

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Allison, Gregg and Brad House. *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017. 240 pp. \$11.79.

Reviewed by Dustin Slaton, campus pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church–South Campus in Tyler, Texas, and a PhD student in church vitalization at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Ft. Worth, Texas.

As the multisite church phenomenon continues to transition from a growing trend to an established reality, the landscape of what multisite churches look like and how they function continues to be in flux. Critics of multisite churches have pointed out many issues with the practice, questioning ecclesiological foundations of multisite churches and accusing such churches of turning pastors into idols.<sup>1</sup> Some of these criticisms are warranted concerns, while some are generalizations, with negative practices of certain churches being applied to the full range of the multisite landscape.

Into this discussion, Gregg Allison and Brad House have presented their co-authored book, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite*. They are

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough list of the criticisms of multisite churches, see Thomas White, “Nine Reasons I Don’t Like Multi-Site Churches,” *9Marks Journal* 6, no. 3 February 26, 2010: 49–51, or Jonathan Leeman, “Twenty-Two Problems with Multi-Site Churches,” *9Marks*, October 1, 2014, <https://www.9marks.org/article/twenty-two-problems-with-multi-site-churches/>.

uniquely positioned to write on the multisite church because of their combined experiences. House was an upper-level leader at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, before that church went through much turmoil and eventually rolled off each of its campuses into autonomous churches. Allison is a professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and has been a consistent proponent in the area of multisite theology. Both men are now part of the pastoral leadership of Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, a multisite church with four locations in Louisville and Southern Indiana.

*MultiChurch* gives a positive treatment of the multisite church as it enters young adulthood and presents the most thorough positive treatment of the theological implications of multisite to date. The book is divided into three sections: Scouting, Orienteering, and Setting Out.

*Scouting.* In the first section, Allison and House “provide perspective by examining biblical, historical, and contemporary developments within the multisite movement” (18). The reader will surely take note that “biblical” is listed among the developments. Allison and House trace the origins of multisite beyond the twentieth century, all the way back to the first century. They see the multisite ministry as less of a new development and truly a “renewal of early church methodology” (31). The authors cite many examples from New Testament descriptions of the church’s practices and notes in the greetings of Paul’s letters. However, their arguments are supported by too much speculation. In one paragraph, in particular, their wording reveals the speculative nature of their evidence by using “may,” “informed speculation,” “we can imagine,” and “perhaps” (33). Allison and House’s strongest argument is based on the descriptions of the church’s meetings in Acts 2:46 and 5:42, but they do not expand on this as much as they could in this section. While this line of argumentation warrants more depth, overall, their positive assessment of the biblical warrants for multisite churches is strong.

*MultiChurch* includes a well-formed multisite argument on the nature of *ekklesia*. The understanding of *ekklesia* is the most common theological criticism leveled at multisite churches; thus, Allison and House must address it. Their argument shows that the nature of *ekklesia* has enough wiggle room to allow a church to meet in multiple locations and remain one church.

One of the most useful parts of the first section is the chart that describes the landscape of church interconnectedness from single churches, to the various forms of multisite churches, and ending with loosely networked churches (48–49). The following pages provide clear and succinct descriptions of the benefits and downfalls of each type of church structure. The authors, proponents of multisite ministry, are nevertheless honest about the pitfalls associated with each form, and even go on to specifically address the criticisms leveled against multisite churches. In each area, they provide red-flag warnings to multisite churches, pointing out potential problem areas in the practice. They also provide a way forward for each one. All of this is lead-

ing to the middle section of the book, wherein they present their preferred multisite organizational structure, dubbed “multichurch.”

*Orienteering.* The center section addresses five specific organizational elements of multisite churches and makes suggestions for each one. The first of these concerns the general organization of the church. This section tells what the church will look like once it is finished being set up as a multichurch.

The next issue to be addressed is polity within the church. Allison is unapologetically a plural-elder Congregationalist, with emphasis on the elders.<sup>2</sup> *MultiChurch* advocates for a strong church leadership structure that is comprised of various levels of elders and other leadership staff. The structure has redundant levels of leadership; the purpose of which is to ensure that the central leadership does not overpower the various campuses. The description in the chapter may make readers wonder if they could even establish such a cumbersome structure at their church and whether the structure is necessary. Allison and House are merely describing the structure they employ at Sojourn Community Church, which leaves one to wonder if there might be a better way, especially for smaller churches with smaller staffs and fewer elders.

The third topic addresses the ministries of the church. Throughout the book, it is clear that House and Allison are not advocating for campuses that are a copy of the original campus. This is one of the strongest points of their argument for multichurch. The goal of each campus is to contextualize the vision and mission of the church for its neighborhood/community. The benefit is that each church has the opportunity (responsibility) to dream and implement how it will carry out ministry, and the other churches are there to resource them as they can, acting as partners to help them refine their ministries. This solid chapter should drive the ministry mindset. One of the strong, legitimate criticisms of multisite churches is the franchising of ministries in various contexts, even if the context does not warrant the similar style. In contextualizing the church to meet the local culture, the campus can connect with its neighborhood in a more relevant way.

