



ORGANIZING THE “MESSY MIDDLE” IN LARGE CHURCHES

A number of years ago, the corporate consulting firm where I worked published an internal paper entitled "Structure isn't everything, but it's not nothing either." The title is awkward, but the document made an important point. Most consulting projects at that time focused on creating winning strategies. The paper argued that the right organizational structure makes it possible to implement those strategies successfully.

It may be tempting to dismiss this as a business concept that has little application for churches. And yet, the lack of clear, effective structures and other elements of organizational design can be just as much of a problem in ministry as in business. This is especially true in churches that have grown beyond the simple model of a single worshipping community or single location.

Understanding the “Messy Middle”

Most small and mid-sized churches have fairly simple organizations. They generally meet in one location and have one primary preacher/teacher. They may have one worship service, or if more than one, the same person preaches in all the services. The church may have a few other paid staff, all of whom report to the pastor.

That simplicity begins to fade as any of these factors change. When a new worship community is created or a new location is launched, complexity increases. It increases if a second person becomes the primary preacher for one of the worship communities or campuses. If the staff grows to the point where another layer is needed (rather than all reporting to the senior pastor), that also adds complexity.

This shift from simplicity to complexity is illustrated below:



Complexity occurs when different *entities* within a church have distinct identities and draw on the same resources. Movement to the right in this diagram corresponds with increased complexity. This movement generally correlates with increasing size, even though that is not always the case.

Some large churches remain relatively simple in their programming, staffing, and number of distinct worship communities. Likewise, some mid-size churches have significant variations in one or more of these dimensions that raise their complexity. When a church has two identical



worship services, they often do not have distinct identities. But with multiple worship services or primary preachers or locations, unique identities and competition tend to emerge. Of course, competition between ministries (e.g., music and youth) can occur in any size of church, but resource allocation and other trade-offs become more complicated in a multi-community context¹.

What does complexity look like in practical ministry terms? Consider a church that is preparing to launch its first satellite campus in a growing suburb that is five miles from the main campus. Like most churches, their desire is to have consistency between campuses in order to leverage strengths and maximize efficiency. And like most churches, this one has limited resources for the launch. Those resources are being allocated for the campus pastor’s salary, a part-time worship leader, equipment for the worship service and childcare, rent for the school where the campus will meet, and marketing to promote the new campus. Programming for children, youth, small groups, and missions will be supported by staff from the original campus.

Instantly, a church that was relatively simple has become much more complex. Staff members are now dividing their time between the two campuses. Programs that worked well at the original campus may be viewed as inappropriate or inadequate for the satellite.

Why would a church make decisions that increase complexity? The underlying rationale is almost always a belief that creating new options – whether in worship style, preacher, location, or some other dimension – will release potential leaders and enable the church to reach a different group of people than it is currently reaching. There is ample evidence to support this belief. This paper is not arguing for or against the increased complexity of a multi-community model, but is instead a resource to help church leaders better understand and address the challenges they will encounter in this context.

It’s worth noting that the far right side of the continuum can actually be less complex. This is where each entity (a campus or worship community) has a high degree of autonomy and independence, and therefore little need for coordination or competition for shared resources. For example, each campus of a multi-site church might have its own staff for programming and might plan its own worship services (including sermon series). This is less complex than a multi-site church that shares some staff and has common programming and sermons.

Most large churches, and some mid-size churches, operate in the space between the ends of the continuum. It’s this space that I refer to as the “messy middle.” And it’s this space that is the focus of this paper.

Challenges in the Messy Middle

Any church in the messy middle will instantly recognize the competing forces that pull to the right and to the left on the uniformity-flexibility continuum. The right (toward flexibility) uses terms such as “effectiveness” and “contextualization” and “ministry impact.” Allowing a campus to have more flexibility means that they can make adjustments to better meet the unique needs of the people they are seeking to reach. This point of view says that the gospel is unchanging, but the best way to proclaim the gospel will look different in the suburbs than in the inner city. The drive for greater independence isn’t just focused on the worship service. It may be expressed in discipleship, children’s and youth programming, missions, and communication. Differences can arise at the broad philosophical level (e.g., the importance of small groups for

