

# **“Moving from Struggling to Strength & Vitality”**

## **A Strategy for Revitalization For Anchor Churches with Multi-site or Poly-site Ministries**

### **The Vision**

To assist struggling congregations with high potential for regaining a vibrant ministry as well as to launch new mission sites with a higher degree of success and impact.

### **The Reality:**

The landscape for congregations has changed dramatically over the past generation and the Church has been slow to respond. Mission starts have had lackluster success and smaller churches have dramatically shrunk in size. For example, half of the churches in the North Carolina Synod now worship 50 people or fewer. The average worship attendance for an ELCA congregation is below 109 per Sunday and decreasing every year. This has resulted in many congregations existing in isolation, struggling to survive.

We believe that we can revitalize many struggling congregations through a partnership with a medium/large congregation called an “anchor church.” Mission starts and restarts that are yoked with larger, vibrant congregations have a much higher success rate of developing or redeveloping a thriving ministry than going it alone. Among other reasons, this is due to:

1. The synergy of partnering with a larger staff to think creatively, receive consultation and share resources.
2. The infusion of new energy, vision, and vibrant missional DNA
3. The cost sharing some staff including book keeping, membership record keeping, graphic designs, social media, secretarial support, musicians and youth/family workers to reduce duplication
4. The development of lay and professional staff for a more effective shared mutual ministry

### **Various Models**

To address these issues of helping struggling churches as well as beginning new mission starts, there are several models that have been used from “parachute drops” to church mergers. Historically, these have had mixed results. In their excellent book entitled, Better Together, authors Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird provide a compelling overview of these failed strategies and provide a healthy alternative to moving forward. They lift up the various models that have been tried over the years, pointing out the pitfalls and the benefits of each approach. The traditional model of the “parachute drop” has proven to have the least success in terms of long term viability. The next least successful strategy is a merger between two struggling congregations. In such a strategy, unfortunately, neither struggling congregation is able to provide the vision, leadership or the resources to make this merger a success. Alternatively, when there is a merger of two equal, medium size congregations that choose to unite, it

also has a low success rate because of the conflict between blending their individual and separate sense of history, buildings, culture and traditions into a single congregation.

In their research, by far the best and most successful mergers were the result of what we are calling “anchor churches.” These anchor churches unite or partner (covenant) with either a struggling church or launch a new start and provide vision, resources, leadership and proven track record to take the lead in making these "mergers" a success. The anchor-partner church relationships have the highest success rate and show more measurable growth than any other approach.

There are several variations for these anchor-partner church relationships. Each of these could work for the anchor partnering with an existing, struggling church or ministry as well as for launching a new ministry site. Potential anchor-partner congregations will have to discern which model best fits with their vision, temperament, vitality, current situation, and relationships.

- 1. The Franchise Model (Pastor Rusty Sullivan, Faith Lutheran, Flower Mound, Texas)**  
This model, often used by mega-churches, creates various sites that look and smell and taste exactly like one another. They have the same worship, the same branding, the same feel and typically have the same sermon streamed into all the various sites.
- 2. The Poly-site Mission Community (Pastor Jonathan Heierman, Calvary Lutheran, Clarkston, Michigan)**  
This model is similar to a "mini-synod" in which a variety of ministry expressions and approaches are interdependent and unified around the anchor church by a common DNA of mission, vision and values. Sites may vary in the degree of unity and independence they have while creating a partnership in terms of providing service in the community (homeless shelter, counseling services, community orchard or park) and/or shared programs for its members (small groups, youth groups or confirmation classes). Furthermore, these sites may be worshiping communities but are not limited to congregations. The anchor church could initiate or unite with various ministries such as a community garden, a counseling center or a senior housing development, as well as coming alongside struggling congregations utilizing either the Accompanying and/or Adoption Models below or a blend of the two. The anchor church provides the vision, resources and leadership that unite the variety of sites. Staffing, governance, and management are overseen by the anchor church, while various financial streams are developed to fund the variety of ministries.
- 3. The Accompanying Model (Pastor Doug Hill, Abiding Hope, Littleton, Colorado)**  
In this example, struggling churches partner with vibrant ones for a season. They remain independent but come alongside a healthy church for a time of coaching and encouragement until they regain their stability. At that time, the goal is for them to dissolve the partnership so that they can multiply this model and become a coaching site for others

This coaching model also applies to using anchor churches to launch new worshipping sites to provide them the leadership, members, resources and vitality to begin strong with the intention of making them independent within 3-5 years.

