

SOJOURN ELDERS: WHY WE BELIEVE OUR MULTI-CAMPUS APPROACH IS A BIBLICAL MODEL

After extensive prayer and study, we the elders of Sojourn Community Church want to share our conclusions on whether the multi-campus model of spreading the gospel is a biblical one. Ultimately this is the test, and this is where we spent most of our decision-making time: in the Word and in prayer:

Let's just say right up front that we don't want to have a "this works so it's got to be right and don't criticize us or slow us down with the Bible" kind of attitude about moving toward a multi-site or multi-campus model for Sojourn. As with everything that we do, we want our motivation and methods to flow from the gospel message. We should always be able to support what we are doing from the Scriptures. In this post, we will address three doctrinal questions:

- (1) Does the word "church," when it is used in the Bible, refer to a single assembly or gathering place?
- (2) Can you find multi-site churches in the Bible?
- (3) What kind of leadership structure should our multi-site church have?

Before we answer the questions, we should say that we are thankful for thoughtful men like Pastor John Piper (Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN), [Pastor J. D. Greear](#) (The Summit Church, Durham, NC), and [Dr. Gregg Allison](#) (Southern Seminary, Louisville, KY) who have wrestled with the biblical implications of the multi-site model. Much of what we've written below is adapted from what they've already written.

(1) Does the word "church," when it is used in the Bible, refer to a single assembly or gathering place?

The word for church used in the Bible has a wide range of meaning. The word's basic meaning is "the called" or "the gathered." The word "church" is used to describe:

(a) The totality of Christians that God has “called” ([Acts 20:28](#); [1 Corinthians 12:28](#); [Galatians 1:13](#); [Ephesians 1:22](#); 3:10, 21; 5:23-32; [Philippians 3:6](#); [Colossians 1:18, 24](#))-the universal church built on the teaching of the apostles and prophets ([Matthew 16:18](#)).

(b) Groups of Christians that met in homes were also called churches ([Romans 16:5](#); [1 Corinthians 16:19](#); [Colossians 4:15](#); [Philemon 2](#)), and the word “household” was also used to talk about such a “house church” ([Romans 16:10, 11](#); [1 Corinthians 1:11](#)).

These house groups may have been something like a large community group meeting but with the regular practice of celebrating a communion meal together “from house to house” ([Acts 2:46](#)).

(c) In a city, the people were known as the church of the city (Jerusalem-[Acts 8:1](#); 11:22; 12:1, 5; 15:4, 22; 18:22; Antioch-[Acts 11:26](#); 13:1; 14:27; 15:3, 30; Ephesus-[Acts 20:17](#); Cenchrea-[Romans 16:1](#); Corinth-[1 Corinthians 1:2](#); 11:18; [2 Corinthians 1:1](#); Philippi-[Philippians 4:15](#)). Paul would teach and appoint elders in each of these churches ([Acts 14:23](#); [1 Corinthians 4:17](#)), and each church would gather as an assembly to worship ([1 Corinthians 11-14](#)) and to publicly remove unrepentant members ([Matthew 18:17](#); [1 Corinthians 5:4, 12](#)).

(d) Often, the biblical authors will talk about multiple churches in a region ([Acts 15:41](#); 16:5; [Romans 16:4, 16](#); [1 Corinthians 4:17](#); 7:17; 16:1, 19; [2 Corinthians 8:1, 18-19, 23-24](#); 11:8, 28; 12:13; [Galatians 1:2, 22](#)). Perhaps these are simply groups of city churches.

(e) In at least one instance, Christians scattered throughout a large regional area (Judea, Galilee, and Samaria) are described as a single church ([Acts 9:31](#)).

This is not an exhaustive list of how the word for “church” is used, but one thing is clear from the overview. ***It was the people that were known as the church, not the assembly or gathering place.*** This is clear because the people are called the “church” both when they were scattered ([Acts 5:11](#); 8:1, 3) and when they were gathered ([Acts 14:27](#); 15:22, 30). So long as we are speaking about believing people who have covenanted together, whatever is said about one part of the church is true for the whole-whether we are talking about a house church, the city church, the regional church, or the universal

church. The essence of a local church is a covenant people, not a manner of assembly.

(2) Can you find multi-site churches in the Bible?

Our answer is adapted from J.D. Greear, "[Is the multi-campus concept biblical](#)," (November 23, 2007).

Consider the church in Jerusalem.

(1) The Jerusalem church had a massive growth problem. The first few chapters of Acts tell us that within a few weeks well over 10,000 people had come to Christ and that more people were being added "every day." [Acts 2](#) records the crowd's response to Peter's sermon as, "What should we do?" and after Peter's explanation, 3,000 respond. In [Acts 3](#), it says that 5,000 MEN responded to Peter's second sermon. The Jerusalem church went from 120 to many thousands in one week! What did they do? They welcomed the growth! No conscientious Christian ever says, "We're growing too fast!" So, the Jerusalem church scrambled to do what it could to accommodate that growth.

(2) The Jerusalem church remained as one church. Three times in Acts a reference is made to the church in Jerusalem, and each time it is referred to as a single body:

[Acts 8:1](#)- "There arose on that day a great persecution against the *church* in Jerusalem."

[Acts 11:22](#)- "The report of this came to the ears of the *church* in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch."

[Acts 15:4](#)- Luke describes Paul and Barnabas' return to Jerusalem: "When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the *church* and the apostles and the elders."

Each time, it does not refer to churches, but a church. Not once is it referred to as multiple, independent congregations.

[Acts 9:31](#) actually describes the Christians in the whole region of Judea (the capital of which was Jerusalem), Galilee, and Samaria as ONE church.

This means that the Jerusalem church (or perhaps a regional church based from Jerusalem) was ONE church with at least thousands of members.

