



Multi- Congregational Philosophy

Introduction

A MULTI-CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH is one that holds services in multiple geographic locations. The Austin Stone Community Church currently has six congregations that meet at six separate locations on Sundays across the city of Austin, Texas. Our heart in pursuing a multi-congregational model is rooted in our desire to plant churches.

Before The Austin Stone was planted, the primary methodology of the day was pragmatic: build a really big building and achieve as much numerical growth as possible. Numerical growth is not a bad thing, and we believe that healthy things grow numerically. But we believed God was planting our church to multiply, not just grow. Early on, we wanted to be a church that not only had 2,000 people coming on Sundays, but also to be a church that planted 200 churches and sent out 2,000 goers.

And the Lord has been doing exactly that. As of 2020, there are more than 7,500 people attending our church to worship together and be equipped for the mission of His calling. God is allowing us to participate in numerous church-planting efforts not only here in Austin, but also among people groups throughout the nations. In addition, He has been using our church to send out countless goers to those people groups on the outer edges of this world and right here within the city of Austin.

Primary Programs

As of spring 2020, The Austin Stone has six different congregations meeting at six different locations throughout Austin:

1. **Downtown**—Austin High School

2. **North**—1150 McNeil Rd.

3. **Northwest**—9001 FM 620 North

4. **South**—Paredes Middle School

5. **St. John**—For the City Center

6. **West**—916 S. Capital of Texas Hwy.

These congregations gather in three primary ways:

1. Worship services

2. Missional Community groups

3. Equipping environments

Is Multi-Congregational Biblical?

Before assessing the biblical nature of a multi-congregational church model, it is essential to first define *local church*. Is it primarily defined, as some would argue, as the church gathered corporately, or is it primarily defined as a people sharing a common confession and covenant? At The Austin Stone, we are theologically convinced that **the church is primarily God's regenerate people who share a common confession and a common covenant**. While gathering is a function of the church, it is not the primary definition of a local church.

The word for *church* used in the Bible has a wide range of meaning. The word's basic meaning is "the called" or "the gathered." The word *church* is used to describe many different forms of the church:

1. **The Universal Church**—*Church* is used to describe the totality of Christians that God has “called” or the universal church built on the teaching of the apostles and prophets.¹
2. **House Churches**—*Church* is also applied to groups of Christians that met in homes,² and the word *household* was also used to talk about such a “house church.”³ These house groups may have been something like a large community group meeting, but with the regular practice of celebrating a communion meal together “from house to house” (Acts 2:46).
3. **Church of the City**—In a city, the people were known as the church of the city, and this was true for churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Cenchrea, Corinth, and Philippi.⁴ Paul would teach and appoint elders in each of these churches, and each church would gather as an assembly to worship and to publicly remove unrepentant members.⁵
4. **Churches in a Region**—The biblical authors would refer to multiple churches in a region.⁶ Perhaps these are simply groups of city churches. In at least one instance, Christians scattered throughout a large regional area (Judea, Galilee, and Samaria) are described as a church.

Though this list of how the word *church* is used is not exhaustive, one thing is clear: people are the foundation of the church. People gather in many different ways, and church is not necessarily the assembly or gathering of people at a specific time and location.

Confession and Covenant

WHILE THE GATHERING TIMES and locations may differ, the people of a local church must have some things in common: (1) a confession—a statement of shared beliefs, and (2) a covenant—a commitment to one another for living out those beliefs. At The Austin Stone, our common confes-

sion as a multi-congregational church consists of our Affirmation of Faith, and additionally includes adherence to a common culture, budget, and polity.

1. Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Galatians 1:13; Ephesians 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32; Philippians 3:6; Colossians 1:18, 24; Matthew 16:18

2. Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2

3. Romans 16:10, 11; 1 Corinthians 1:11

4. Acts 8:1; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:27; 15:3-4, 22, 30; 18:22; 20:17; Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 11:18; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 4:15

5. Acts 14:23; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 5:4, 12; 11-14; Matthew 18:17

6. Acts 15:41; 16:5; Romans 16:4, 16; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 7:17; 16:1, 19; 2 Corinthians 8:1, 18-19, 23-24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Galatians 1:2, 22

Common Theology

The common theology of The Austin Stone is explicitly developed in our full [Affirmation of Faith](#). Our common theology can be briefly summarized by the following foundational beliefs:

- The Bible is the Word of God.
- There is one true and living God who exists in three persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.
- God created all things for His glory.
- Men and women were created in the image of God.
- God alone is the architect and finisher of our salvation.
- The Holy Spirit gives gifts to His children.
- The church consists of all who have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ for their eternal salvation.
- Heaven and hell are real places.
- Jesus Christ will one day return to establish His kingdom.

