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abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of the multi-site church movement in light of the historic belief in the oneness of the church. It discusses historic understandings of oneness, the definition of oneness used by multi-site advocates, and the single most commonly raised objection to multi-site churches—that they fail to assemble. It evaluates the validity of that objection and multi-site churches as a whole and finds that the oneness of a local church in the New Testament requires relational and geographical closeness that most multi-site churches lack.

introduction

One of the most rapidly growing movements in North American Christianity is that of multi-site churches. A recent dissertation on the movement says, "The Multi-Site Church Revolution era began with a trickle of new multi-site churches; it now burgeons with a torrent of them."[1] Growth has been especially steep since

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[1] Brian Frye, "The Multi-Site Phenomenon in North America: 1995–2010" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 104.

2000. The results of a 2007 survey of 1000 multi-site churches indicate that "for every one multi-site church begun before 2000, ten more emerged between 2000 and 2007."[2] Those who have been tracking the movement estimate the total number of multi-site churches as 2000 in 2007, growing to 2500 by 2008, and 3000 by 2009, leading them to call multi-site churches "the new normal."[3]

What is distinctive or new about multi-site churches? As the phrase implies, it is "being one church in many locations."[4] This phrase raises questions, though, because from the New Testament onward, individual churches were often described in terms of a single location, from "the church in Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1) to "the church that meets at their house" (the house of Priscilla and Aquila, Rom. 16:5). Paul and Barnabas won disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, and regarded the groups of believers in each place as individual churches, for whom they appointed elders "in each church" (Acts 14:23). Robert Banks believes that for Paul, "*ekklēsia* cannot refer to a group of people unless they all do in fact actually gather together."[5] How then can groups of believers in divergent locations be one church? This article will present the answer given to that question by those in the multi-site movement and evaluate it. It will, first of all, give a brief, historical survey of what it has meant to affirm belief in one church. Second, it will give what multi-site churches mean when they affirm that they are "one church in many locations." Third, it will explore the single most common objection raised against the multi-site understanding of the oneness of the church. Finally, it will evaluate the multi-site church understanding of the oneness of the church.

historical survey: "we believe in one church"

The affirmation of belief in one church, found in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed, has deep roots in New Testament teaching. Jesus' use of the singular "church" in Matthew 16:18 ("I will build my church") is an implicit argument that the church is one, and it is strengthened by Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 that all those who believe in Him would be one. Paul's teaching on the church as a body highlights both the multiplicity of members and the oneness of the body (Rom. 12:5; I Cor. 12:12). The oneness of the body is one of the aspects of unity that Paul proclaims as fact and commands us to maintain and preserve (Eph. 4:3–5).

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2 Ibid., 104–05.
3 Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Road Trip: Exploring the New Normal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 217–18.
4 Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-site Church Revolution: Being One Church . . . In Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).
5 Robert Banks, *Paul's idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 40.

At the same time, the New Testament also speaks of churches in the plural on twenty-seven occasions. Obviously, belief in the oneness of the church did not preclude the recognition that, in some sense, the oneness of the church had some boundaries. When groups of Christians crossed those boundaries, it was proper to speak of them as "churches." So, in what sense is the church in the New Testament one? Christian history gives a variety of answers.

In the early church, it was obvious that there were a multitude of scattered churches, but they sensed as well that each local church was somehow related to a larger, universal church, the one body of Christ. While some early fathers appealed to their common proclamation of one faith as the basis of their unity,[6] increasingly the unity of the church was grounded in communion with the bishops. Those who walked in communion with the bishops were part of the one church; those who rebelled against the authority of the bishops were outside the church.[7] The unity of the church was seen as that of a visible, empirical institution. Little theological consideration was given to the oneness of a local congregation; rather, oneness was a mark of the universal church.

The Reformers' break with the Catholic Church signaled a new understanding of the oneness of the church. Unity was no longer based on communion with a visible institution and its bishops, but on possession and embrace of the Gospel. Paul Avis says,

> For Luther, the Church was created by the living presence of Christ through his word the gospel. Where the gospel is found Christ is present, and where he is present the Church must truly exist. This conviction lay at the root of the whole Reformation struggle and was shared by all the Reformers—Lutheran and Reformed, Anglican and Anabaptist. They were prepared to sacrifice the visible unity of the Western church if only by so doing they could save the gospel.[8]

In place of a visible unity, the Reformers and their evangelical descendants have largely seen the oneness of the church as a spiritual and invisible reality. The preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments have been seen as the visible marks of a true church, but how the scattered true churches possess unity is not visible or institutional. It lies in their common embrace of the gospel.[9]

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[6] Such as Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses,* I, 10, 2.