(3) That church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. [Acts 2](#) says that the ONE new church gathered around the teaching of the apostolic team.

(4) There is no way the ONE church could have been gathered as ONE large group. There was simply no facility that could hold them in Jerusalem! [Acts 2](#) tells us they were meeting to hear the apostles' teaching daily "in the temple." There was no place in the temple that could daily accommodate more than 3,000 people. Plus, this was before microphones and video projection. It would take multiple, smaller gatherings for the many thousands to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching. That's probably why it says they met "daily." The Scriptures say that the church was in one accord ([Acts 2:44](#)), meaning that it was unified, but it never says that the many met together in the same place. It does say that every day some portion of them were meeting together in the temple courts or at Solomon's Porch to hear the apostles' teach ([Acts 2:44](#); 5:12). Do you see what this means? A "teaching team" of apostles were holding multiple services in the temple.

(5) In addition to smaller temple gatherings, the one church met in multiple houses every day to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching. Surely this seals the deal. One church is meeting in multiple houses, and a traveling group of apostles' is teaching every day in different houses and different locations in the temple or wherever else they could find space ([Acts 5:42](#)).

(6) The Jerusalem mega-church had massive organization problems and members who felt "left out." In [Acts 6](#), people were complaining that in the Jerusalem mega-church member-care was not happening. How did the apostles respond? They appointed another organizational structure within the church to minister to the needs of the growing body. We believe that the New Testament gives guidelines, but not specific details on how to best organize the

church for pastoral care and effective ministry. The big Jerusalem church was messy, but it took the necessary steps to re-organize to accommodate growth.

We don't believe that the Bible mandates the multi-site model, but we do think it is one biblical way to organize a church. And we see the Jerusalem church as a model of this organizational structure.

(3) What kind of leadership structure should our multi-site church have?

Adapted from Greg R. Allison, "[Theological Defense of Multi-Site](#)," (9 Marks eJournal May/June 2009).

Our prayer is that Sojourn will be an Elder-led, Deacon-served, Member-responding multi-site church for the sake of reaching Louisville.

In the 1644 *London Confession of Faith*, English Baptist churches were explicit about the cooperation that should characterize their churches: "And although the particular congregations are distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head." Our prayer is that a multi-campus Sojourn will embody this emphasis on strong connectionalism.

Certainly, the London Confession calls for unity between separate churches. But we believe it will be possible for us to achieve that strong connectionalism more readily through the multi-site approach. We long for cooperation and interdependence. We believe in united community, and we want to live life and engage in ministry *together* as we grow. Our one church will exist in various locations or campuses, and the leadership teams at the various sites will engage in ministry together by meeting together, sharing ministry resources, holding one another accountable, preparing sermons together, addressing problems together, and by sharing a common

budget. In doing so, we hope to avoid two extremes that have typified the church in the past:

(1) We hope to rage against the *fierce independence and exaggerated autonomy* which is promoted by rugged American individualism. This has too often been evident in churches. We repudiate strongly the fierce autonomy that has typified many independent churches in the past.

(2) On the other hand, we also reject *overly formalized structures for cooperation between churches* that all too often become bureaucratically heavy-handed, ponderously slow and incapable of offering realistic partnership for mission.

Elder Led. Under the sovereign direction of Jesus Christ, our lead pastor, an elder team will lead Sojourn. This council will be composed of the elders from the various sites. As a team, they are responsible for teaching, leading, praying, providing vision for, and shepherding the church, which will exist in multiple locations. Some of these elders are paid while others are not. Some will preach and teach at the various campuses while others have a specific campus assignment. All shoulder together the leadership for the entire church in the areas designated as their responsibilities. Coming together regularly, the elders will support one another in prayer, share ministry resources, hold one another accountable, prepare sermons together, address problems as a team, and share a common budget.

Deacon Served. Deacons serve the church. While Elders are dedicated to the work of teaching, leading, praying, and shepherding, the deacons are devoted to serving in all other areas of the church. These areas will include men's and women's ministries, family, youth, and children's ministries, worship arts, the 930, counseling ministries, urban renewal, benevolence, and mercy ministries, missions and church planting ministries, and many more. Deacons are typically campus-specific, that is, they engage in their ministries at particular sites and not system-wide.

Member Responding. Sojourn will have a single membership-one church body with biblically designated congregational responsibilities. Our church is elder led, not elder ruled: the elders lead with authority in their sphere of responsibilities (noted above), and the congregation -- which exists at multiple sites -- responds with wisdom and humility in its sphere of responsibilities, which includes confirming the elders, removing sinful members through church discipline, affirming the budget, and guarding the gospel by approving any major changes to the constitution and Sojourn's member covenant. We see regular family meals, which will bring together all the members from the various campuses, as the ideal. Such meals are designed to exhibit and foster unity among members, display and promote the strong connectionalism between the various sites, and provide the opportunity for members to discharge their congregational responsibilities as a whole. On the other hand, we recognize the practical difficulty of gathering all the members of a large church together for a meal. This kind of whole-congregation meeting may not be possible forever.

For the sake of reaching Louisville. Sojourn will exist in multiple locations for the purpose of reaching the Louisville area.

Accordingly, there will be a geographical limitation placed on our church. We are a church in the Louisville region, for the Louisville region. We are called as missionaries to this metropolitan area, reaching out to our neighbors, which involves adding other sites to expand the church's reach into heretofore unreached areas of the region.

Darrin Patrick, Pastor of The Journey Church in St. Louis has said, "In a sense, multi-site missionality reverses the trend of taking people out of their missional/relational networks in order to attend the church; it instead establishes campuses at multiple sites so as to affect all the neighborhoods in the city. One might say the multi-site church is more locally minded, because it's not forcing everyone in a church into one centralized location."