

Viewpoint for Moving Forward beyond a One-cell Church

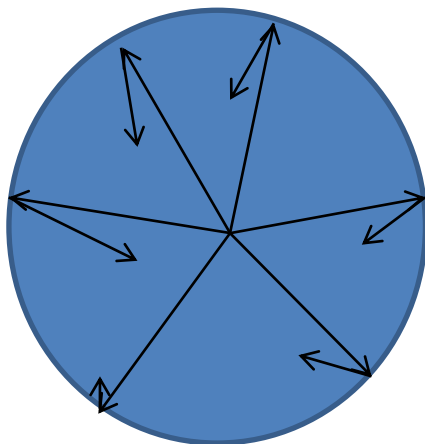
Often churches our size continue to wrestle with why more than one worship service serves them better than a single service. A recent conversation in our LBA retreat sparked me to review the rationale.

Of course, there is the practical yet powerful and effective concept of choice. Experience of many churches has shown that giving people a choice of times to attend increases attendance, often about 10%. Removing choice decreases attendance. But there is much more to it than this.

Often there is also, as is true in our case, the issue of building capacity. Many churches our size were designed and built, as ours was, to seat about 150-200 people. So, using the 80% rule, when the average attendance church approaches 80% of capacity, it is much more practical and better stewardship of facilities to hold two services than to build another sanctuary. This is what first prompted us to consider two services back in the mid-nineties.

Two services in our case also make possible maintaining two slightly different service styles, not just in music, but in the response/participation style of the congregation. Each service has developed its own “personality” and many who attend that service prefer that personality over the “feel” of the other service.

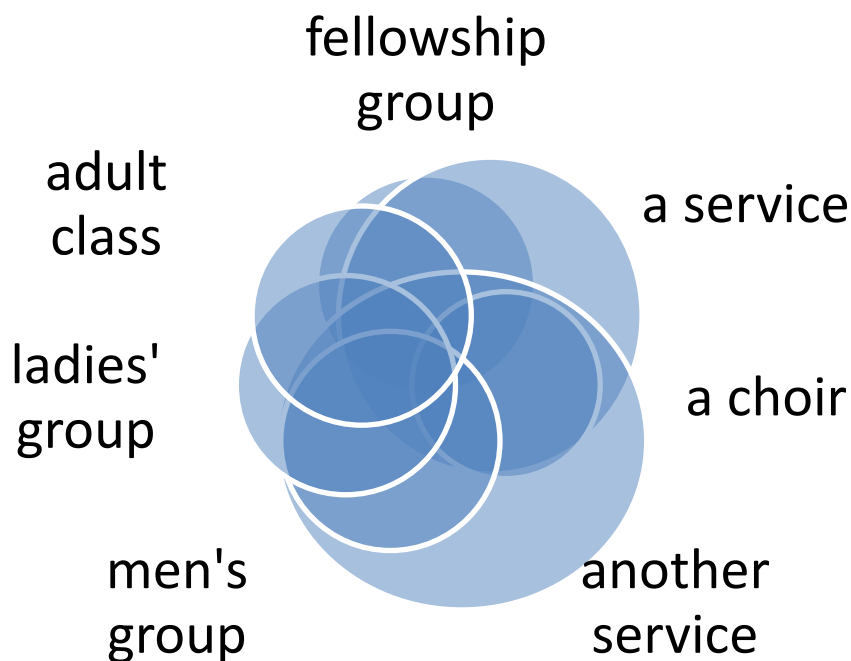
But underneath these, there is a fourth very powerful issue that is in play. This is a big hidden reason why churches like ours struggle to get comfortable in a two service system.



Part of our mission statement is to make disciples as Jesus commanded us to do. If we are successful, usually the church grows and attendance increases. We think about how growth in attendance requires additional seating capacity. However, we usually do not think of the changes in thought dynamics that also need to happen as a church grows.

One key change that must happen for the church to keep growing is for the church to develop in the way it thinks about itself. It must progress from thinking about itself as essentially one small group held together by face-to-face interaction to a multi-cell concept. If it does not, it will always unconsciously be trying to revert to one cell size. It will tend to restrict its growth subconsciously by trying to stay within the bounds of face-to-face interaction. Usually this is defined as some form of “everyone knowing everyone” or “everyone seeing everyone at church.” As the diagram shows, the group can only get to a certain size before it bumps up against the size limits of a group than can describe itself this way. This dynamic is what keeps small churches small.

What is needed is for the church to progress to a model for its organization that will burst the constraints of one-cell thinking. Churches like us can begin to picture ourselves differently. This new picture does not have the limits of the previous paradigm. We must begin to think of ourselves as a multi-cell system held together by different factors.



So what will hold a multi-cell church together? It is held together by five things in order of importance; its mission, its pastoral and staff leadership, its church culture, its common history and its location. These glues are very powerful. Some of these glues may be present in a one-cell church but they are not the primary ones. The advantage of these glues is that none of them limits the church to one cell. (Some larger churches use only the first four glues and meet at several different locations.)

Primary glue for a one cell church	Primary glues for a multi-cell church in order of importance
Face- to-face interaction	1. Mission (For us: Love God; love others; make disciples!) 2. Pastor and key leaders 3. Our church’s culture 4. A common history 5. Location

It is important to note that switching our primary organizing paradigm does not mean that we lose the value of face-to-face interactions. But the expectation will change as to where we look for personal relationships. We will no longer expect face-to-face interactions with the whole organization, but rather in the sub-groups of the community. Indeed, we will work harder to enhance them, to preserve their personal touch and dynamics of caring inside the smaller fellowship circles. As individuals we will not expect to know everyone that attends church, but we will expect to know everyone, for example, who is in our adult class, on our VBS staff, or maybe even at our regular service if we are the outgoing type.

I believe that the long-term growth of our church depends on our two-service system. Two services are a basic organizational expression of the multi-cell concept. They greatly increase the total number of people to whom our church can effectively minister. The two-service system may not always look the same as it does now, but it needs to express as it does now, the multi-cell rather than the single cell concept. This prepares our church for success in obeying Jesus’ command to “Make disciples.”