[7] This is a major theme of Cyprian's important work, *The Unity of the Catholic Church,* written in response to the schism of Novatian.

[8] Paul Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 3.

[9] For a contemporary expression of this idea of the oneness of the church, see Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken, and Mark E. Dever, *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004).

In the centuries following the Reformation, Protestants split irrepressibly into dozens, then hundreds, even thousands of denominations. Such Protestants could still affirm the oneness of the church, because they assumed the distinction between the visible and invisible church and attributed oneness to the latter.[10] Still, strongly connectional denominations introduced some ambiguity into the idea of oneness, because while never claiming to be the one universal church, they nevertheless claimed to be one church. For example, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms and seeks "to deepen communion with all other churches within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" and yet also affirms that "[t]he particular congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church, called the church."[11] How are the associated congregations of a denomination one church? Overall governance by the General Assembly is one obvious aspect, but some denominations might also claim "common vision, mission, and ministry."[12]

Less connectional denominations, while not calling their associated congregations one church, did see the act of associating as giving some manifestation of unity on a larger than local church level. Perhaps the most striking statement of the close relationship associated churches bear to one another comes from the seven English Particular Baptist churches who formed the first Particular Baptist Association. In their 1644 Confession, they affirmed the autonomy and full ecclesial nature of each local congregation, yet also saw a value in associations of congregations. They wrote:

> And although the particular Congregations be distinct and severall Bodies, every one a compact and knit Citie in it selfe; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affaires of the Church, *as members of one body* in the common faith under Christ their onely head.[13]

Since it is the local congregations who are the "members of one body," the unity of that one body is one that extends beyond the local church level. Yet, it cannot be the full unity of the universal church, which extends far beyond the scope of the

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[10] D. G. Tinder, "Denominationalism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,* ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic and Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001), 335, notes, "The theological distinction between the church visible and invisible, made by Wycliffe and Hus and elaborated by the Protestant Reformers, underlies the practice and defense of denominationalism that emerged among seventeenth century English Puritans."

[11] *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),* Part II Book of Order 2011–2013 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2011), 3, 13.

[12] This phrase is from the web site of the United Methodist Church, describing their structure and organization. It states, "The United Methodist Church is able to maintain a common vision, mission, and ministry through the worldwide connectional system." See http://www.umc.org/site/c.1wL4KnN1LtH/b.1720697/k.734E/Structure_Organization _Organizaation.htm, accessed 9/14/2011.

[13] Article XLVII of London Confession, 1644, as found in W. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith,* rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969), 168–69. Emphasis added.

seven churches which signed the 1644 Confession. Rather, the statement seems to imply that the unity of associated churches is nonetheless valuable and desirable because it manifests, even if in a limited way, something of the oneness of the larger body of Christ.

While many decry denominations as detrimental to the unity of the church,[14] Richard Phillips sees them as positively enabling unity on two levels. He cites Bruce Shelley's view that "Denominations were created . . . to make unity in the church possible," and explains, "Denominations allow us to have organizational unity where we have full agreement, and allow us to have spiritual unity with other denominations, since we are not forced to argue our way to perfect agreement but can accept our differences of opinion on secondary matters."[15] While Phillips may be correct that denominations have enabled like-minded congregations to enjoy organizational unity, others would say that organizational unity is not the type of unity the New Testament calls for, nor is it the type of unity given to the church by the Spirit. Thus, it is not the unity we are to recognize and maintain (Eph. 4:3–4).[16]

What makes a local church one church has not been a major topic in theological discussions. From early on, those discussions focused on the oneness of the church universal. Perhaps the fact that the church was born in an imperial context, where the local was subordinated to the imperial, had some impact. At any rate, while the unity of local congregations has not received much attention from theologians, it was an important issue in the New Testament. One important element of unity was a common faith. Paul reacted strongly to the threat to the oneness of the faith represented by the heterodox preaching in the churches in Galatia.[17] One of the elements of unity highlighted in Ephesians 4 is "one faith" (Eph. 4:5), and many of Paul's letters to churches included theological instruction and correction so that they could be one in faith, both internally and in relationship to other churches.

