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NEW LIFE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Reflecting the Community

Multi-site church logistics can be daunting, even for churches with only a few campuses reaching out to similar audience groups. But when multi-site meets multi-cultural, the result can be multi-challenging.

“One of the biggest challenges we face is that we’re doing multi-site church in very diverse, urban America,” said Mark Jobe, founding pastor of New Life Community Church in Chicago, which gained its 10th campus in March 2008. “In our multi-cultural context, it’s not like, ‘Here’s the product, let’s find a delivery system.’ We have to customize everything. We’re among the pioneers for the urban multi-site model.”

An attendee at one of the 10 New Life Community campuses on Sunday mornings will not see and hear a sermon on video. In addition to the live worship music that is culturally relevant and very different from that presented on another campus, audience members receive a live message from their campus pastor or one of the 13 other members of the pastoral team.

“All 14 of the pastors meet together every Monday morning to talk about the message we’ll be delivering the following Sunday,” Jobe said. “Probably 75 percent of the time I drive the outline, and then we prepare together. That way we have the same message, the same vision, and the same flow. We’re all on the same page.

“But, when it comes time to preach, if a campus pastor feels like he’s wearing Saul’s armor, he can customize it. In fact, messages will always be very contextualized at each campus because we’re dealing with very different audiences, from mostly whites in the Lincoln Park and Lakeview areas to mostly Hispanic in the Little Village area. Our ethnic mix is very diverse. Of our 21 Sunday services, four are conducted in Spanish.”

Jobe said it is crucial for the campus pastors to look and act like their communities.

“They have to be the community and the culture,” Jobe said. “They have to speak the language. What we look for in campus pastors are people with a proven track record and leaders who have the DNA of our vision. We try to provide them with as many tools as they require, but they need to be spiritual entrepreneurs who are outwardly focused and willing to take risks.”

New Life Community Church was founded by Jobe in 1986 — with multi-site expansion beginning 10 years later — but its roots now go back more than 125 years due to the Restart program. Like other major U.S. cities, Chicago has its share of old church buildings that are vacant or nearly empty. Many of these churches have been turned into condominiums or office space ... what Jobe calls sacred space being taken up by secular space.

“What we’re doing when we move into an old structure has a real redemptive quality to it,” Jobe said. “When a church asks us to move in and bring our vision, we don’t close a church down, but rather merge the location, adopt their history and celebrate their history, hoping as many people as possible will stay if they want to. We’ve done this five or six times now.”

New Life Community Church functions on one overall budget, although each location is expected to be fiscally responsible within its individual budget. The 14-member pastoral team serves as the elders, and each campus also has five or six elders who provide spiritual oversight for their campus.