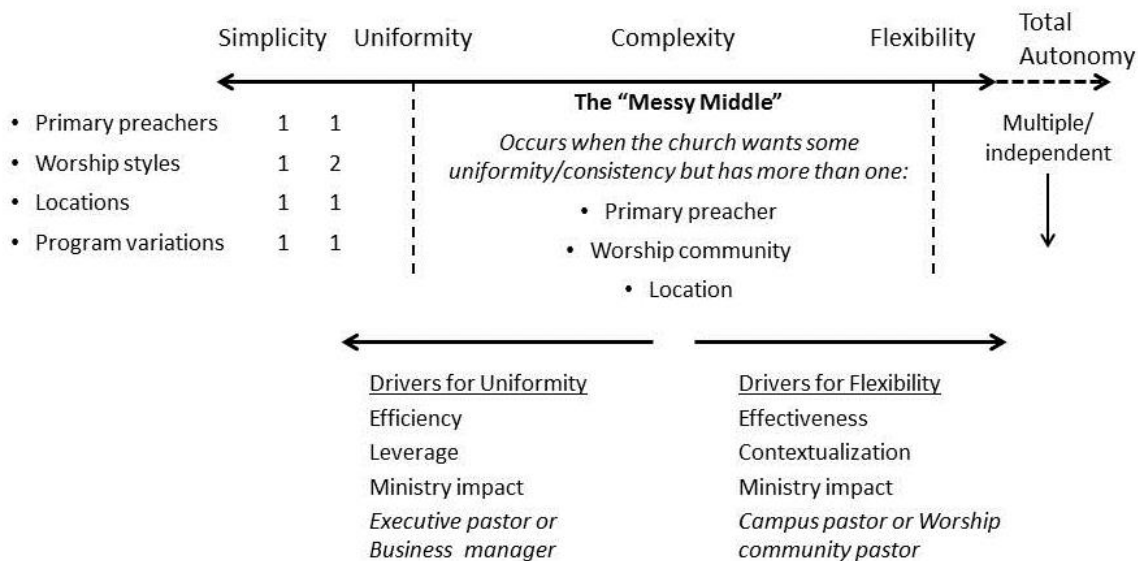
¹ “Multi-community” refers to a church with multiple campuses and/or distinct worship communities. Throughout this paper, the terms “campuses” and “worship communities” will be used interchangeably to refer to these distinct entities. “Campus pastor” and “worship community pastor” will also be used interchangeably to refer to the leaders of these entities.



discipleship) and at the small tactical level (e.g., whether/how to receive an offering in worship services). Ultimately, all of these specific questions are oriented around the larger question of how to best maximize ministry impact for each specific worship community.

On the other side, key terms for the pull to the left (toward uniformity) are “efficiency” and “leverage” and “ministry impact.” Autonomy and independence doesn’t automatically result in better ministry, and it certainly isn’t free. The drive toward uniformity argues that the church’s strengths should be used to the maximum advantage. Why reinvent a program when a proven one already exists? This is especially true when resource needs are being considered. Greater uniformity is seen as good stewardship. It allows the church to be more efficient in the use of its limited resources. And ultimately, good stewardship of resources maximizes ministry impact.

Church Organizational Design



The competing pulls can be characterized by two stereotypical personalities that are present in many churches. The pull to the right is led by entrepreneurial pastors who lead campuses and worship communities. They may be thankful for the support of the larger congregation, and may even affirm the value of uniformity, as long as it doesn’t impede their ability to reach the mission field. However, they will constantly identify places where small (or large) deviations can help them be more effective. The stereotypical roles that pull to the left are executive pastors or business managers². Much of their time is spent allocating resources and creating systems. They are not as close to the mission field as the campus pastors, and they are keenly aware of the implications of allowing greater flexibility.

Many other staff positions are affected by the uncertainty and tension of the messy middle, but one is particularly significant: the senior pastor. When a campus pastor is pushing for greater autonomy and an executive pastor is pulling for uniformity, senior pastors are often caught in the middle. They understand the reality of resource trade-offs. They also want each campus or worship community to be successful. And they want harmony within the staff. Ultimately, they

² A variety of titles are used for these positions. The common denominator is that this is the most senior person on the staff whose responsibilities generally include budgets, procedures, operations, and administration.



want the overall church to thrive, but it's not always clear how to make the messy middle work to accomplish goals that seem to be at odds.

The competing pulls toward flexibility on one side and uniformity on the other side are the essence of the messy middle. So what are some of the specific dynamics of organizational complexity for these churches?

Rules. Every church has “rules.” They might be called policies or procedures. They might be spelled out in detail, summarized in a bullet point list, or passed along orally. Some are mandated to comply with governmental regulations and others are strictly internal.

