

# What are the Pros and Cons of Multi-site / Video Venues?

How are Multi-site methods transforming the global church?

Where does Substance see itself going in regards to these methods?

Did you know that one of our fastest growing church services is a "video venue?" It seems rather odd to think that people would prefer a "virtual me" compared to a "real live preacher;" yet, the stats don't lie. It never ceases to amaze me when people give their lives to Christ at a video venue. It's genuinely filled with God's Spirit.

Strangely, I've actually heard several people say that they're irritated to suddenly find out that I'm preaching live. And when I ask why, they immediately say: "I can see you ten times better when you're on video." And perhaps it's because we do a high-definition "2 simultaneous views" method. But, studies show that over 63% of communication is non-verbal (i.e., hands, eyebrows, facial expressions). So, because we don't have video magnification when I preach live, there are a good number of people who simply prefer how close a video makes them feel. (I.e., they love to see my eyebrows and nostril flares?) Maybe not. But, it makes sense: I mean, why watch a preacher who's 80 feet away when you can watch a video that projects an aspect ratio of only 6 feet?

Even more, churches across the country are experiencing the same phenomenon. There are even a few singular churches that have over 25 different video services spread across cities – even state lines! You see: the question is not "*does it work*;" rather, the real question is: *why does it work*? What are the pro's and cons? Under what circumstances might these formats fail? And what aspects of worship and church health could be undermined or enhanced by using such formats? Thankfully, there are hundreds of churches who are working out the kinks. And Substance has the privilege (and the frustration) of being one of those churches.

Of course, it's important that you understand: Substance didn't "choose" this model because we have an addiction to risk-taking (although, I did in fact have a psyche evaluation tell me that once : ) But, honestly, I had no interest in multi-site until it became a total necessity for us. In fact, I was overwhelmed with skepticism towards video venues in all sorts of areas. I thought that it undermined the need for church planting... for teaching other pastors to preach. I thought that they were just another way for egotistical pastors to export their narcissism across the state (and granted, I'm admittedly a bit cynical). Yet, the more I processed the pros and cons of video venues, the less fearful I became. Ultimately, I don't believe that "church services" have anything to do with true Biblical church (i.e., there is no "sacred format," only "sacred relationships" in my theology of church). In fact, I started to realize that video venue methods can actually hold a key for many problems in the body of Christ.

So in the following essay, I want to share with you a few of the pros and cons (and I obviously see more benefits than liabilities). Of course, this is not meant to be a book on multi-site (although I did get a little long-winded). Currently, there are a few great books on this topic already. Rather, my goal is simply to open your minds to how this is dramatically enhancing both the growth and health of Substance as well as the body of Christ at large.

So allow me to start with a few of the benefits of embracing multi-sites and/or video venues. And here are a few of topics I'm going to address:

1. Video Venues can save the church *massive amounts* of money and facility debt.
2. Video Venues radically empower the persecuted church
3. Video Venues enhance the options for small town parishes
4. Video Venues can free up pastors to "pastor" rather than write mediocre sermons
5. Video Venues break the cookie-cut "CEO-teaching pastor" mold thereby dramatically increasing the number of people who can become effective pastors.
6. Video Venues can provide the opportunity to get better theological diversity in pulpits
7. Video Venues provide a strategically efficient solution for planting niche churches in urban or spatially limited neighborhoods.

Then, below these, I'm going to hit some common concerns and how we might address some of those issues.

## **1. Video Venues can save the church massive amounts of money and prevent facility debt.**

One of the unique problems facing Substance is our crazy growth. I remember back in the beginning, planting was pretty hard and emotional. If someone would have told me that Substance will soon be averaging almost 80 new members a month, I would have started crying (even if they were lying to me in an extreme attempt to encourage me). And, I must admit, I actually do tear up a bit when I think about how many radical conversions we experience each month. But, when you're living in a city where it literally can cost millions of dollars per acre of land, building a facility that accommodates the growth can be incredibly difficult.