These theological convictions are close-handed issues for the eldership of The Austin Stone. Each statement is a clear definition of our beliefs on different topics and defines what distinguishes The Austin Stone and her associated ministries from people who share different views. In addition to our current Affirmation of Faith, we have five doctrinal distinctives that are important to enumerate in our current church culture (each distinctive is developed fully in the associated “Doctrinal Distinctives Philosophy”):

1. The God-centeredness of God

2. The sovereignty of God in salvation
3. Complementarian relationships
4. Credobaptism
5. Missional church

Common Culture

The Austin Stone is a movement of congregations and ministries that is united in theological conviction and a common distinctive culture. The culture of The Austin Stone is expressed and codified in our Culture Map. The cultural distinctives of The Austin Stone will be shared across the different congregations and ministries, but the expressions of that culture may be distinct in some activities and language as is contextually appropriate for both the leaders and people of the ministries.

Common Budget

The Austin Stone still shares all financial resources in common with one another. While different congregations and ministries may bring in more or less revenue, every ministry of our church is aligned with our mission. We believe that together we are capable of far more than we would be independently, and our shared resources allow us to be more effective in ministry and mission and efficient in the use of resources.

Common Polity

When it comes to how the church is organized, The Austin Stone believes deeply that the Scriptures teach two offices in the local church (elders and

deacons) and covenantal church membership. We summarize our polity as elder-led, deacon-served, and congregationally affirmed.

Other Theological Considerations

IN SOJOURNERS AND STRANGERS: THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH,⁷ Dr. Gregg Allison summarizes the particular theology of being multi-congregational in this way:

A theological case for multisite churches can be developed from two areas: the church's missional characteristic and its unity. Multisite churches, grasping the missional identity of the church, are designed with the specific missional purpose of reaching their city/region with the gospel as a community; this is often done with sites targeting specific areas of or groups within a city. In a sense, multisite church missionality reverses the trend that takes people out of their missional/relational networks in order to attend the church and establishes campuses at multiple sites so as to affect all the neighborhoods in the city/region...

The New Testament emphasis on unity, cooperation, and interdependence certainly addresses the sanctified reality that should characterize churches individually and, as I have proposed, in close association with one another. Because of the commonalities—e.g., mission, vision, finances, leadership—shared among their sites, multisite churches embody these biblical virtues in concrete ways. Specifically, the

pastoral teams of the various sites engage in ministry together by meeting regularly, sharing ministerial resources, encouraging personal accountability, fostering pastoral cooperation through the preparation of sermons together, addressing problems as a team, praying together, and the like. Members in general also experience this unity as they have a well-developed sense of a common presence of their church throughout the various venues, all of which are focused on the same worship, the same mission, and the same community, undergirded by shared resources.

These two theological bases will be expounded upon below.

The Church and Mission

One conviction that drives our multi-congregational philosophy is mission. Jesus commanded His disciples to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). And before ascending into heaven, Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both

7. Dr. Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), chapter 9.

in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We must consider our mission as a church to be spreading the good news of the gospel to all people in all places, and that includes reaching every pocket of people in Austin, Texas. Like Paul, we want God’s Word to “spread rapidly and be glorified” (1 Thessalonians 3:1), and we pursue the increase of the church (Acts 9:31). As a multi-congregational model is a permissible form of church, and with our local body grounded in a common confession and covenant, we believe that one biblical and advantageous way of spreading the gospel, increasing, making disciples, and being His witnesses to the ends of the earth is through being a multi-congregational church.

The Church and Unity

In addition to missionary effectiveness, the multi-congregational church model is a display of the unity of the local church in a particular region. Unity in the local church is both God’s desire and also fulfills God’s purpose of the church’s corporate witness to Christ. In John 17, Jesus prays this:

²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²² that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

(John 17:20-23)

Christ prays demonstratively to the Father for the unity of the whole church, asking that it would reflect the unity in the Trinity. He also articulates the purpose of that unity as a testimony to Christ’s coming and God’s love. Through a multi-congregational model, The Austin Stone can display a compelling unity in both doctrine and love for one another that is a unique testimony to our city about the power of the gospel.