Whatever they're called and however they are codified, the rules dictate how things are supposed to be done. These rules cover a wide variety of activities: hiring a new staff person, raising money, scheduling vacation, entering new people in the database, sending a church-wide email announcement, screening volunteers, and much more.

In the messy middle, a key question is whether all the rules apply to every campus and worship community. Those who say “yes” argue that the rules exist for a reason. They were put in place and have served the church well. They may be needed for legal or liability reasons, as is the case with hiring a staff person or screening volunteers. In other cases, such as database entry, failure to follow the procedures can create problems for other ministries.

And yet, for all these good reasons, there may be equally good reasons to make exceptions to the rules. Policies for a much larger “main campus” may be less applicable for a small satellite campus. A vacation request procedure is needed to coordinate the schedules of dozens of staff people and insure adequate coverage. When a campus has three staff members, the formal policy and official forms seem like overkill.

Consider a building use policy that was created for three reasons: (1) limit access by outside groups because the main campus often ran out of space for evening meetings, (2) collect fees from outside groups using the building, and (3) establish liability protection. Now consider a satellite campus that has excess space and wants to use its building for community outreach. The first two reasons may be less applicable for this campus, but the third one is still valid. Should the satellite campus be required to use the exact same policy? Or make adjustments? And who gets to decide?

The messy middle is filled with these sorts of questions. It is unwise to say that none of the rules apply, and too restrictive to say that every rule applies without exception. So senior leaders spend significant energy dealing with the questions and exceptions that characterize the rules in the messy middle.

Financial subsidies. Starting a new campus or worship community isn't cheap. Some churches have an expectation that every campus will reach megachurch size, and their launch plans and start-up costs reflect this philosophy. But even churches with more modest ambitions will incur significant costs to get a new campus off the ground. In general, campuses are expected to operate at a financial breakeven after a period of time.

So what happens when a campus isn't meeting its financial targets? In some cases, the church launches the campus knowing that the target mission field has lower giving capacity and the campus is unlikely to be self-sustaining in the first few years (if ever). In other cases, the growth curve is slower than desired, which leaves the campus operating at a deficit. Regardless of the cause, the church is left with a tough choice: (1) continue to operate the campus at a loss, subsidizing it from the overall budget, (2) reduce the cost structure of the campus, knowing that this may undermine its ministry impact, (3) make changes in campus leadership in the belief that this will result in faster growth, or (4) close the campus.



Campus and worship community leaders will usually advocate for the first option, extending the timeline for deficit operations. They genuinely believe that another year (or two) is all they need to reach breakeven. Business managers, central staff, and volunteer leaders that oversee finances tend to prefer any option except the first. They see other ways that the funds could be used, and they are much less convinced that the campus will soon be in the black. Those feelings will be particularly strong if these same leaders tightened their financial belts to support the campus launch.

A final factor that can make finances even murkier in the messy middle is when the income streams are unclear. For example, a new, on-site worship community may draw a mix of people. Some are new to the church, others are “internal transfers” from another worship community, and still others drift back-and-forth between worship communities. Which contributions should be credited to the new worship community? The offering plate isn’t much of an indicator, since online, automated draft, and mail-in comprise a large portion of contributions. The bottom line is that the financial bottom line is often unclear in a multi-community context.

Shared staff. Unless a church has moved all the way to autonomy on the uniformity-flexibility continuum, it will have to come to terms with the challenges of “shared staff.” Any individual staff member whose regular responsibilities relate to more than one campus or worship community is “shared.” Admittedly, every staff member is part of the bigger whole, but when you look at job descriptions and normal duties, it is clear that some staff are essentially dedicated to a single campus while others are shared.

Almost any role can be a shared staff position. The obvious and most common ones are in the support services, including accounting, facilities, human resources, and information technology. Communication staff members are also frequently, but not always, shared. When positions are clearly shared across all the different ministries, the sharing is often facilitated by some sort of agreement (formal or informal) that explains how time and resources will be allocated and how decisions will be made. For example, the communications department will establish lead times for creating new graphics and criteria for producing videos.

The use of shared staff is intended to make efficient use of church resources. However, individual staff members may live in constant tension from being pulled in different directions. Smaller or newer worship communities and satellite campuses may feel that they are not being treated “fairly,” especially if the service standards have not been formalized.