Especially in our circumstances: Substance reaches an amazing amount of unchurched people... most of whom don't understand God's blessing on things like tithing. So, the fact we've been able to operate on less than 60% of our income for much of our church life is actually quite amazing especially when our income is already half of most normal churches.

Of course, we'd all like to imagine that church services, programs, etc, are free. I mean, it seems pretty simple to do a church service right? Most people think: "Just turn the light on and do church." Unfortunately, almost every church in America spends between \$3-8 dollars per person just to open the doors for every person that attends. (I.e., the average American church spends roughly \$600-1100 dollars a year per attender... regardless of whether or not they give anything!) And it's not that American churches are secretly serving caviar in gold-plated prayer rooms. Rather, when you add up heating/air-conditioning, electrical, custodial costs, as well as the rental fees, mortgages or staff fees, this is what a typical church service costs. Even "home churches" spend about the same amount per attender when all is said or done. So, no matter what model of church you embrace, the fact remains: It costs money to reach people.

Of course the reason all of this is relevant to multi-site & video venue models of church is because, now that video venues have proven to be a viable model of church, this dramatically increases the financial options for churches like Substance.

A while back we were maxing out three services at Fridley highschool. The problem was this: Despite searching through at least 50 different facility options, none of them would work for Substance. You see, in the Twin Cities metro, there are only so many facilities that have more than 1000 seats. Of the ones who would even bother renting to us, most of them

were either ridiculously expensive, inaccessible, or they were simply inadvisable places to be setting up a decent kids ministry. Sure, if everyone would simply drive 35 minutes north we could probably get a good deal on a high school auditorium. Or, if we could simply squeeze \$4 million dollars out of our people, we could probably afford to build an additional 800 seat auditorium. Yet, for Substance, we knew that it was premature for us to build at that time. Much like buying a house, too many people bite off a mortgage that cripples their cash flow. And having been in such a situation at my last church, I vowed to never get into that cash-poor situation again. But, the problem still remained: What does Substance do?

Well, in a stroke of luck, Northwestern College decided to open their doors to us. And through creative video technology at all three of our campuses, we were able to increase our seating capacity by almost 2200 seats... all for a small fraction of the cost of building. Sure, the video technology had a price tag to it; but, in our case, it was far less expensive than the cost of pre-maturely building some huge mega-facility... especially one that we could immediately outgrow (which might be the case no matter what we do : ) Again, video venues aren't always the solution. And in some circumstances, a video venue could actually cost *more* than other classical expansion solutions. But for us, it prolonged our ability to save huge amounts of money through portability.

## **2. Video Venues can radically empower the persecuted church.**

It's amazing how different the church is in the Middle East. After doing several pastor's conferences throughout persecuted countries, it's amazing how difficult it can be to grow their churches. Muslims who convert to Christianity live under constant threats. In fact, many Christian churches are afraid to welcome such Muslim converts as it often draws unnecessary attention from oppressive Islamic and government groups. (And we Americans already find it hard to simply be welcoming to sinners and outsiders... now imagine welcoming sinners who have hit-squads following them!) You see: Quite often Christians live in such fear of persecution that many of these new converts fail to find the fellowship they need to grow in their faith. However, video methods are changing everything for them.

Many pastors are beginning to record their teachings and services on video; and, through clever webcasting techniques, they can fuel the massive networks of underground churches who are meeting in unmarked locations all over the Middle East. Sure, it's great that you and I get to have a choice about whether or not we want a "live" preacher vs. a "video message." But, for them, it's a matter of life or death.

Even more, when you consider the massive growth of such churches, it's hard to keep a good ratio of pastors to parishioners. I.e., Even if Bible schools exploded across Third World countries today, they would hardly be able to crank out enough pastors to meet the needs of these exploding churches. I.e., Video teaching is a necessity for church health.

So, because American churches have been bold enough to experiment with this technology, churches all over the world are starting to reap the benefits (and bear fruit with them on a whole new level). And for this, we should be thanking God.

## **3. Video Venues enhance the options for small town churches**

For years, denominations and small towns have been plagued with a problem: How do we get quality pastors to move to our city? Cities with a limited economy tend to have "lesser opportunities." And this is true both in church experiences as well as business.