Multi-Congregational Principles

EACH CONGREGATION of The Austin Stone will adhere to the theological, cultural, financial, and polity convictions. Additionally, the following convictions shape our multi-congregational philosophy:

1. We are multi-congregational in order to contextualize ministry to an area of Austin.

Because the city of Austin shares many things in common across groups of people, we believe that much of our culture and practices will translate quite well to many pockets of people in our city. That being said, each congregation of The Austin Stone is a unique group of peo-

ple who gather together, and different points of emphasis may need to be made at different times. Contextualization means that congregation leaders take the primary things we hold in common and apply them with wisdom in plurality over time to unique people. We consider both those who are already gathering with the congregation, as well as those who reside within the spheres of influence that might be reached by each congregation. Sound contextualization as a congregation requires clarity on our convictions, accurate knowledge of God's people in the congregation, and also a clear sense of mission as a congregation to reach the lost. Sound contextualization also requires awareness of the dynamics of church size and the historical approaches of The Austin Stone in given seasons of ministry.

2. We are multi-congregational to remain faithful to being a biblical church in a context.

Staying multi-congregational lets us be smaller even as we get bigger. We are able to stay intimate as a people as we continue to grow in the overall movement. A congregation must seek to be faithful to all the mandates of Scripture regarding the local church, while practically utilizing the shared assets of the movement to accomplish those ends. Also, being a people committed to covenant community requires intimacy and knowledge of one another. While the movement may be able to keep accurate records of those entrusted to our care, shepherds of a local congregation are far more able to know the stories of the saints, as well as be poised to shepherd reactively in cases of need. Simply put, if elders do not know the sheep, they cannot feed them, lead them, or protect them. Each congregation will then be led by a plurality of elders, served by a plurality of dea-

cons, and uphold a congregation of regenerate members who partner with the congregation and the movement to see disciples, communities, leaders, and churches multiplied to the glory of God.

3. We are multi-congregational in order to steward financial resources and physical space.

Though sites can be expensive to start up, the overall failure rate of congregations, coupled with the rapid ascendance to fiscal health at a particular congregation, leads The Austin Stone to see a unique stewardship in the model. Through a multi-congregational model, we are able to utilize the resources of the wider movement to more efficiently and cost-effectively launch a new congregation. Additionally, through the leveraged resources of the movement, we are more capable of stewarding both temporary and permanent physical spaces toward greater usage and care. With respect to temporary spaces, through our pre-existing relationships with facility owners, we are more effective at negotiating sustainable rental rates, mitigating potential risk factors in contracts, and maximizing the relational investment required for a mutually beneficial partnership. With respect to permanent spaces like the For the City Center, we are able to have a broad base of potential partnering organizations, a sound process for vetting candidates for shared spaces, and much better infrastructure for tenant support.

4. We are multi-congregational to prevent stagnation through sending.

Historically, churches drift from being mission-driven to self-focused after seasons of growth. The Austin Stone realizes the very real possibility of that in our own life as a church, and a multi-congregational model helps us fight against that natural drift by focusing on sending. Each of our congregations can be a blessing to the city and participate regularly as a sending church right in our own backyard. Tangibly, planting new congregations can help keep our maturing congregations on mission by reinforcing and necessitating sending and support. We actually believe it is good and healthy for a church to regularly participate in sending, even though it can be difficult for some churches to accomplish. Our sending congregations are blessed when another congregation is planted by an opportunity to refresh their vision and through opportunities for new leaders to emerge.

5. We are multi-congregational to make better decisions in plurality.

With multiple elders and leaders expressing ministry and mission in various contexts, we gain compounded plurality that allows for much healthier and wiser decisions to be made. While not every congregation may need the exact same solutions at the same time, all the congregations reap the benefits of the others through shared learning and communication. We believe that congregations will be healthier, individual leaders will be more capable, and ministries will continue to thrive because of the potential for shared learning and collaboration in such a rich environment of relationships.

Conclusion

We believe that through multiple congregations, we can replicate the theology, culture, and leadership of The Austin Stone in a local church expression in different locations throughout Austin. These congregations will help us to more faithfully make disciples, cultivate communities on mission, develop leaders in the kingdom, and plant other autonomous churches to the glory of God.