The challenges of shared staff are greater for positions that have a primary responsibility to one campus or worship community, and a secondary role that supports the broader organization. For example, a children’s director may be directly responsible for the children’s ministry on the main campus. He may also “help” the part-time children’s director at a satellite campus, sharing processes and best practices. Or a worship leader may have a primary role in two Sunday morning services, but she is also assisting in the launch of a new Saturday night worship community. Or a campus hires its first communications person, with the understanding that this person will “be available” to support the broader church’s communications department. In each of these cases, the secondary duties are not clearly defined. Words like “help” or “assist” or “be available” or “support” leave too much room for interpretation (and misinterpretation). Staff members will naturally focus more on their primary roles, and those who depend on the secondary assignments will often feel like they’re getting the leftovers. The problem is even worse if staff members don’t know what their primary responsibility is. Then the staff person will have multiple people claiming to be his or her boss.

The alternative to dual responsibilities, however, is not attractive. When dedicated staff are hired for every campus or worship community, costs soar and the synergies of being part of



something bigger fade. Instead, dealing with shared staff becomes another challenge of the messy middle.

Sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry is as old as the story of Cain and Abel. An interesting glimpse into this kind of rivalry, though not between siblings, is seen at the end of John’s gospel. After being told by Jesus how he will die, Peter sees John and asks Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” It seems to be a nearly universal human condition that no matter how good our lives may be, we compare ourselves with others.

Just as this rivalry is true on an individual level, it happens at an organizational level between the campuses and worship communities that comprise a church. “Why do they get more money or support?” “Why don’t they have to follow our procedures?” “Why aren’t they doing their part to make this church-wide initiative successful?” These and similar questions are common as soon as a church begins to shift away from a single worship community in a single location.

The sense of rivalry is fueled by a variety of factors. A genuine element of competition often exists, with each entity being compared based on size or growth rates. In some cases, differential treatment is a reality. One campus may receive more financial support or be allowed more exceptions to standard procedures. In other cases, differential treatment may only be a perception, not reality.

I served as the executive pastor of a multi-site church, and one of our sibling rivalry problems occurred during Vacation Bible School. We had a joint VBS, with both campuses coming together at the original, larger site. The newer satellite campus had launched with great fanfare, causing some at the original campus to resent their perceived loss of favor. So as we prepared for VBS each year, I would hear complaints that the satellite campus wasn’t pulling its weight in the number of volunteers. But when we looked at the data that just wasn’t true!

This highlights one difference when comparing organizational rivalry to that between individuals. Even if the leaders (campus or worship community pastors) are not feeling or fueling rivalry, others within their bodies may fan the flames. The Finance Committee doesn’t approve a request to upgrade the sound and video systems at a campus, and the campus pastor understands the decision. Others at the campus, however, may feel unfairly treated and voice their displeasure. Rather than straightforward sibling rivalry, these situations can develop into full-blown family feuds if they are left unattended.

Vision. One of the most important multi-community conversations relates to purpose and vision. A church may have a purpose or mission statement that describes at a high level why it exists. But if you scratch below the surface, you may find that each campus has a different vision for what the mission looks like in their setting. At one level, this kind of contextualization is expected. It allows the campus to be more effective in reaching its mission field. But the line is blurry between contextualizing a common vision and having different visions.

When visions diverge, two other issues arise. The first is that it becomes more difficult to define what is essential for each worship community. Leadership may agree collectively that “missions” is an important element of the church’s vision. So what happens when one campus focuses on overseas mission trips and another emphasizes partnerships with local schools and a third pushes self-directed mission involvement through small groups? In this case, the church can still talk about the importance of being involved in missions, but beyond this there is little in common. A decision that every campus should emphasize the same mission opportunities reduces their autonomy and risks decreased participation from some campuses. A decision to let each campus decide how to do missions is less efficient and loses the punch that can come from unified communication.



So Why Stay Together?

Starting new communities is not a novel idea, but for many years, the primary expression of these communities was a church plant. The “mother church” was expected to give birth to this new community, usually in a different location. After a few years, the intention was for the new entity to grow to the point where it could separate and stand on its own.

The idea of a “permanent” bond between campuses or communities has gained much more traction in recent years. But this raises an important question that often lingers just below the surface of a multi-community church: “Are we better together? In what ways?” The entrepreneurial pull toward the right, toward greater autonomy, will always run into boundaries. In those moments, the leaders of worship communities will be tempted to ask what value they get from being part of the larger entity. They focus on the frustration of the boundaries, and overlook the benefits of being part of something bigger.