Most often, though, the oneness of a local congregation in the New Testament seems to be relational, rooted in the relationships among the members. So, in Acts 2:44, we read that "all the believers were together and had everything in common." Acts 4:32 continues, "All the believers were one in heart and mind." The image of the one body with many members in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12 emphasizes equality in value and honor despite diversity in gifts and is given as an incentive to

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[14] The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states, "Divisions into different denominations obscures but does not destroy unity in Christ." See Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, 3.

[15] Phillips, Ryken, and Dever, *The Church,* 27.

[16] Banks, 48.

[17] Theological unity is given both primacy and greatest prominence in the list of five areas of church unity advocated by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears in *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 137–140. In addition to theological unity, they highlight relational, philosophical, missional, and organizational unity.

mutual care. In fact, one of the major themes of I Corinthians is Paul's appeal to all the members there "to agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (I Cor. 1:10). Similarly, the Philippian church is exhorted to make Paul's joy complete "by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:2). Unity seems very much a matter of the quality of relationships members have with each other, and little to do with organizational matters.

The living out of such relationships would seem to require some level of interaction among the members, as in Acts 2:44, where all the believers "were together." This assumption of interaction among members for local church oneness raises the question this paper addresses. While there are some multi-site churches whose sites are limited geographically to one city, and a smaller number who think it is important for all the sites to meet jointly on occasion, the dominant model does not consider geographical proximity of sites as an issue. When Surratt, Ligon, and Bird list seven criteria multi-site churches should consider in choosing a new site, geographical proximity does not make the list; rather, they endorse a number of multi sites who are "going global."[18] So for the growing number of multi-site churches whose members are widely scattered and never interact, what makes such a church one church?

how can a church be one in many locations? the multi-site answer

Advocates of multi-site churches have given a clear answer to the question posed above. They say, "A multi-site church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board."[19] To clarify, they add, "If your new campus has a vision, budget, leader, or board that's not part of the sending campus, then you've started a new church or a mission campus, not a multi-site church."[20]

Perhaps the most striking part of this definition of the unity of a multi-site church is the almost complete absence of relational or theological elements and the strong emphasis on organization. Such a definition could fit restaurant and hotel franchises, a drug store chain, or banks with multiple branches. In fact, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird explicitly link the development of multi-site churches to franchising concepts and add, "multi-site extensions of trusted-name churches are something that connect well with our times."[21] Brian Frye notes the similarities and raises the question of whether or not it is "acceptable for a new church model

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[18] Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Road Trip,* 61–63; 129–45.
[19] Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution,* 18.
[20] Ibid., 51.
[21] Ibid., 10.

to emerge from a secular business model," but concludes that "it could be that the multi-site church concept is simply a sacred crossover of a twentieth-century marketplace phenomenon."[22] One of the main criticisms of multi-site churches by Thomas White and John Yeats is the similarity of multi-site churches to the business model and the consumerism it encourages. They charge that multi-site churches, in accepting the franchise model, also buy into franchise model standards: "In order to keep up the calculability and meet the demands of predictability, the congregations are forced to become more efficient and sacrifice people on the altar of success."[23]

Gregg Allison argues for a much more positive view of multi-site unity. He notes that biblical teaching says that love, unity, cooperation, and interdependence should characterize local churches individually. Multi-site churches allow for the visible expression of those virtues in a larger than local church level, as congregations show their unity visibly by working together for the good of their city. Allison states, "This theological emphasis on unity is often cited as a key reason for preferring multiplying campuses rather than multiplying church plants: when a new church is spun off, the mother church and the daughter church quickly move away from each other and stop cooperating."[24]

However, Allison's statement is open to question. First, the "theological emphasis on unity" he cites has not been mentioned in any of the literature on multi-site churches this author has seen other than Allison. Rather, the organizational idea of unity seems much more prevalent. Second, as noted above, the desire for visible expression of larger than local church unity is not something new. In the past, this desire sparked the development of associations, conventions, or denominations, not multi-site churches. Third, Allison's observation that mother and daughter churches move away from each other and stop cooperating is not in any way necessarily linked to the phenomenon or model of church planting itself. Separate churches certainly can and often do cooperate. If such churches cease to cooperate, the culprit would seem to be attitudes of independence and pride or rivalry and dissension. Such attitudes, sadly, are equally possible in multi-site churches. Thus, in the end, the key elements of unity in a multi-site church remain primarily organizational (a common vision, budget, board, and leadership). Theological expressions of unity, such as cooperation in ministry, may be present, but they are not distinctive to multi-site churches, nor are they intrinsically linked

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[22] Frye, 76.

