

The Move to Multiple Meetings



We are often asked about the lessons we have learned regarding the establishment of more than one meeting on a Sunday.

Just to give you a historical context, we started multiple meetings before we went multi-site. Following the extension of our Catford building in September '04 (which seats around 500) we grew rapidly so that we had to launch a second morning meeting a year later in September '05. Three years later, we started a third meeting.

We have been particularly helped in this process of establishing multiple meetings by our friend Steve Nicholson from the Vineyard movement – Steve is based in Chicago – and much of what follows is drawn from his experience. Here we have some **key principles that help us make decisions and establish multiple meetings** with at least a measure of success.

Guiding Principles:

Firstly, it's best to do this in a context of some momentum and growth. If your church has not grown for the last ten years, it is unlikely that dividing what you already have into two will help you! Going to a second meeting should not be taken lightly – for us it was as important a strategic directional call as our £2 million building project a number of years before.

Secondly, you want to do it with a sense of God speaking so that you can move ahead with a **sense of faith and anticipation that God will help you with the challenges that lie ahead.**

Thirdly, the move to multiple meetings reflects the **missional motivation** which is at the heart of the church's life.

Here are some of the key **numerical principles** that have helped us as we have made this decision:

We have always worked on the principle that when our auditorium is **80% full** – that is people sitting down during the preaching – we are full.

It's important to work these figures out on your high attendance Sundays - **if you are hitting 80% on your 'high' Sundays it's time to extend your building, move to another venue, or go to a second meeting.**

As we moved towards two meetings, we worked on the principle that we didn't want a divide or split of more than 60/40 - in other words we didn't want 300 at the first meeting and 100 at the second. We worked very hard on retaining the integrity of this principle, including changing the time of one meeting at an early stage to move people forward and asking a particular ministry group to move to the other service.

Ideally, you never want to be under 50% full in your auditorium's capacity - 100 people in a 300-seater venue can rattle somewhat!

Also, ideally, **attendance should be no less than between 170 to 180 in the smaller of the meetings** in order to maintain critical mass (based on a Sunday attendance of 400 or more). This is particularly important in a church context that places a high value on corporate worship.

If you have been used to a celebration of 400 then the worship experience with a group of less than 170 feels very different.

We found too, that in our context **it is easier to go to two consecutive morning meetings than to one morning and one evening meeting** – this helps particularly when it comes to volunteers. (This may differ in university towns and cities.) The length of our meetings is 1 hour and 30 minutes, with a 30 minute 'turn-round' between two morning meetings (e.g. 9.30-11am and 11.30am-1pm). The time of the start of meetings matters more than you realise. Sunday morning between 11 and 12, in our context, remains the prime time to attend church. Our third meeting at the Catford site was initially launched in 2008 at 5.30pm. We ran this successfully for many years but found that numbers began to drop off following our move to multi-site, which offered more space in morning meetings. Upon the launch of our Beckenham site in October 2018, we closed this meeting and will relaunch a third Catford service at the new time of 1.30pm in March 2019.

More preparation needs to be given to Sunday planning during the week. On the Sunday the pastoring of the meeting is extremely important – you have to start and finish on time, notices should be brief, preachers must be disciplined about keeping to time, and ministry times should be included in the 90 mins where appropriate. **The loss of the luxury of flexibility to run over time is weighed against the benefit of reaching more people for Jesus.**

We preach the same message at each meeting, and we launch new meetings at key growth points in the year. We profile the new meetings with massive leaflet drops, advertising our Sundays and encouraging everyone to invite people along.

Implementation points

One of the questions we are regularly asked is 'How do you know which meeting people are going to?' – we found a **simple questionnaire** to be a reliable indicator of which meeting people will attend.

One of the greatest challenges you will face in going to a second or third meeting is the **volunteer challenge** – you need to release a lot more ministry to run the Sunday meetings. We have found running a ministry fair on a Sunday as part of our launch strategy to be an effective way of connecting people to ministry opportunities created by the extra meeting.

When we moved to two meetings, we had to **pastor the sense of loss** that some of our congregation felt. We did this publicly on Sundays, identifying with people's sense of loss ('I don't see my friends anymore'), and providing an exhortation to see the costs of the move as worthwhile as we reach many more people with the gospel.

We have found that as we have provided more options and more space, God has given us more people.

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