Their question, however, is a legitimate one that every church with a messy middle needs to be able to answer. Two of the most common answers are not very compelling. The first is the value of back office support, which includes accounting, information technology, human resources, and facilities. To be clear, it is a real advantage for campus leaders to not have to worry about these functions and to have them done in an efficient manner. However, if that is the only benefit, then the relationship between campuses and the central church will devolve into something that looks more like an outsourcing arrangement, with the central support as a contracted service.

The other less-than-compelling answer is a net flow of money to the campus or worship community. In other words, the contributions from those who attend the campus do not cover campus expenses. This reality may keep the campus connected to the larger body for a time, but it sets up one of three long-term problems: (1) the campus settles into permanent dependency, not worrying about its financial deficit, (2) the campus resents its dependence on the overall church, or (3) once the campus grows to the point where it can stand on its own, it sees no reason to remain connected. The bottom line is that money should never be the only answer to the question, “How are we better together?”

So what are the more compelling reasons for different campuses or worship communities to stay together, even in the chaos of the messy middle? At the highest level, the answer should be, “We’re trying to do the same thing (vision), in the same or similar ways, and we believe that we can accomplish more together than apart.” So how can a multi-community church accomplish more together than apart? The answer tends to fall into one of two categories: efficiency or effectiveness.

Efficiency focuses on resources. Sharing across multiple campuses releases resources to be used in other ways. In a video model, one person spends the time to prepare a weekly sermon, which means that campus pastors can invest their time in other ways to advance the mission. The same efficiencies occur if the church is forming mission partnerships or writing curriculum that can be used on every campus.

Accomplishing more together can also reflect effectiveness. One of the most common forms of effectiveness is dynamic preaching (whether by one primary person or a team) that can be shared across multiple venues. A communicator who connects with large numbers of people and translates well on video can have great impact in this model. But that’s not the only way to accomplish more together. A powerful process for leadership development can be shared across campuses. The same is true for the way that new staff members are brought on board or small groups are structured. Innovative ideas can be developed and tested more quickly at this larger scale.



It is important to note that these benefits of being together require some degree of uniformity and coordination across campuses or worship communities. As a church shifts further to the right on the uniformity-flexibility continuum, it becomes more difficult to make a strong argument that staying together is beneficial. If you're convinced of the value of being one congregation, then it's time to explore how to clean up the messy middle.

Cleaning up the Mess

It's a familiar comedy scene: the apples are perfectly arranged in a tall pyramid in the produce section of the grocery store. Then a child grabs an apple from the middle, and the stack tumbles onto the floor, leaving frustrated workers to clean up the mess. Perhaps you look at that and think, “That could have been avoided – make the stack shorter or keep it out of the reach of small children.”

Far too often, church leaders are cleaning the apples off the floor after their dreams of a beautiful, harmonious multi-community church have come crashing down. This paper is not arguing against multiple worship communities or campuses, any more than I would suggest that a grocery store shouldn't sell apples. Nor am I suggesting that messes are completely avoidable. The only way that the grocery store can prevent an apple avalanche is to have each apple individually displayed, which would be silly and completely uneconomical. Similarly, multi-community churches cannot eliminate all messiness.

In reality multi-community churches exist across the spectrum from highly uniform to highly autonomous. And at all different places on that spectrum, you will find churches that are figuring out ways to minimize their messiness³.

What are the key practices that make the middle less messy? It's all about clarity, specifically clarity in organizational design. When people think of “organization,” they tend to focus on the formal structure and reporting relationships that are portrayed on organization charts. But organizational design is much broader. Specifically, multi-community churches that are less messy have gotten clear about:

- Vision
- Organizational structure
- Planning processes
- Metrics
- Communication
- Finances
- Decision-making authority and systems

Vision. Making the middle less messy begins with clarity of vision. If the different worship communities and campuses are not working from some sort of shared vision, the predictable outcomes are either ongoing tension and/or eventual full independence (becoming totally separate churches).

The specificity of the vision, however, can vary significantly across different models. One church might have a high-level vision of “reaching unchurched people in our communities.” Each campus or worship community is left to decide how to best do this in their context. In this case,

³ Churches that operate at the far right of the uniformity-flexibility continuum are effectively functioning as a confederation of affiliated bodies, not as a single church. They don't have a messy middle to deal with, and as such are beyond the scope of this section.



the vision (and its lack of specificity) indicates that the church will function closer to the flexibility side of the continuum.

Another church might start with the same high-level vision to reach unchurched people, but it unpacks this vision with details of what types of unchurched people they feel called to reach and how they will try to reach them. Each campus is expected to be aligned with this more detailed vision, which will drive a much higher level of uniformity across the different campuses.