4. **The Adoption Model (Pastor Scott Suskovic, Christ Lutheran, Charlotte, North Carolina)**

Just as a family is united in being together but maintain their unique personalities, the adoption model provides a balance between autonomy and unity. In this model, congregations that merge share the same mission, budget, staff, council, resources and membership as the anchor church but allow for room in expressing that at different sites in terms of programming, worship and service.

**The Goal:**

We have seen each of these models work. The goal, therefore, is to provide resources and coaching to congregations throughout the country to select what model best fits their context either in partnering with struggling churches or launching a new site. This can be done with medium and large congregations taking the lead to rethink the church less as an institution and more as a movement that reaches people, transforms lives and makes an impact for the Kingdom of God.

## **Overview of the Four Models**

### **1. The Franchise Model**

#### **Unanimity in Expression, Look and Message**

What color is the McDonald's arches? How many varieties are there to the Nike swoosh? How many rings are there in the Olympic logo? The answer, of course, is consistency. There is a recognizable look to each of these companies that spans ages and demographics.

Many mega-churches have employed this franchise look to their various campuses for decades. We may not like it. It might be not our expression. It may even run counter to our theology. But it works. There is a strong argument to be made for a consistent look and worship and preacher from campus to campus for the anchor church.

#### **Transferring DNA**

To make this franchise model work, anchor churches must transfer their DNA to each successive site with an unwavering consistency in their message, logo, worship and language. Often, this works better with creating new sites instead of adopting a struggling church because of the minimal amount of cultural and tradition changes that are necessary. Often, there is a strong senior pastor in leadership that can cast a consistent vision for all campuses and be the primary preacher. While each campus may have its own musical ensemble and campus pastor for worship leadership, staff oversight and pastoral care, there is a unified message from the lead pastor that permeates all the campuses. Care must be taken to provide checks and balances to such leadership as well as providing

an intentional organizational structure that extends beyond a single, pastoral personality. However, it is a model that has been used with great success and effectiveness across many denominations.

## **2. The Poly-site Mission Community**

### **Variety of Ministry Expressions and Partnerships**

This model grows out of a healthy, growing and energetic anchor church with a vision for mission, creativity, and collaboration, and an openness to launching and/or partnering in a variety of both traditional and nontraditional ministry expressions. This could involve relationships such as those described here in the other three models, as well as a variety of other kinds of mission developments (or redevelopments), social service ministries, and collaborative partnerships with community and synod. A common DNA of mission, vision and values unite these interdependent entities that are affiliated around the anchor church. There is an emphasis on interdependence that allows for fruitful and efficient sharing of staff, resources and programs, and a centralized governance structure. At the same time there is also a clear commitment to encouraging creative and site-appropriate local mission development and collaboration. In this way mission development is empowered and congregational revitalization in the region around the anchor church can grow out of a vibrant mission-minded congregation and flourish in a wide-variety of local expressions.

## **3. The Accompanying / Coaching Model**

### **Accompaniment/Mutual Transformation**

We recognize that many struggling congregations possess a rich history and organizational memory of a day and time when they were vibrant and alive. Thinking of closing or being assimilated into another congregation can be a stumbling block toward redevelopment and renewal. The Coaching Model allows a struggling congregation to maintain its autonomy while being accompanied by a vitalized congregation that is also engaging in a re-visioning and strategic development process of its own. Both congregations benefit through the partnership and focused strategic development. While rebuilding the struggling partner congregation, the anchor congregation develops a cutting-edge perspective enabling it to grow and also remain vitalized and relevant.

