

Larry Osborne

Senior Pastor, North Coast Church, Vista, CA

Larry Osborne, senior pastor of North Coast Church, Vista, CA, explains why video venues, as a ministry tool, can promote unity amid diversity and expand God's kingdom in powerful ways



Larry Osborne: A big-picture leader who prefers a small church environment.

North Coast Church is demonstrating to churches of all sizes and denominations that within their organizations and communities it is possible to have unity amid diversity. There is no secret formula, only a ministry tool that can enable churches to reach people of all ages and mindsets with the Gospel.

Called video venues, Larry Osborne, senior pastor and visionary leader of North Coast Church, stumbled into the concept when his growing church faced a major challenge in 1998: They were out of space and out of options. The sanctuary was filled to capacity, and he did not want to “punish” latecomers by sending them to the overflow room. So he provided an alternative worship venue for them, which soon became so popular he had to add new venues. Over a few years the concept evolved from a temporary solution to a space problem to a powerful core strategy for ministry expansion.

Today, North Coast Church offers 23 weekend worship options on five different sites. And thousands of churches have followed suit. They are discovering a fresh and innovative way to reach different groups of people wanting different styles of music and worship experiences. Call it multisite, multivenue or video café, the concept of “one church, multiple worship styles” has come of age. It's a testament to the pioneering spirit of Osborne and a few other church leaders who like to tread the uncharted path and leave a trail for others.

Church Executive: What is your most compelling case for the multisite or multivenue model of doing church?

Larry Osborne: First, I'd differentiate between two aspects of the multivenue movement. Most people think only of geographic expansion, but there are a number of us who think that in the long run what will be even more significant is the ability to expand ministry demographically within one church.

Geographic expansion involves taking your church and planting it at some distance away with teaching on video. Demographic expansion is when you provide a targeted worship service, style of music or ambiance that allows you to reach people on the fringe of your ministry who would not be reached well by a one-size-fits-all style of ministry. It might be a more traditional or edgy worship option, or even in a different language.

By Rez Gopez-Sindac

For me the most compelling reason to start an offsite ministry is that anytime people drive 25 minutes or more to your church, the drive time kills off what I like to call come-and-see evangelism and almost always guarantees reduction in youth involvement. The opportunity to bring coworkers and neighbors is undercut because people say, "Well, I'd love to come and I've heard of the church, but it's too far away." The ability to keep youth involved over the long haul is stifled because the drive becomes too long for most people especially for midweek services and special events beyond the weekend.

Many of us in larger regional churches have fooled ourselves by thinking that planting small groups in a distant community means that we've really moved into that community with significance and provided a nucleus around which to build. But it takes more than a small group presence to impact a community. With multiple video worship venues, we can now take the church to where the people live rather than asking them to drive to us.

The most compelling reason for starting an onsite venue aimed at demographic expansion is that we no longer live in a one-size-fits-all culture. We live in a culture of FM radio and cable TV. People expect options and choices. The old idea of blending a service and reaching everybody with a one-size-fits-all ministry goes against the culture in very significant ways. In fact, my definition of a blended service is that it's a great way to make sure no one is happy! That wasn't true in the past. But there has been a huge culture shift. Today people expect to find whatever it is that fits them best.

Do you have a time frame by which to measure the success of a new venue?

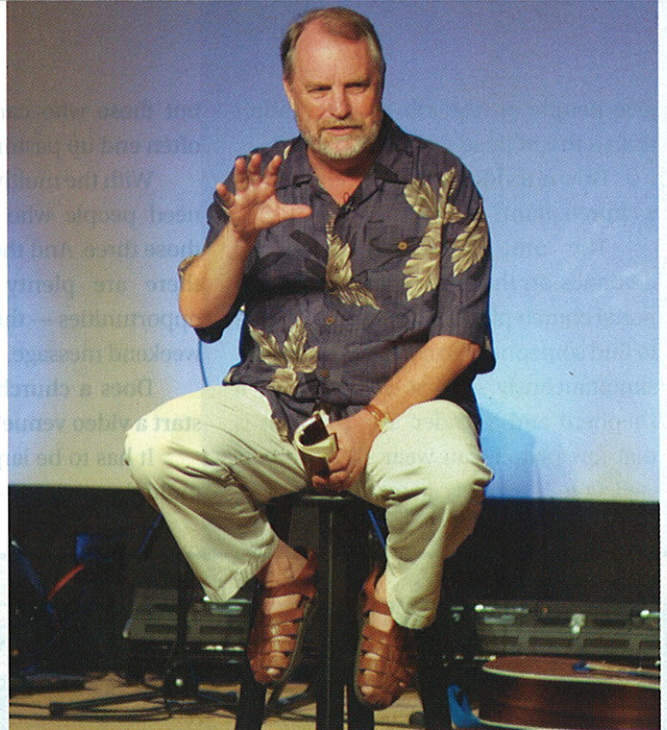
We normally ask people to commit and help "seed" it for six to eight weeks. If it's not working, we want to know early. We don't want people to continue coming simply out of guilt and a commitment they regret. We've only had one that didn't work.