In order to clean up the messy middle, leaders from the church need to be on the same page regarding vision. In this context, “leaders” must include campus pastors (and often other campus or worship community leaders) in order to avoid serious vision alignment problems. They should answer three questions:

- What is our vision?
- What does the vision mean?
- How much, and in what ways, are campuses or worship communities allowed to contextualize the vision?

The latter two questions, if left unanswered, are where much of the confusion and tension of the messy middle is created. One simple framework for addressing the third question is “same/similar/specific⁴.” What is to be done the *same* across all campuses? What is to be *similar* (but not exactly the same)? What can be decided on a campus-*specific* basis?

The three vision questions are important drivers for the other elements of organizational design. An environment with tight interpretation of the vision and minimal contextualization has one set of implications for structure, planning, processes, and more. This is notably different from an environment with loose interpretation and broader contextualization.

Organizational structure. “Can I see the organization chart?” When I first began consulting with churches and ministries, I thought this was a simple question. But after asking this question many times, I’ve learned that my question rarely has a simple answer. I’ve been told that there isn’t an organization chart or that what’s on paper isn’t really how they’re organized. And I’ve seen charts that look more like a bowl of spaghetti than a neatly structured set of lines and boxes.

While there will always be some fluidity in churches, staff members need to know who they report to. They need to know how they relate to others in the organization and where to turn when then run into problems. They want to know who will be evaluating their performance. For these and many other reasons, clarity in organizational structure matters.

In a multi-community environment, however, many staff members are shared or have dual functions (as noted earlier). The children’s ministry director may lead the ministry on the central campus and support the ministry at satellite campuses. In business, this is referred to as a “matrix” organization. A person may have dual responsibilities with one direct supervisor (“solid line relationship”) and then a second person that they report to on a “dotted line” basis. The children’s director would have a solid line to the central campus Family Pastor, and a dotted line to the other campus pastor(s).

Organization structures that bring clarity to the messy middle:

- Show the reporting/supervisory relationships for every staff person.

⁴ This framework comes from Mark Sheets and Diannah White of Good Shepherd United Methodist Church, a multi-site congregation in Kansas City.



- Have only one direct supervisor (solid line) for each person.
- Have feedback loops that work in concert with “dotted line” relationships (described in the metrics section).
- Are philosophically consistent with the vision.

This last point is particularly important. The staff member who oversees adult discipleship in a high uniformity environment might have other individuals at each campus that report directly to him or her. The campus staff would then have dotted lines to their campus pastors. In an environment with greater flexibility, the campus discipleship staff would report to the campus pastor and have a dotted line to the central person.

One other implication is that senior leaders need to learn how to function in a matrix environment, which is not the norm in ministry settings. As will be discussed below, effective planning and communication becomes much more important in this context. Equally important, leaders need to build bridges and keep short accounts so that issues and confusion are resolved quickly.

Planning processes. In a simple church, planning may be seen as optional and is often a calendar-driven exercise. In a multi-community church, a more robust planning process is essential. Why is planning more important as complexity increases? Because coordinating calendars is not enough. Resource allocation becomes more fluid and difficult in this context. Having multiple communities leads to an explosion of ideas and opportunities, and with this, greater likelihood of misalignment and competition.

Effective planning flows out of the vision and brings focus and coherence to this messiness. The leaders of multi-community churches need to be able to evaluate different options and decide on the specific steps – whether new initiatives or changes in existing programs – that will be prioritized for the upcoming season. I think of this as “strategic planning,” but I recognize that some ministry leaders prefer less business-like language. Regardless of terminology, the process needs to translate vision into specific goals and action plans for each campus, worship community, and ministry unit.

A well-designed planning process tells the children’s ministry director whether to focus more time on the central campus (where he/she has direct responsibility) or the satellite campus. It guides decisions about the next staff position to be created and where to direct funds. It puts major church-wide events and emphases on the calendar so that they are not overridden or overlooked by a campus. It informs senior leaders where to invest their energy and relational capital. These decisions should emerge from a process that says, “With God’s help, here’s what we expect to accomplish over the next 12-24 months and how we plan to do it.”

