

A New Apostolic Church—New Life Christian Fellowship

by Bobby Hill and Jerry Graham

New Life Christian Fellowship in Chesapeake, Virginia is eighteen years old. Six years ago, the founding pastor retired and the current Senior Pastor assumed the leadership mantle. At that time the church was averaging a little over two hundred people on a Sunday morning. Today, attendance is averaging a little over twenty-two hundred on a weekend (one Saturday night service and multiple Sunday services). The staff has grown from about 3.5 people (including the secretary) to 22 with pastoral credentials and 24 support and administrative people. Dr. John Vaughan, through his Research Center for the Study of Growing Churches, listed New Life among the two hundred fastest growing churches in North America in 1996, and among the one hundred fastest growing congregations in 1997.

One of the unique features of the church, apart from its incredible growth, is its use of the “satellite” model. There are currently five geographically separated congregations all operating as one church, with one Senior Pastor, one Board of Elders, a shared ministry staff, and a common budget. In all likelihood, the model is in part responsible for the phenomenal growth of the church. The diversity and smaller size of each congregation enables the church to reach the unique neighborhoods in the Hampton Roads metroplex area by maintaining a feeling of family and togetherness that a single megachurch could never provide. As one of the pastors so eloquently phrased it, “New Life is large enough to celebrate and small enough to care.”

The use of the satellite model came as an answer to prayer as the Senior Pastor sought God’s direction for the future direction of the church. The church was faced with

looking for land to build a larger sanctuary as the two Sunday services were often filled beyond capacity leaving “standing room only.” The church had made great strides in its transition to a cell-based structure, when during prayer regarding the capacity challenge, the Senior Pastor was given the familiar 2 Kings 4 story of the widow’s oil and the empty jars. The Pastor felt God was directing him to procure “empty containers” and that the Lord would be faithful to fill them. That vision spawned the idea of “multiplying” the congregation using the same principles as the home cell groups used when they became too full.

The first empty container or satellite congregation was launched early in 1996 when the Senior Pastor led some 200 people from the main church to begin a fellowship in a community about six miles away. Amazingly, the 200 empty chairs left by the satellite launch were filled in less than a month. The second satellite was launched about a year later, and the same phenomenon occurred again.

There are several factors which might be considered key in the implementation of our multi-congregation strategy. Each one could be a chapter in a book, but in this article we are limited to a brief description of a few of them.

The area of leadership development, which most experts acknowledge is a critical factor in any church’s growth, takes on new meaning and urgency with the satellite model. Each time a new congregation is launched, the model calls for approximately 150 leaders to be in place in order to ensure the successful start of the congregation. Each congregation requires us to replicate the complete children’s program, have a complete worship team, a full complement of greeters and ushers, as well as coordinators for the various ministry functions such as name tags, welcome center, information center,

missions, etc. The old church growth adage of creating new roles to get people involved is an automatic process in our model. The satellite approach provides a multitude of entry points for emerging leaders.

Additionally, the shepherd versus rancher picture developed by Carl George had to become ingrained in the culture of the church. The Senior Pastor had to be willing to give up unparalleled territory in order to make the model work, i.e., he had to be willing to lose in order to gain. For example, since the Senior Pastor cannot physically be present to preach in all the services at each location, he had to train and then trust his Lead Pastors to provide the necessary balanced feedings from the Word. The Senior Pastor had to reconcile that he could walk into one of the satellite's worship services and have people who had been attending three and four weeks greet him as a visitor.

The Senior Pastor had to develop the fine art of flying in formation versus flying solo. Teamwork among the pastoral staff had to be raised to unprecedented levels and had to become second nature to each of them. Since oversight for many of the normal church functions came from central staff, all of the pastors had to clearly recognize and internalize that their ability to perform in the satellite model required them to submit to a paradigm of mutual dependence upon each other and other ministry staff members for their congregation's success. Even with congregations of several hundred worshippers, they had to learn submission and deference to a far greater extent than would be required if they were leading their own churches.

The Lead Pastors all had to learn how to develop a vision for the geographical community they were serving, and yet keep it within the boundaries of the regional vision for the overall church as defined by the Senior Pastor. This frequently requires the Lead

Pastors to set aside some of their individual initiatives in order to stay in step. On the other hand, the Senior Pastor is required to continually climb a little higher so that his vision extends a little further. Also, the church's vision requires constant monitoring on a more intense level due to the rapidity of change generated by the dynamism of the model. The cost for failing to monitor and reinforce the vision is clearly far greater in the satellite model as congregations can rather quickly lose their focus and begin to drift away from the more global vision.

Still another factor that had to be approached from a fresh perspective was the whole issue of community. How do you keep a feeling of "one church" alive among multiple groups that meet as individual congregations? This challenge led to the development of Combined Celebrations which are scheduled four to five times per year. These are events where all the congregations meet together for the Sunday service, providing the opportunity for all to see the true size of the church and for the Senior Pastor to speak to the whole church at once. Newsletters and other tools for communicating the "one church" concept are also of greater significance in the satellite model.

Overall, there are a number of advantages to the multi-campus or satellite approach. Among them are the ability to employ specialized staff, provide the balance and stability of team ministry, mold the satellite congregation to match the local community's demographics, avoid needless staff duplication, as well as enjoy a broader financial base. Again, space doesn't permit a discussion of each of these advantages in this article.

Despite the numerous advantages to the satellite model, however, we would be very hesitant to recommend it to others. While the upside of taking this approach is very favorable, we have also found that there are many snares and challenges, a number of which we are still seeking a solution for. However, we believe that God called us to build His church for this location in this particular way, and it is this steadfast faith that God will give us the necessary solutions that gives us the energy and confidence to continue to press on toward the mark.

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