For decades, good teaching pastors tended to get sucked into bigger churches in larger cities. And why is that? Great teachers are hard to find. Let's face it, most Americans have high standards for their senior pastors: They must be well educated. They must relay that education in such a way that is exciting and fun. "Oh, and by the way, we need to you be an expert in organizational leadership and small business management to boot." You see, it's hard to find a person who fits all of the criteria of an ideal "American senior pastor."

So, one of the emerging trends is for large metropolitan mega-churches to plant a satellite in a smaller nearby town. The benefit is that the small church can mooch off of the endless resources of a mother church with little or no cost. For example, small churches can outsource their videos, graphic designing, discipleship curriculums, legal woes, and their IRS procedures to larger churches. I.e., Smaller churches can have the look and feel of high-dollar programming for next to nothing. This translates into greater impact for the kingdom.

Even more, small town pastors don't need to feel the burden of preaching every week. Through video technology, they can hook up to their mother campus for any number of conferences or messages. So rather than wasting 3 days a week writing a mediocre message, local pastors can actually spend more time pastoring rather than reinventing the wheel. As a result, smaller town pastors can spend more time ministering to the people in their town.

(Answers to the following three points will be offered below)

**4. Video Venues can free up pastors to lead rather than rewrite mediocre sermons (& provide mediocre care).**

**5. Video Venues break the cookie-cut "CEO-teaching pastor" mold thereby dramatically increasing the number of people who can become pastors.**

**6. Video Venues provide the opportunity to get better theological diversity in pulpits**

I spend an amazing amount of time writing my messages. It quite rare for me to spend less than 3 full work days writing a good sermon. Fortunately, I've got over 2000 sermons under my belt; so, through clever recycling, I'm able to use my "extra time" to creatively integrate inspirational films and video testimonies into my messages. I.e., I'm able to accomplish in a week what most young pastors can only dream of.

However, 15 years ago, it took all of my strength to simply preach a mediocre message. And unfortunately, I had to abandon a huge number of leadership responsibilities to even produce such a mediocre message. Unfortunately, I often times had to choose between preaching and "pastoring." A singular counseling appointment or leadership meeting would often force me to write my sermon on my one day off (a scenario that was hardly God-honoring). Yet, I felt completely enslaved to the expectations of the people.

I was one part marriage counselor... one part youth pastor... one part business leader... one part theological expert... one part non-profit lawyer... one part wedding planner... one part accountant... one part small group coach... one part web-designer/marketer/worship-

leader/video-editor. You see, pastors of medium size churches have to wear a large quantity of hats with relatively little resources. And unfortunately, very few pastors are able to fulfill such expectations with balance.

Only one out of every 100 church plants will survive the first ten years! This is because very few pastors can fit the psychotically rare gift mix of the modern American senior pastor (or meet the expectations of the average Christian consumer). We want our pastors to be brilliant teachers, prophets, CEO's, and theological experts. Of course, there are many people who fill just one or two of these roles. But, if they don't have all three, their odds of being a successful senior pastor of a growing church dramatically diminishes.

This had led some people to the conclusion that we need to "up the training" for our senior leaders. However, I believe that sometimes the opposite is true. Perhaps we need to simplify the role of senior pastors by breaking the stereotype "gift-mix" demanded by this position. And video-venues are providing the perfect opportunity for this.

For example, I had a friend who was a brilliant leader. He could lead worship. He could rally a team like no one else. Yet he had one tragic flaw: He was somewhat boring to listen to in the pulpit. No matter how much he'd try to muster his enthusiasm, he couldn't keep the people's attention for longer than 10 minutes. So, should we just throw my friend away? No. Instead, let's set him up to succeed. And in his case, the perfect scenario was becoming the campus pastor of a video venue.

Every week he diligently picks out a high-def. video feed from a dynamic teaching pastor. Every week his flock gets fed from a host of America's finest teachers. And every week he spends a massive amount of time mentoring, pastoring, and equipping his flock for ministry.