In addition to the concepts described above, the best planning processes for multi-community churches include four important elements:

- Honest assessment of current reality. Decisions about the future must be anchored in a clear understanding of the present. If something isn’t working well, leaders need to be willing to name it. Otherwise, plans will be based on wishful thinking.
- Each campus/community is represented. When plans are made by a small executive team and then handed to others to implement, buy-in and execution will be poor. Even if campus leaders are not at the final decision-making table, they need to have an opportunity for input and to know that their concerns and needs have been considered.
- “Team one.” While campus representation is important, the leaders with final decision-making responsibility are not in the meeting to advocate for their ministry areas. Instead,



the senior pastor or executive pastor should ask them to put on their “team one” hat, seeking to make the best decision for the overall church. If that means that another campus is given extra attention and resources, then they should support that decision⁵.

- What’s most important? Ultimately, effective planning seeks to select the best ideas from among many good ones. If the process doesn’t narrow down to a limited number of specific initiatives, then church leaders will be left to wander aimlessly in the messy middle.

The bottom line is that an effective planning process is a great resource for addressing the complexity of a multi-community church.

Metrics. As explained above, an effective planning process says, “Here’s what we expect to accomplish.” This is only meaningful if there is a way to determine whether the church has actually accomplished what was expected. And that leads into the realm of metrics.

Metrics are simply a way to track progress toward a goal. We’re familiar with the standard metrics that are used in most churches – worship attendance, new members, new believers, small group participation, and giving. Any (or all) of these may be important indicators of whether the church (overall) or specific campuses are achieving their goals. But many other metrics can be put in place, depending on the specific plans and goals of the church. For example, a church’s planning process may identify hospitality as a priority. While new members are one indicator of effective hospitality, the church might also track the percentage of first-time visitors that return a second time.

A complete discussion of metrics is beyond the scope of this document. The point of this section is to highlight how metrics relate to the planning process and the value they provide in a multi-community church. The value comes in several forms:

- Goals, and the measurement of progress relative to those goals, is one form of motivation for leaders. Once a goal has been set through the planning process, leaders will do their best to reach the goal.
- When the same measures are applied across campuses, the comparison can be a useful leadership tool. If one campus has a much higher rate of return visitors, leaders can look for best practices to apply across the other campuses.
- Metrics can help in resource allocation decisions. The rapid growth in the number of students on one campus may justify a decision to add another part-time staff member.
- Meaningful metrics won’t eliminate sibling rivalry, but they can create a sense that decisions are fair and logical rather than based on favoritism.

Internal feedback loops are another type of metric that can be particularly helpful in a multi-community church. In a matrix organization, one of the common frustrations is a lack of “control” over people in dotted line relationships. For example, a campus pastor may be frustrated with a lack of attention from the shared person who is responsible for adult discipleship. A culture that encourages informal feedback is the best way to address concerns, but formal feedback systems can also be valuable.

Any department or individual that supports other campuses or departments can benefit from feedback. This can be a simple form that allows “users” to provide feedback on the “service” they’ve received. Questions can cover the quality of the end product, timeliness,

⁵ The “team one” concept comes from Patrick Lencioni’s book, *The Advantage*.



responsiveness, attitude or other factors. When used properly, this kind of feedback loop can overcome problems like the squeaky wheel, favoritism, and blind spots.

Metrics are a valuable leadership tool even in a small, simple church. They become indispensable in a multi-community environment.

Communication. Even in a relatively small church, an ongoing cry seems to be, “We need to communicate better” or “No one told me that.” The problem can be exponentially worse in a multi-community church. In reality, church members don’t need to know everything that is happening. But when key leaders are uninformed about important events and decisions, things get messy in a hurry.

Many churches have cultures that are highly verbal. Important news and announcements are given (spoken) in staff meetings. That may work for a church with a small staff and one location. But it’s a problem for staff members that miss the meeting, and an even bigger problem for remote staff from other campuses who physically can’t attend those meetings.

A church with four locations decides to close one of its campuses. The campus has been much more expensive to operate than forecast and is close enough to another site that people can easily make the drive. Leadership may not invest time to communicate this decision with the other two campuses. After all, it doesn’t affect them, so why should they care? But rumors may spread, stirring up the staff or even the entire congregation. People at the other campuses may hear that the decision was arbitrary or that the entire church is having financial problems.

So to combat the messy middle, churches need to evolve their internal communication strategies to reflect the reality of being multi-community. This may mean:

- Rethinking meeting structure and format to improve the flow of information and eliminate gaps.
- Creating remote/video links for off-site staff to participate in certain meetings.
- Establishing a weekly internal staff email to communicate important news and updates.
- Cascading communications from senior leaders to the rest of the members of their teams.