[23] Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding on Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 82–83.

[24] Gregg Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," *9Marks eJournal* (May/June 2009), 12.

to the multi-site model. They would seem problematic for multi-site churches whose sites are geographically scattered.

Still, the recognition that multi-site churches, like associations, can give some type of a tangible expression of unity on a larger than local church level leads to an important, but as far as this author has read, unacknowledged point. Multi-site churches, as most such churches are developing, are *not* local churches and, in fact, cannot be. The very definition of one church in many *locations* excludes "local" as a proper adjective for them. The fact that some multi-site churches are extending their campuses across multiple states, and some are even going international, require us to see them as something other than local churches, but they are not the universal church. So if they are neither a local church nor the universal church, what are they? Part of the difficulty with multi-site churches is they fit neither of the traditional categories for church.

Perhaps multi-site churches that are expansive geographically are more akin to denominations than local churches. The fact that multi-site churches see their oneness in terms of sharing a common vision, budget, board, and leaders makes for interesting comparison to the unity of associations, conventions, and denominations. The parallel is not exact, for multi-site churches have one budget, board, and leaders, while individual congregations in most denominations have their own individual budgets, boards, and leaders. However, similarities do exist. Denominations do often seek to foster a common vision, and as a denomination, they operate under one denominational budget, with one set of denominational leaders, similar to multi sites.[25] While a common theological heritage is often part of the common vision of denominations, their unity, like that of multi-site churches, seems to be largely organizational. The reason why it is difficult to find biblical or theological grounds for the unity of multi-site churches is the same reason why it is difficult to find biblical or theological grounds for the unity of denominations—"the Bible in no way envisages the organization of the church into denominations."[26] Likewise, multi-site churches, at least once they go beyond the city level, are not envisaged in the New Testament.

Then is the oneness of multi-site churches simply a semantic problem that would evaporate if multi-site churches gave up the claim to be local churches and accepted the designation of being networks or associations or even denominations of churches? It would clarify things on one level, but it would raise other questions,

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[25] For example, the United Methodist Church website states, "The United Methodist Church is able to maintain a common vision, mission, and ministry throughout the worldwide connectional system." For the location of the website, see n. 12 above.

[26] Tinder, 335. He sees this as the explanation why historically, "there has never been much theological reflection on denominationalism."

issues of polity, the role of a "campus pastor," and the importance of a congregation providing its own teaching ministry—issues that lie beyond the purview of this paper.

It is this author's belief that part of the difficulty in evaluating most multi-site churches, especially those that are widely scattered geographically, is that they fit neither of the common categories of biblical teaching about the church. They are neither clearly local nor universal. If we ask, then, if multi-site churches are biblical, the answer is no, at least not as most multi-site churches are developing, in terms of having a clear biblical precedent. However, if a multi-site church limits itself geographically to an area the size of a city, the possibility of biblical precedent becomes much stronger, as will be discussed below. The presence or lack of biblical precedent does not necessarily validate or invalidate multi-site churches *per se.* For example, it is very difficult to find a biblical precedent for denominations, yet most would grant at least some limited value and validity to them. The question should then rather be, is there anything inherent in the multi-site church model that is contrary to biblical teaching on the church, or destructive of the New Testament idea of the church? Specifically, for this paper, is there something about multi-site churches that violates biblical teaching on the oneness of the church?[27] In fact, there are many who think the multi-site model is fatally at odds with the New Testament model of the church, precisely on that issue. In the next section, we will consider the single most commonly offered objection to the multi-site model, which is related to the oneness of the multi-site church.

are multi-site churches contrary to new testament teaching on the oneness of the church?