Of course, if you ask him: "Don't you feel limited that you can't control the messages to your flock?" On the contrary, he believes he has all sorts of control: *"I can choose to press play... or not! I can choose the preacher. I can choose the message. And if I want to preach, I can. But at least I have the option, which is more than most American pastors can say."* You see video venues open up the possibility for a whole new pool of candidates to succeed.

It has been said that *"church planting is the single greatest evangelistic methodology under heaven."* This is because the growth or demise of almost every single church movement in history can be traced back to it's prioritization of church planting. Of course, church planting is really hard. And because the "American Church planting Gift Mix" is so rare, the failure rates are incredibly high... until video venues came along. So, perhaps, multi-site/video venues could be a perfect new asset for church planting. After all, anyone who's ever planted a video-venue knows that it's almost 100% the same process as church planting. Indeed, it *is* church planting.

You see, the idea of watching a video may appear unappealing at first (even though we ironically stare at television and movies for hours at a time). But consider the trade-off: Astronomical church planting failure rates... Grotesque amounts of time spent writing mediocre messages that should have been spent on personal mentoring and other effective pastoral tasks. You see: Video venues aren't always the solution. Pastors who built their churches on raw leadership instead of great teaching may have a hard time transitioning to video. But, it's still undeniable that video methods could open up a world of options that didn't previously exist for many churches.

## **7. Multi-site strategies provide a strategically efficient solution for planting niche churches in urban or spatially limited neighborhoods.**

(Keep in mind, the following response is a bit verbose. So, unless you're a church-method geek, you may want to skip ahead).

For decades there's been a trend from "small neighborhood churches" towards "large regional mega-churches." Of course, this trend isn't limited to churches. Businesses in general have made this shift: From small grocery and hardware stores to Super Target and Home Depot. Increasingly, Americans seem to prefer the large programming and quality of "mega-sized" organizations.

Certainly, there has been a recent trend towards "small" again in certain church circles. But, the overall shift to mega-churches has hardly been altered. In fact, many of the largest church growth studies have concluded that, in the last 15 years, almost all growth in American churches have been in those over 1000 members. Of course, I'm not saying this is good or bad. I'm simply saying that it's a massive trend that smart church leaders need to reflect upon.

By way of insight, I think it's relevant to ask the question: Why have people gravitated towards mega-grocery or mega-hardware stores. In short, the common answers are the following: Mega-stores generally offer tens times the options for a fraction of the price. Even more, the franchise mega-store models tend to offer both consistency as well as statistical quality. This is why "franchise business" success rates unmistakably smother those of independent businesses.

Of course, if you're anything like me: I tend to champion the little entrepreneur. I have a fascination with the novel and unique approaches to life. So, it's sad to admit that franchises fulfill the preferences of most Americans better; but, from a statistical standpoint, it's true. But how does all of this affect urban and neighborhood church models?

There's a huge reason why large chain stores like Super-Target and Home Depot focus on suburbs rather than urban cores: Money. When you go into a city, the cost of land can be astronomical... if it's even available. You see, it's economic suicide for most businesses to even consider an urban location. Sure, there may be plenty of people nearby; but, what good is that if you can't provide adequate parking or adequate traffic egress. I.e., Cost-effectiveness has summarily killed the "local grocery store" across the United States. And the same thing is true with churches.

Some Christians like to pretend that money, acreage and parking lot capacity have nothing to do with evangelism or church growth; but, it's time we wise-up to the fact that these "unspiritual things" can have a huge impact on long-term success. Most of the people advocating for urban churches obsess about the need for them yet fail to address the greater business forces which affect their success.

Of course, I completely believe in the need for more urban churches. And thankfully, the body of Christ at large is finally returning to social justice issues that have blighted urban neighborhoods for decades. Yet, despite the rise in urban advocacy, it's rare to find any of them who are proposing functional "church-business" plans. I.e., We rant about the need for multi-ethnic churches; yet, simultaneously live in denial of the factors which cap their success.

Urban churches are often incredibly more expensive than suburban counterparts; yet, they usually also generate far less income. This is usually because the cost of land is far higher. Available land is far more sparse. Multi-ethnic churches are quite often more geographically tethered (which only decreases the available facility options, and increases the amount one must pay for their "only option".) Then, add in the socio-economic factors resulting in small offerings, and you have a recipe for a horrible business plan.