Effective communication starts with listening. When staff members and other leaders say “I didn’t know ___,” that is a clue that something may be broken in your internal communication. If your communication strategy hasn’t changed significantly as your church has become more complex, it’s almost certain that important information isn’t getting to all of the right people.

Finances. Just as in a marriage, money can be one of the most contentious issues in the messy middle. At the core, two central questions need to be answered clearly and consistently: How are we counting? How are we allocating? The counting question focuses on income. As noted earlier, it is not always obvious how contributions should be attributed to the various campuses or worship communities. If each community is expected to stand on its own financially, this can be a critical question. Accordingly, the related accounting needs to be fair and transparent.

The second question about allocation relates to expenses. Campus and worship community pastors are generally responsible for managing expenses within their budgets. But who determines the size of that budget? Who gets to decide spending priorities within their budget? Does their budget include a portion of the shared expenses, and if so, how is that determined?

Financial decisions should flow from the church’s overall multi-community philosophy. In a high autonomy environment, campus pastors should have a high level of control over their budgets.



In a more uniform church, much of a campus budget may be set by formulas and a centralized budgeting process. In either case, and at all the other places along the continuum, leaders need clear answers on the two central questions to minimize money squabbles.

Decision-making authority and systems. Remember that the core tension in the messy middle is the pull toward uniformity and efficiency on one side versus flexibility and contextualization on the other. So when questions and uncertainty arise – and they always will – who has the authority to decide?

A church has a benevolence policy to never give out cash. Benevolence requests from members are considered by a committee, and non-members are referred to a local assistance ministry. But one campus wants to keep some petty cash on hand for emergency walk-in needs, which clearly contradicts the policy. Who makes the decision? Unfortunately, this is often left unclear. And when it is unclear, these types of decisions are often elevated to the executive team or senior pastor.

Clarifying the vision and the organization chart (reporting relationships) can help with the issues around decision-making, but that alone is usually not enough. How do you know if more work needs to be done to clarify decision-making authority? Three indicators are:

- Executive team meetings get bogged down dealing with relatively small issues.
- People routinely circumvent or undermine the official authority or procedures.
- Leaders frequently say that they don’t know who will make a decision.

Multi-community churches need to establish clear ground rules for making decisions, including when and how to make exceptions to policies. Then they need to consistently live within those ground rules. They also need effective systems to facilitate effective decision-making.

“Systems” run throughout many of the elements described in this paper. They are critical for efficiency and consistency in a multi-community environment. Systems are used to measure progress on goals, develop campus-specific plans, allocate resources, provide feedback, and much more.

The systems that worked well in a simple church are unlikely to be inadequate in a multi-community setting. The financial system just needs to count total contributions when a church has one worship community, but a different system is needed if income is to be credited to each campus. Some pastors resist efforts to “systemize” the ministry. They fear that this will lead to a loss of flexibility. And while this is a valid fear, systems can ultimately improve ministry effectiveness by minimizing confusion in the messy middle. The right systems allow decisions to be made by the right people and enable leaders to focus on the work God has called them to do.

What Now?

If you’re leading in the messy middle of a complex church, you may wonder where to start. The answer, of course, will be unique for each congregation, but here are four suggestions to get the ball rolling:

- Determine where you want to be on the continuum. Throughout this paper, I’ve tried to be clear that there is not a “right” point on the uniformity-flexibility continuum. But you do need to know where you are and where you want to be.
- Own your part in the mess. If you’re in leadership, you bear at least some of the responsibility for the chaos being experienced by others (unless you’re brand new).



Now is the time to acknowledge the confusion and frustration that can occur in a complex organization and to apologize for not giving it enough attention.

- Identify root issues. If your home has a water leak, you stop the leak before mopping up the water. In the same way, it is best to address the root issues underlying organizational messiness. Beyond lacking a coherent philosophy, the most common are unclear vision and rogue leaders (those who refuse to get on board with the vision and philosophy). Start with these to pave the way for any other fixes you may attempt.
- Do something. Once root issues have been addressed, the long list of other challenges may feel overwhelming. Don't try to fix everything at once, and don't become paralyzed. Choose one, preferably something that is solvable and that will have real benefits, and get to work. You and your team will be glad to see movement in the right direction.

You didn't get into the messy middle overnight, and you won't get out of it quickly. In fact, your church's vision may never lead back to a place of simplicity. But armed with a better understanding of organizational complexity, you can help your church thrive by making the middle less messy.