered many churches that attempted multisite strategies that, unfortunately, created negative outcomes. Choosing more identical campuses or more autonomous campuses is just one of many strategic decisions that church leaders must make about their multisite model that has the potential to produce different results.

One of the reasons why churches choose multisite strategies that don't work is because way too many multisite "experts" have told pastors that there are many ways to do multisite. And then, these experts report data demonstrating and celebrating all the many ways churches *are* doing multisite. But what never gets reported in that data are the *failed* outcomes of the many churches that tried to implement a bad multisite strategy.

On that note, here are some of the key strategic differences from our recent survey comparing the campuses of the healthiest multisite churches—those that are experiencing the most growth and the most baptisms—and the churches that had to close campuses:

- **Mergers create more challenges.** Closed campuses were 40% more likely to have launched as a result of a merger with another church.
- **Successful campuses had much larger core teams.** The core teams of healthy campuses were almost 60% larger prior to launch when compared to the core teams of closed campuses.
- **Successful campuses launch larger.** The average in-person, at-launch attendance of campuses that are still thriving was 320 people. The average for closed campuses was 140 people. Healthy campuses launched with more than twice as many people. (By the way, those healthy campuses, on average, have doubled in size since they launched to more than 640 people today.)
- **Hiring from within pays off.** Closed campuses were less likely to be led by a campus pastor who was selected from within the church, either someone previously on staff or in lay leadership.
- **Portable space has its limitations.** Closed campuses were twice as likely to meet in a portable space that required setup and teardown every week. That's why The Unstuck Group recommends that multisite campuses move to a permanent location within three years from launch.
- **The teaching model matters.** Closed campuses were twice as likely to use a model where the campus pastor was the primary teacher. When compared to the fastest-growing campuses with more baptisms, the closed campuses were four times more likely to use a model where the campus pastor is the primary teacher. Again, the healthy multisite campuses were much more likely to use video teaching.

When asked for the primary reason for closing a campus or letting it become an independent church, churches most often cited leadership challenges, followed by the campus not being financially sustainable and attendance plateau or decline. So, once again, **not all multisite strategies produce the same results.**

This reality has been obvious to the multisite consultants on the Unstuck team for many years as we've served more than 100 multisite churches. Now, we have the data to confirm it as well.

Are there churches that find multisite success by engaging a strategy that hasn't worked for other multisite churches? Of course.

The learning here is that there seems to be a correlation between the strategy for multisite and the likelihood of experiencing success, as defined by attendance growth and life change as reflected in public statements of faith through baptism.

ABOUT THE UNSTUCK GROUP

Most organizations start, grow, thrive, lose momentum, decline, and eventually end. **That doesn't have to be your church's story.**

The Unstuck Group has a combined 100+ years of experience serving multisite churches across the country—from helping re-clarify and restructure a current multisite strategy to launching your very first campus. At the end of our Multisite Unstuck Process, you'll have a comprehensive, customized plan for healthy multisite expansion and the structure and systems to help you execute your plan.

Over the last 11 years, we've worked alongside and built relationships with the leadership teams at 600+ churches. Our goal is to help you lead a thriving church that continually reaches new people and helps them take next steps towards Christ.

>>> Interested in learning more? [Let's talk.](#)

This report was also made possible by the generous support of Christian Financial Resources:

ABOUT CHRISTIAN FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Since 1980, Christian Financial Resources (CFR) has financed more than 950 ministry projects for independent churches in the United States. As your church grows, CFR is equipped to support your vision and your ministry with financial services tailored to meet the needs of independent churches—including capital campaigns, stewardship services, and loans for construction, building purchase, or real estate acquisition.

As your ministry continues to grow, consider how CFR can help your church cultivate a generosity mentality and raise more capital for your next project.

>>> Interested in learning more? [Click here.](#)

For more information related to this survey and the summary of the learnings, contact:

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