The fourth issue addressed in *MultiChurch* is money. This chapter bursts some of the myths about how money is used and managed in multisite churches, and it gives some suggestions for how multisite churches should handle finances. Staying with the overall theme of *MultiChurch*, each local campus assumes primary responsibility for how its funds are used. The goal of the central leadership is to be as little of a burden to the church as possible and to facilitate the money management, especially those funds which are to be used throughout the campuses.

The final topic is the area of membership—a gray area in the realm of multisite churches. Critics often question how membership is handled and

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<sup>2</sup> See Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), and Gregg R. Allison and John S. Feinberg, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

how church discipline is facilitated in a way that is consistent across all campuses. Allison and House position the process of membership at the discretion of the local congregation, so long as it follows the theological understandings of the whole church. Thus, each congregation must develop its own process for welcoming and initiating new believers and members into the body. They must also communicate to the other campuses when disciplinary action has been taken against a member so that the campuses can be consistent in their handling of that member.

*Setting Out.* The final section of the book is a how-to guide for making the transition to multichurch. It gives systematic instructions on preparing, planning, implementing, and even continuing the process once it is established.

*What is "multichurch?"* The answer to that question comes partly in the introduction: "A multichurch is a local community of maturing Christians who multiply their influence by launching, developing, and resourcing multiple congregations to reach its city with the gospel of Jesus Christ" (17). The heart of the book is the form of church structure and polity that Sojourn Community Church has chosen, which Allison and House believe is the best structure for multisite churches: multichurch. In defining the multichurch structure, they state, "The *multichurch model* features one church that expresses itself in multiple *churches* that have a form of polity that provides the responsibility and authority to make decisions about budget, contextualization of ministries, and more" (50). They then offer two varieties of the multichurch model: the cooperative model and the collective model. The cooperative model "brings together multiple interdependent churches as one church," while the collective model "is a collection of independent churches collaborating as one church" (65).

What makes this different from the typical model of multisite church is the location of authority. In multichurches, the bulk of authority lies in the individual campuses or churches, rather than with the central church leadership. This means that instead of being a top-down type of authority, there is a bottom-up direction of authority. The different levels of the central leadership councils are primarily composed of leaders from the various campuses, while there are still a few who are not linked to one specific campus. Obviously, there is much more to be said about this structure, but this review cannot go into greater depth.

With multichurch, the linkage between the churches is primarily for administrative and visionary reasons. The churches/campuses themselves are left to determine how to carry out the vision in their individual contexts. Some of the benefits, therefore, are the shared administrative costs, unified leadership, shared vision, and availability of ministry expertise (i.e., if one church excels in counseling, other churches can use it as a resource).

The question churches must ask themselves, especially churches that are not already multisite, is, "Is it worth the hassle?" The primary benefit that is found in multichurch, which is not found in a network of churches, is the

shared administrative costs and the unified leadership, although it could be argued that unified leadership is still achievable outside a multichurch setting. The elaborate structure necessary, according to Allison and House, is a large undertaking, with many moving parts. Why would a healthy single campus church want to embark on that journey when most of the benefits can be attained through a quality network?

For churches that are already multisite, the transition makes much more sense, especially if the church has a desire to become more contextualized and provide a more incarnational ministry in its neighborhood. The looser affiliation and bottom-up authority structure free the churches to carry out the gospel vision in their own way without the micromanagement of a central authority that might be more concerned with unified form or branding than contextual ministry. Even so, it seems like many churches will inevitably make the full transition to autonomous, networked churches rather than remain in a multichurch structure. These loose connections of the collective model will begin to lose their hold. Allison and House themselves admit this possibility when they write, “A weakness of this model is that its success is largely dependent on avoiding conflict between the local church leaders. The minimal level of expected collaboration and contribution to the collective . . . is such that each church could easily spin off from the collective as an independent church” (72).

In *MultiChurch*, Gregg Allison and Brad House have offered a great resource to advocates of the multisite movement, especially those looking for an ecclesiological “okay” for multisite. They have also provided some reasoned answers for moving past some of the questionable practices currently being carried out in multisite churches. Even more so, they have provided some thoughtful considerations for the next iteration of multisite church ministry. Multisite may never be completely dethroned, but as more churches reconsider the appropriateness of a cloned multisite strategy, multichurch may lead the way to a more thoughtful and theologically refined form of multisite.

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Davis, Charles. *Making Disciples Across Cultures: Missional Principles for a Diverse World*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015. 236 pp. \$18.00.

Reviewed by Kenneth Nehrbass. Kenneth earned a BA in classical civilization from the University of California, Irvine, an MDiv from Anderson School of Theology, and a PhD in intercultural studies from Biola University. He is an associate professor of intercultural studies in the graduate programs at Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University.

The field of intercultural studies has provided missionaries with some tools for describing cultural differences (e.g., power distance, event-versus-time orientation, collectivism-versus-individualism, high-versus-low context speech, etc.). Moreover, evangelical schools of intercultural studies typically equip students