So what could go wrong in a new worship venue?

Obviously a lack of a big-picture leader will lead to failure. In our case, however, the venue that failed had to do more with having the wrong facility than the wrong leader. We started it in an old downtown theater in an area that was being revitalized. We thought it would be an excellent venue—you could go to church then stop at one of the coffee shops afterward. But when we actually started holding the services, we realized after the second or third weekend that we had a big problem.

We place a high value on participation in worship, but a theater is designed for performance not participation. It's built to stifle ambient noises not amplify them. People could not hear the voices of others, so they quit singing and just listened to the people up on the stage. While a theatre might work well for a more performance-oriented church, it killed us by undercutting the participation level of our worship time.

Another potential landmine is trying to reach people with whom you have no relational contact. For example, a fairly traditional church might want to reach the so-called emergent



"With multiple video worship venues, we can now take the church to where the people live rather than asking them to drive to us," says Osborne.

generation, but if it doesn't already have some people with that mindset, it will almost certainly fail. The same goes for a very edgy church that tries to start a venue for traditionalists.

One big advantage of a multivenue church is that leaders are constantly developing new leaders.

Absolutely! It's a fabulous tool for developing and empowering leaders. It gives them lots of opportunities and it motivates us to constantly find and develop new leaders. Our largest venue seats a little over 500—that's the North Coast Live. We've been able to grow to nearly 6,000 in attendance, with the largest venue seating only 500. This means that lots of people have a job to do. If we had a sanctuary that seated 2,500 people, then we would only have a place for few stars—a few people on stage, ushers, children workers, and parking lot attendants. But with all the venues, each one feels almost like a church plant with many opportunities for ministry.

However, in quickly filling those opportunities, a church might be taking the risk of using people who are "unqualified" or "unprepared."

I think we usually worry too much about being failure proof. The Apostle Paul would come to town, stay a month and leave a church. But we want to send everybody to seminary and make sure nothing can go wrong. Our bias at North Coast is to look for people who are spiritually growing, not people who have spiritually arrived. And once we find them we try to keep training them along the way.

As for the danger of "unqualified" leaders, I see that concern as a bit of a straw man. No church I know of would intentionally put unqualified person or a bull-in-a-china-closet personality in charge of a ministry. But at the same time, we don't feel everyone needs a seminary degree or tons and tons of training to minister effectively. Bottom line: We try to >>

give people on-the-job training rather than a ton of head training.

How is a video venue different from a church plant?

The only difference is in the demands on the key leader. For a traditional church plant to succeed, you have to find someone who can wear three hats simultaneously — that of a teacher, a shepherd and a leader. The problem is that few people can wear all three hats well. Lots of people can wear one or two,

but those who can wear all three well often end up pastoring a megachurch.

With the multivenue model, we only need people who are good at two of those three. And they still get to teach — there are plenty of other teaching opportunities — they just don't teach the weekend message.

Does a church have to be large to start a video venue?

It has to be large enough that it has multiple services — and they should be

pretty full. We've worked with churches that have 400 to 500 people that have planted venues. They begin with just one onsite venue or one offsite that's nearby. One exception would be a very large sanctuary that can't be filled. Let's say the church has a lot of history, and a very traditional style; I might suggest they start an edgy service even though they aren't full in the main service. They might be surprised how many people are dying for a change and can be reached.

What are the challenges church leaders have to be aware of before launching a new worship venue?

Before starting, leadership needs to answer questions like: Who's going to have the final say on programming decisions? Is it going to be done by the venue leader, the church board, the senior staff or the mother church? What are you going to do with the money raised at the venues? Does it go into one pot or does the money raised there stay there?

Another challenge is being clear about your "North Star" goal — what is the main reason you're doing this and how are you going to measure success or failure? Also, what are your non-negotiable boundaries, the things that you won't let the venues do. Every church has its own non-negotiable boundaries, but they have to be articulated ahead of time. If you wait to do so, then all you have is a fight.

We're launching a new worship venue this fall that falls into the category of geographic expansion. We have 800-plus people who are driving to our church from a nearby community called Fallbrook. It's a 30-minute drive away, so we want to bring the church to that community. Its "North Star" will be to plant full-service community church.