The most common objection to multi-site churches comes from the claim that the basic meaning of the word for church in the New Testament, *ekklēsia,* is assembly. Multi-site churches, by their very nature as "one church in many locations," do not assemble.[28] Therefore, it is argued, they are contrary to the basic New Testament idea of the church. This argument is employed by Thomas White, Grant Gaines, Jonathan Leeman, and Bobby Jamieson in their articles in the May/June 2009 issue of *9Marks eJournal* and in books by Mark Dever, Thomas White, and John Yeats.[29] As quoted earlier, Robert Banks believes that for Paul, "*ekklēsia* cannot

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[27] Thus, I am taking something of a normative, as opposed to a regulative approach to assessing multi-site churches. It would seem that this is the tacit approach most Protestants have taken with respect to denominations.

[28] The exceptions to this are the multi-site models offered by Allison, "Theological Defense," 17–18.

[29] See articles by White, Gaines, Leeman, and Jamieson in *9Marks eJournal* (May/June 2009): 42–66; Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church* (Wheaton; Crossway, 2005), 87; and Thomas White and John Yeats, *Franchising McChurch,* 102–03.

refer to a group of people unless they all do in fact actually gather together."[30] Roger Gehring similarly affirms that in Pauline teaching, the church "comes into existence in the act of gathering."[31]

However, an interesting pattern of usage of *ekklēsia* occurs in the New Testament that qualifies the application of this objection. This is the fact that Paul always uses the singular for the church in a city (thus, the church in Cenchrea, Corinth, and Thessalonica) and always uses the plural for groups of Christians scattered across an area larger than a city (thus, the churches of Asia, Galatia, etc.). The usage by Luke in Acts follows the same pattern, with the single exception of Acts 9:31, where the singular "church" is used in a regional sense, to refer to the Christians in Judea and Samaria.

Multi-site advocates have claimed the use of the singular for all the Christians in a city as support for their model. "Aubrey Malphurs observes that Corinth and other first-century churches were multi-site, as a number of multi-site house churches were considered to be part of one citywide church."[32] The size of the church in Jerusalem has caused many to posit that the one local church of Jerusalem must have included a plurality of house churches, if for no other reason than the sheer difficulty of finding a place large enough for three thousand or more to meet. Roger Gehring, whose book *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* is the most detailed study of this issue that I have found, concludes that "a plurality of house churches existed alongside the local church as a whole in Jerusalem."[33] In addition to the sheer practical difficulties in gathering a church of the size of what the church in Jerusalem certainly came to be, he notes how frequently houses pop up in the description of the church in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, we are told that the sound of a violent wind "filled the whole house" where the believers were gathered (Acts 2:2). The habitual practice of the early church was to "meet together in the temple courts" and break bread "in their homes" (Acts 2:46). Paul ravaged the church in Jerusalem by going "from house to house" to drag believers off to prison (Acts 8:3). Gehring says, "We can assume that Saul did not randomly choose some houses but, rather, precisely the houses in which he suspected Christian assemblies, in hopes of catching them in flagrante delicto."[34] Finally, in Acts 12, upon his miraculous release from prison, Peter knew to go "to the house of Mary the

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[30] Banks, 40.

[31] Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 164.

[32] Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution,* 27, citing Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 22–26.

[33] Gehring, 89.

[34] Ibid., 88.

mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying" (Acts 12:12). It seems likely that this house was the location of one of the house churches of the church in Jerusalem. Gehring believes, "It is almost certain that a plurality of house churches existed in Rome," and "we can be certain that a plurality of house churches existed alongside the whole local church in Corinth," with indications of a similar plurality in Antioch, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Philippi, and Laodicea.[35]

On the basis of such claims, Brian Frye thinks the objection to multi-site churches on the grounds that they do not assemble falls. He says,

> No definitive evidence exists that would forbid or disqualify dividing a single church into multiple worship gatherings. . . . If both house church gathering and local church gathering took place concurrently within the early church without harm, it stands to reason that the multi-site practice of segmenting a congregation into smaller groups for corporate worship is an acceptable and viable expression of church worship.[36]

However, he and other multi-site advocates who make this claim overlook an important limitation in their theory. While I think it is likely that Gehring is right, his findings only validate **citywide** multi-site churches, and the fact that Paul uses the plural "churches" for gatherings of Christians beyond the city level implies that oneness only applies to a church in one location (i.e. city) and the universal church. Multi-site churches that go beyond a city are neither, and going beyond a city is characteristic of most multi-site churches. In fact, among multi-site advocates, Gregg Allison is the only one I know of who limits the spread of a multi-site church to a city, and who advocates the various sites gathering as one church on a regular basis.