### **Strategy:**

1. A covenant is created to define the relationship between the two congregations.
2. Typically, the council of the struggling congregation is dissolved or suspended and replaced during the covenant period with a Vision Team consisting of members from both congregations, as well as the pastors.
3. The Pastor of the struggling partner congregation is supervised and coached by the Pastor of the anchor congregation.
4. The staff of the anchor congregation serves as a resource for the partner congregation.
5. The two congregations assess where they can overlap and/or collaborate (e.g. confirmation, web development, printing of materials, outreach initiatives).
6. The process for redevelopment includes:
  - a. A period for relationship and trust building
  - b. Generating new guiding statements (6-12 months) as needed
  - c. Creating a 3-phase strategic plan
  - d. Accompaniment for 3 to 5 years

### **Pay It Forward:**

With the rapidly changing North American context, all congregations must practice an ongoing redevelopment cycle every 3 to 5 years. The hope is that after 3 to 5 years of accompaniment, the congregation being redeveloped will be on the path to new life and ready to repeat the process on their own. When doing so, we hope that they will become the anchor congregation for one or two other struggling congregations to introduce them to the process. The plan is for this “pay it forward” model to gain significant traction throughout the greater church over the next 10 to 15 years.

### **New Sites**

This Coaching Model also applies to launching new worshipping communities in which the Anchor Church provides the same resources, coaching and vitality with the intended design of making the new site an independent congregation within 3-5 years.

## **4. The Adoption Model**

### **Both/And**

At the core of The Adoption Model is the concept of both/and. We envision a model that is not based on several campuses that all look and sound the same as seen with some mega-churches where there is one preacher live streamed to several locations. Neither are we envisioning a synodical model where congregations are in loose partnership or simply merged with one another. This would be a “both/and” approach with multiple campuses having:

Unity as one congregation	but	Freedom of different expressions
Common branding	but	Individual look
Centralized membership	but	Pastoral responsibility for sites
Centralized finances	but	Campus stewardship
One staff	but	Sharing resources
One leadership team	but	Individual decision making
Common Goals	but	Individual accountability
One Council	but	Campus representation
One overall vision	but	Campus discernment teams

### **Strategy:**

There are four criteria to consider when partnering with a struggling church:

1. The congregation must be located in an area with good potential for growth and within a reasonable distance of the anchor church—less than a half hour or at most an hour
2. The congregation must be vacant of a pastor. To change the culture of the church, you need to begin with new leadership who can embody the culture and values of the anchor church.
3. The congregation must be eager to do this. That is, this should not be something that needs convincing or urging. If the Spirit of willingness and boldness is not there, it is best that they do not enter into this partnership.
4. The congregation must be willing to pay the price. Every church says that they want to grow but few are willing to rethink their mission and ministry. The “price tag” includes:
  - a. Name and cultural change
  - b. Financial management by the anchor church

- c. Change of worship style
- d. Change of branding
- e. Loss of local council
- f. Increased expectations of volunteering, inviting, giving, outreach
- g. Moving from Struggling to Strengths

**Other Considerations:**

The words that provide value to our understanding of this partnership is unity and autonomy. There will be unity of staff, membership, vision, council, and finances while allowing for autonomy of expression in programming, evangelism, outreach and worship. Pastors from all campuses will be called by the anchor church with specific responsibilities to a specific campus or campuses.

To assist these lead campus pastors, hand-picked Discernment Teams will provide direction and counsel to implement the overall vision into the specific context. This will shape worship, education, evangelism, and programming that is both concurrent with the overall vision and specific to that particular campus.

**Concluding Remarks**

The ELCA is not alone in experiencing this trend of declining worship attendance and church participation. Between 5000-10,000 Protestant churches close each year with only 1000-2000 starting. Today, our denomination's average worship attendance is around 100, with many dipping below a self-sustainability number. While 80-85% of new, independent mission starts fail in the first five years, the reverse is true when coupled with an anchor church: 80-85% thrive.

As we look to the future of the ELCA, we are more and more convinced that we must tap into the resources, leadership, creativity, and vision of these anchor churches to start new churches and other creative ministries, and to bolster struggling ones. It is our hope that through this process, we can multiply these efforts across the country for a vibrant and lasting impact for the Gospel and to grow the Kingdom.