But when we started The Edge, our "North Star" goal was anybody who liked a more cutting-edge style of worship. We wanted to reach a mindset, not an age group, so we made sure we marketed the worship style rather than calling it a service for youth and emergents.

Some people think that only younger people are "edgy" and older

Roofing Tiles





Needing a new Church Roof?

Or building a new Church?





Gerard Stone Coated Roofing Tiles.

- 120 mph wind warranty
- 5 profiles and many colors to choose from
- Won't crack, peel or burn
- Lifetime Limited Warranty
- Over 30 years manufacturing experience and the pioneer in stone coated steel roofs







GERARD
800/23-ROOFS METALS USA

(866) 218-4552
www.gerardusa.com

eXpress Request No. 10

people don't have any idea of the postmodern world.

Outlook and state of mind are not determined by age. People of all ages think in a way similar to what we've come to call postmodern. And many 20-year-olds think in the linear terms of modernity. We always tell churches to aim at a mindset rather than an age group, and you'll be shocked by who comes.

We've actually taken numerous census in our venue called The Edge. We consistently find that the largest demographic is 18-24 years old, but the next largest (just one percent less) are the 40-49 years old. Old rock and rollers!

Even our traditional worship venue, Traditions, is not made up of only senior citizens. In fact, most of our senior citizens do not go to Traditions; they choose other venues. Traditions is actually made up of a variety of ages who all share one thing in common: they were raised in a church and enjoy a more nostalgic worship set.

What's the role of the senior pastor in ensuring the success of a multisite ministry?

To ensure success of a multisite or multivenue church, the senior pastor has to value those he can't see. A lot of pastors are all about performance. If they can't see you in the room, you don't count.

Second, a pastor has to be willing to equip, empower and release leadership. For all the years I've been at North Coast, empowering and releasing people for ministry has been one of our highest values. For example, we pay our worship leaders to raise up worship leaders, not to create an all-star band. For 20 years we've had a weekend teaching team, even before it was a rage. That's because I believe that a church is healthier with multiple voices, and I believed that if I didn't model raising up other people to do my job, I would never be able to get others to raise up people to do their jobs. A pastor who doesn't value raising up and deploying other people probably won't succeed with a venue-based ministry.

The other thing a senior pastor has

to do is to be willing to adapt his teaching to a venue structure. For instance, we use the Saturday night's tape instead of a live feed on Sunday, and that means I can't say "tonight," "earlier today" or anything like that. I have to make sure that in our case my Saturday message is as good as I can make it. It can't be a warm-up for Sunday. I've had to adapt my teaching style. My preference would be to keep

"Aim at a mindset rather than an age group. If you aim at an age in a culture of FM radio and cable TV, you'll miss a ton of people."

changing and fine-tuning the message every time I preach it until I got it perfect or until I finished the last sermon of the weekend. Now I have to treat Saturday night as if I've got just one shot.

My observation is that many of the churches that have successfully transitioned to the multisite or multivenue movement are those that are personality driven or have strong, charismatic senior pastors. Is there a "conquer all" mentality that might be present?

That's true perhaps of some of the bigger-name churches, but not with most of the churches we've worked with. Those that have successfully launched video venues have very good pastors, but they're not all incredibly charismatic personalities. What's universal is a desire to accommodate more people and often a lack of enough space to do so. They aren't driven as much by a desire to "take over the world" as they are by a desire to provide an empty seat for those who want to come.

At North Coast we have no desire to take over the world. We keep adding venues because we run out of space, people drive too far, or they contact us and ask us to come. But we don't really think in terms of starting a North Coast movement.

How much money is needed to launch a worship venue?

It all depends whether it's onsite or offsite; onsite is usually cheaper. You have to spend the money to get a pretty good camera, which is a lot cheaper now than what it used to be. After a good camera is purchased for the first venue the rest of them can share it. So the price tag can go down after the initial one. A new venue can cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$100,000 depending on

whether or not you already have a good projector and whether or not the building needs tenant improvements.

Frankly, I don't think we could have done this 20 years ago because the technology wasn't within the financial reach of many churches. It is now.

In your case where does the funding to start a new venue come from?

We have a unified budget so everything is lumped together. The resources needed for the new site come out of our general church budget. The staff on our main campus and the staff on our new sites are all paid out of the same budget.

When a new worship venue becomes financially stable, should it give a percentage back to the general fund?

Every church seems to be doing it differently. We've worked with Willow Creek when they planted their sites, and I believe in their case the money raised on the site stays there. At North Coast, it all goes into one pot. Some churches have a percentage that is paid forward to launch other venues and churches.