Another fact is that: Most urban churches are destined to have tight growth lids. I.e., It's a statistical fact that, no matter how good the leader... American churches won't grow beyond 300 people per acre (In fact, most churches max out at 125 members per acre of land). Thus, based on available land in urban locations, it's rare to have a church larger than a few hundred. Of course, with a smaller number of members, it's not uncommon to lack both the human and financial resources to create "competitive" or "quality" programs and services. Much like small town churches, urban churches feel like the inferior younger brother to their expansive suburban mega-church counterparts. Much like starting an urban grocery store: It's hard to keep up when everyone is demanding both the options and prices of Super Target.

Does this mean we should abandon both urban and neighborhood church models? Not at all. These people need and deserve the message of God just as much as anyone else. But, in order to reach them, we need to come up with a better solution. I believe one of the best solutions is to start planting urban video venues as satellites of suburban mega-churches.

Mega-churches are often successful *precisely because* they've managed to provide broad programming and service options that appeal to a large group of people. Previously, when mega-churches reached capacity, they'd build some larger, inefficient mega-center (by incurring huge debt) and then they'd abandon their old location. But since video venues have become a success, mega-churches are increasingly opting to plant portable video venues. As a result, many mega-churches have rediscovered the ability to plant "niche" satellite churches. (I.e., an edgy campus targeting "20-somethings"... or an urban hip-hop campus).

For example, downtown Minneapolis is largely inhabited by tens of thousands of single 20-somethings. It's very hard to find a sizable "family" church in downtown. After all, many families are terrified to take their kids downtown. The driving is crazy. The atmosphere is intimidating to some. Even more, children's ministry requires a good amount of square footage. So, renting or constructing a church with such square footage needs can be astronomically expensive (& highly regulated by the city). Thus, many downtown churches find that whenever couples start to have kids, they lose these families to their mega-church counterparts who offer endless programs.

So, why not consider this alternative: Plant a 20-something campus in downtown with a worship experience that is explicitly marketed towards that exact audience. The suburban 20-somethings would probably *love* the hip feel of an urban church. So, let the Suburban mega-church constantly fuel the downtown campus with these members. Conversely, the suburban mega-church will likely receive many of these same members back (when they start having kids... or start looking for reasonable housing).

Of course, the Suburban mega-church may need to release control over the worship, sermons, and marketing; but, if a strategic alignment is found... much like video venues in smaller towns, the resources of mega-churches can finally be harnessed in a way that serves the urban, niche, and neighborhood church again. I.e, through a smart use of video venues we

can start creating a mutually beneficial symbiosis between Suburban mega-churches and niche urban churches.

Keep in mind: I'm not implying that "smart churches" should simply take the easiest economic path by moving to a 5th ring suburb and then re-invade the city. However, there's definitely an interesting business strategy here. As for Substance, we've currently opted to be a 2nd & 3rd ring suburban church. This gives us a great mix of ethnic and economic diversity while keeping us nearby our specialty -- reaching 20-somethings and college students -- who represent the largest demographic of unchurched people in the Twin Cities.

And because of this, we're probably going to *pay more* for land and facilities than most churches who simply move 20 minutes out. However, we may also potentially reach more unchurched people than many other churches (because, statistically, unchurched people are decidedly young and/or multi-ethnic people. And young people cling to the affordability of inner suburban housing.) However, this statement of strategy is nothing more than an opinion. There are other strategies for reaching lost people that we also support.

But, the bottom line is this: Every pastor and every church needs to first identify: *"Who am I most qualified and anointed to reach? And secondarily: what is the best location and economic strategy that would enhance this?"* Hence, if churches would simply listen to God's voice and then apply sound business strategy mixed with emerging multi-site methodology, then, it's only a matter of time before your church will be conquering both the suburban and urban core.

