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TITLE: Multi-congregational Churches Becoming the Trend

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Thank you for calling Grace Community Church. If you are calling in regard to our traditional worship service, please press 1. If you are looking for celebrative worship in a casual, non-threatening atmosphere, please press 2. If you're not into religion but you believe in God and own a pair of Timberlands, then our Gen X service may be for you. Press 3 now. If you don't know where you fit in, please press 4 to make an appointment with our counselling service. And have a great day.

Thousands of churches across the country are adding worship services to reach different groups of people. Traditional churches are starting services for baby boomers. Boomer churches are reaching out to GenXers. Some churches are even targeting the fastest-growing segment of the population – senior adults.

The trend knows few bounds. From the struggling traditional church in the city centre to the thriving suburban megachurch, multiple worship services are becoming the solution of choice for churches looking to reach new people or avoid decline.

“That's happening all over the country in tens of thousands of churches,” said church consultant Bob Gilliam of Aurora, Colo.

Charles Arn, a church-growth researcher from Monrovia, Calif., estimates that over half of Protestant churches would benefit from starting a new worship service, either to reach a new group of people or to bring in more of the same. Arn and others say new worship services grow faster than existing congregational worship. With an estimated three-fourths of North American churches either plateaued or declining, adding a worship service for a new target audience is one way to breathe in new life.

The formula varies widely. Some churches offer new styles and formats for worship. Some offer more convenient times. Some target different subcultures – from punks to cowboys. The most common pattern for multiple services, Arn said, is “from one generation to its succeeding generation,” which also usually includes a more contemporary worship style.

The result of all this diversification – “multi-congregational churches” – where two or more distinct groups live together as one local church.

But does it work? Is it healthy? Is diversity of worship the answer for every church or only some? And what holds a church together when it meets in separate services?

"Those are going to be hot debates for the next 10 to 20 years," predicts David Hughes, a pastor who studied the trend and led a traditional church to make the transition.

The idea of "a church within a church," as some call it, is not entirely new. In reality, any church with more than 100 or so members is a collection of subgroups, "a federation of tribes within a tribe," said Hughes, pastor of First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem. Sunday School classes, age groups or ministry teams each can function as a subgroup.

But when those subgroups meet separately for worship – the one activity they used to do all at once under one roof – subtle distinctions become pronounced.

Worshipping in subgroups became popular in the 1980s. It followed a national trend toward demographic segmenting and target marketing, "which probably began when the baby boom generation arrived on the scene," said Arn, president of Church Growth Inc.

For many congregations, the story is strikingly similar. Baby boomers did not respond well to traditional church methods and programs, but they flocked to churches that made worship and other ministries relevant to the boomer experience. New churches designed with boomers in mind flourished, while those founded earlier by the builder generation struggled to keep up.

While some traditional churches tried to adapt, others resisted major changes, particularly to their style of worship. The rock-based worship music of the boomers was too much of a departure from the tradition of organ and hymn. Yet as many builder churches stopped growing, the prospect of missing a whole generation of Christians spurred some to action. The solution for many was segmented worship along generational lines.

First Baptist of Winston-Salem is a historic downtown church with a formal worship style. Hughes led the 1,200-member church to start an early-morning contemporary service for the baby boomers who were not responding to the church's traditional ministry. Though only a fourth the size of the traditional congregation, the new service accounts for most of the church's growth.

Meanwhile, some boomer churches, after a decade or more of growth, found their appeal to the baby-bust generation likewise was limited. The cultural gap between boomers and busters was in some ways even wider. So sub-congregations for the post-1964 generation began to appear.

Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, the quintessential baby boomer church, established a new service for baby busters when it became clear they weren't attracted to Willow Creek's patented seeker services. Dieter Zander, who in 1986 founded one of the first buster churches in West Covina, Calif., was hired in 1994 as the teaching pastor for Willow Creek's new congregation.

Arn said segmented worship is the best strategy for reaching any new group of people. After studying the experience of several hundred churches over a five-year period, he found that 80% of churches that add a new worship service show an increase in total attendance, contributions and commitments.

But multiple worship services don't work for every church. What makes the difference?

The one essential ingredient, according to pastors and consultants alike, is an outward focus. Churches that are committed to those outside their fellowship can muster the resources and tolerate the changes required to make multiple worship work.

That commitment is called different things – a growth orientation, evangelistic fervor, Great Commission thinking. A growing league of scholars and researchers refer to an “apostolic mindset,” recalling the outward focus of the first-century apostles that spread the gospel throughout the Mediterranean.

“An apostolic mindset is absolutely essential,” said Jim Johnson, who has led Dunwoody Baptist Church in Atlanta through a transition from a traditional church to one targeting boomers and busters. “The average lifespan for a church is 50 years, after which it follows a bell curve and begins to decline. For a church to survive and thrive after that, it has to make arrangements to reach a succeeding generational group or succeeding mindset.”

A church focused on preserving the past, protecting its fellowship, or simply surviving won't have the commitment to start multiple worship services, said Arn, author of *How to Start a New Service*. His studies suggest that half of Protestant churches fall into this category. “For a church that does not have a Great Commission conscience, there really is little or no alternative other than stagnation and death because that, more than any other ingredient, is necessary for a church to grow,” he said.

Arn worries about what he calls a “spiritual selfishness” that keeps many churches from focusing outward. “There is a plague of self-centredness which spends for more time than appropriate on our own spiritual growth and far less than appropriate on reaching beyond ourselves.”

Greg Warner writes for the Associated Baptist Press.

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