Here we must ask the question why Paul consistently used the plural (churches) for groups that were scattered over areas larger than a city. While there is no explicit answer in Paul's letters, a good argument can be made that to be one local church, there must be some level of relational unity. Thus, there is something in the nature of a local church that involves relational interaction or gathering, and when the geographic expansion of a group of Christians exceeds the ability of the persons involved to gather, it is more appropriate to see them as separated into different churches rather than as distributed in the sites of a single church. While Gehring does see a plurality of house churches composing the one church in various cities, he also states, "Paul, however, also places a high value on a regular

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[35] Ibid, 296.
[36] Frye, 228–29.

assembly of the whole local church there [Corinth]."[37] Robert Banks is even stronger. While he acknowledges the probability that the whole church in Corinth and Jerusalem met together in smaller groups from time to time, he also insists on the importance of an actual gathering of the whole. He says, "The word [*ekklēsia*] does not describe all the Christians who live in a particular locality if they do not in fact gather or when they are in fact not gathering. Nor does it refer to the sum total of Christians in a region or scattered throughout the world at any particular point of time."[38] Such gathering is not envisioned for most multi-site churches. Thus, the objection to the possibility that one church can meet in many locations seems to have some weight, at least for those multi-site churches who see no importance in gathering their members, or those whose expansion makes such gathering impossible. Such multi-site churches are missing the relational element involved in making a group of believers one church, and would be more accurate to describe themselves as one network of churches in many locations, as one prominent former multi-site church has recently done.[39]

conclusion

This paper has argued that two factors question the appropriateness of calling multi-site churches "one church in many locations." First is the New Testament teaching on the unity of a local church, which includes a strongly relational element, referring to the quality of relationships among the members, relationships that assume some level of interaction. A second and related idea is the importance of gathering to the nature of a church.[40] Even Brian Frye, whose dissertation supports multi-site churches, recommends that "*multi-site churches should attempt to gather the entire church body periodically as the context allows.*"[41] These findings do question the appropriateness of calling a widely scattered multi-site church one local church. Some are coming close to resembling associations or mini-denominations.[42] However, we did find support for the idea that some New

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[37] Gehring, 296.

[38] Banks, 41.

[39] Just this past summer, as they were planning to expand into more widely scattered locations, Mars Hill Church decided to do away with "campus" terminology and call each of its sites a church. They see this as more biblical, more natural, and more accurate, because every Mars Hill church "fulfills the biblical criteria for a church." But these former campuses will not lose all relationship with each other and the home church. "Though by definition we may be many different churches, the Mars Hill Network of churches remains a single, united church. We share a common infrastructure, a common mission, common teaching, and a common belief that we can reach more people by working together than existing separately." This seems a positive development, though questions remain concerning the relationship of the individual churches to the Mars Hill Network. See "No More Mars Hill 'Campuses,'" http://blog.marshill.com/2011/08/08/no-more-mars-hill-%2%80%9ccampuses%e2%80%9d/, accessed 8/9/2011.

[40] Gehring, 296; Banks, 41.

[41] Frye, 229. Italics in original. In the absence of a clear biblical command that churches must gather, Frye is unwilling to give more than a recommendation, but it is a recommendation that many multi-site models will not find praticable.

Testament churches were composed of multiple house churches in one city and were regarded as one local church. Thus, multi-site churches whose sites are close enough to allow for relational unity and at least occasional gathering do seem to have some New Testament support.

Finally, the wide diversity of multi-site models and the varied circumstances that have led churches to go in that direction call for adding some limitations to this critique of multi-site churches. For example, in the case of churches who have gone to multiple sites because of extraordinary response to a gifted preacher, going to multiple sites seems to this author preferable to the options of turning people away, or building ever bigger and more expensive auditoriums. In other cases, a multi-site model adopted as a temporary expedient while leadership is being developed to allow additional sites to become healthy local churches seems an acceptable church planting strategy. However, a church that extends its sites across states and even internationally needs to recognize the difficulty involved in calling itself a single local church. If it recognizes this difficulty and begins to see itself as a denomination or network of churches, this would be a positive step, but if it still retains one budget, leadership, and board for its associated churches, it faces other questions of polity, the proper role of pastors, and the importance of local churches providing their own teaching. We will leave those questions for another day and another article.

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42 Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Road Trip,* 222, list as one of their predictions for what is next for multi-site churches, "A few multi-site churches will become mini-denominations."