## But what about the "Cons" for Multi-site and video methods?

Well, most people usually voice one of the following concerns. And like any "tool", multi-sites and videos can both help and hurt an organization when they're used incorrectly. Here are a few of the downsides:

**(1) Some teaching pastors are simply horrible at preaching on video:** I believe it's possible to be a decent preacher yet be bad at video preaching. At Substance we go to great lengths to make sure that the video audience stays engaged. For example, when I'm preaching, I stare at the camera far more than I ever stare at the native audience. I also tend to use a large amount of short videos throughout my messages; so, if you're the typical talking-head pastor, you may want to give some thought to how you preach before going to multi-site. If you built your church on pure leadership rather than teaching (like many mega-church pastors have done), you just might not translate as well through video. A good way to know is simply evaluate your podcasts. Many multi-site pastors easily have a larger audience online than they have attending their services. Yet, another place to look is your technology. If you're producing a horrible looking low-def video feed of yourself, it may be your technology, not your preaching that is killing you. (But pastors: be honest with yourself!)

**(2). Some senior pastors don't want to "give up" their altar ministry time or pulpit time to campus pastors.** Every teaching pastor should be training in a replacement. Video-sermons are never to be a substitute for training in a new generation of preachers. Ultimately, I think it's healthy for every teaching pastor to be working as one part of a "teaching team." Not only would this give the teacher a break; but, it also would help add

theological and topical diversity in the pulpit. Some people fear that video-venue models weaken the church by making them *more personality driven*.

Although this can be true, ironically, video-venue churches can actually accomplish the exact opposite. At our church, if I want a week off, I simply tap into the feed of another great preacher. (I don't even have to pay to fly them in!) In fact, this actually enables me to get out of the pulpit *more*.

However, I still feel the need to be training in a new generation of preachers. Video venues are never supposed to be a substitute for empowering new leaders (even though, this may unfortunately happen in some churches). But, it's safe to say that Substance is going to be constantly empowering new "live teachers" from amongst our ranks.

### **But how do we resolve the problem of doing altar ministry after our messages?**

As you would imagine, doing extended altar ministry can be logistically complicated by video technology. Of course, some pastors would totally disagree; but, whenever I want to do altar ministry after a particular message, I have to spend time with our campus pastors about how they are to individually use that time after my message is done. Of course, the net result is that I've spent far more time teaching *others* how to do altar ministry than I have spent *actually doing it*. (Which is arguably a great thing). But, some pastors (especially from a charismatic background) don't want to give this up. And if that's you, multi-site is likely to be an exercise in frustration for you.

### **(3). Multi-site is a horrible option if your site hasn't adequately addressed and adapted to the specific needs of the community you're planting in:**

I've known of many mega-churches who plant a satellite in another city. And, sometimes, the culture of the church simply doesn't translate into the culture of that specific city or neighborhood. For example, if the local culture is explicitly young (like Minneapolis), a piped in video of an elderly preacher may not be as relatable as another. Also, certain worship styles may have a larger appeal in certain locales. Thus, the mother-church may need to surrender a bit of their control over the particulars of worship and other formatting issues. Of course, I believe that smart leaders can and do compensate for this. But, there are some circumstances where no amount of compensation will make the difference. Sometimes, it's simply smarter to plant an autonomous church rather than force a satellite or video venue to thrive.

In summary: Multi-site and video technology is nothing more than a tool. Like a butter knife, you could use it to make sandwiches for your neighbors; Or, you could kill them with it. It's neither good nor bad. It's *all* how you use it. Certainly, I know of pastors who are probably misusing it. But, let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Multi-site video technology is changing the face of the planet. And the church shouldn't dig its head in the sand and pass by all of the benefits just because it doesn't initially jive with our narrow-minded church model.

Believe it or not, when you research all of the statistical causes of spiritual growth, very few of them directly pertain to "church services." I.e., Things like small groups and non-church-service discipleship experiences are proven to have a much bigger influence on people's spiritual growth than any formula for the "perfect worship format." So, whether the preaching is live or if it's a pre-recorded video doesn't matter as much to me. I realize that

this brave new world of video preaching may feel awkward to some; but, let's not stop experimenting with it when God is clearly using it to bring people unto himself.