This is one of those boundaries that you have to talk through ahead of time. There's not a right or wrong way to do it, just spell it out ahead of time. For us, if the church is within driving distance of our main campus, it shares our budget; but when a venue is located outside of our geographical region (in other >>

3 successful strategies for a venue launch

First, you need to make sure that you put only the teaching on video — never worship, seldom drama. Hollywood long ago realized that concerts and Broadway plays don't translate well on a two-dimensional screen. We always suggest that if you're going to have a drama, have a different drama team live in the venue or occasionally go without it. But when it comes to worship, never put it on a screen. People don't respond no matter how great the quality. It's the teaching that seems to translate well on a screen, not the other elements.

Second, you have to find a go-to leader, someone who has the ability to draw people, work with volunteers and can sense the climate in the room. In other words, you need to have a big-picture type of leader. Sometimes we've had venue leaders who were great with individual lambs but they don't know how to be a shepherd to an entire flock. A venue leader or pastor has to see the big picture to the point that they can walk into a room and realize the sound is not working, people are not participating, the bathrooms are not clean — all the stuff pastors who have a mindset of watching over the whole would see and do.

Sometimes people think they can succeed with just an emcee or by having a very warm shepherding personality up front, but if they don't have leadership skills they can't see the whole picture of what the flock really needs. The phrases I like to use to describe this type of leader are "pastoral presence" or "tribal chief."

Third, when preparing to launch, you need to count the "yes" votes only. In other words, you're only looking for people who want to plant the new venue. You don't care if everybody else is against the new venue because you're not forcing them to go. A church that takes a survey to ask if launching a new venue is a good idea will almost always find the congregation says it's a bad idea. My entire staff, except for two people, said it was a bad idea! But we went ahead and launched it only for those who wanted to come — and it was a smashing success. So much so, that all of those who were so strongly against it at the beginning became fans later on. Just gather a critical mass core (which all depends on the size of the room) and go for it. — **Larry Osborne**

words too far to drive in to the main campus) the money raised there stays there. We feel that when you get too far away, centralized control is at best a good guess of what they need. We can't really know what's happening that far away. But when it's within our region, within an hour or so, we have a much better sense of what's going on and can offer wise leadership.

What is the future of the multisite movement?

My guess is that within the next 15 years demographic expansion will be even more significant than the geographical expansion. Here at North Coast, demographic expansion is a very high value. But from the thousands of churches that have looked into our system, there seems to be only a handful that have really grasped and put into application the power of demographic expansion.

I think using venues for geographic expansion will continue because we simply can't keep building bigger and bigger buildings and having people drive further and further distances. There will always be a few humungous facilities, but I believe in the future megachurches will move more and more to a multisite model.

But you are moving to a new, bigger property.

Yes, but while our total adult seating will be around 3,000 per service, it won't be in a 3,000-seat auditorium. Instead, North Coast Live (what most would call the main sanctuary) will seat just 1,200 or 1,500 people. The Edge will seat 800. A video café and Traditions and other venues will make up the other 1,000.

The most common question the people in our church ask me about the new facility is "When we get there are we going to stop the venues?" And the answer they all want to hear is, "Absolutely not!"

Many people like to be in a big church because they want to be anonymous. With your video venues, are you finding that what people really want is a sense of community?

The statements about anonymity are true, but I think sometimes they're overstated. An unchurched person doesn't want to be jumped on by a greeting committee. They don't want to stand up and introduce themselves. They don't want to be asked too many questions. They want to sit in the back row — on an aisle — so they can leave if things get strange. But most everybody who comes back a second time wants to at least have some connection. People go to a big church in spite of its size, not because of its size. I have a saying I use a lot around here: Leaders like it bigger, most people prefer it smaller.

Your church has many strengths — video venues is one of them. In what other areas of ministry do you feel North Coast has pioneered or made a strong impact?

We've been very successful with our small group ministry. We average 80 percent of our weekend adult attendance in our midweek small groups. Most of these groups are what we call sermon-based. That's a lecture/lab model that digs in deeper into the application of the weekend message. We've been doing it for over 20 years and it's incredible what happens when the entire church is focused on the same thing at the same time. We simply take the message and try to get people talking about what it means in their day-to-day life. It's been really interesting to me that when churches come to look at our video venues, a huge percentage of them walk away wanting to know more about our sermon-based small groups than the venues.

Where do you see North Coast going in the near future?

We're actually not a very goal-driven church. We have never had any numerical goals and we still don't. Our goal is simply to keep providing an empty seat and empty parking space to accommodate the people God brings to us. We will continue to expand our venues to reach different subcultures and mindsets — and we will continue to plant venues in areas where we sense a Macedonian call. We certainly don't have a big map in which we put little pins to describe areas we're planning to conquer. We just wait until there's a pocket of people who say "Come and help us," and we'll do everything we can to help them.

CE