

Church Merger Key Success Factors

Instructors: Jim Tomberlin & Warren Bird

Church mergers have occurred at an unprecedented scale across North America, with over 40% of multisite campuses emerging through mergers. The pandemic accelerated this option for many of the 250,000 stuck or struggling churches in North America. Many churches are discovering they can have a fresh start or new leadership by merging with a multisite church or church planter needing a facility.

In this workshop, Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, authors of *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work—Expanded & Updated*, provided insights into navigating church mergers effectively.

Key Takeaways from the Session

Understanding Church Mergers

- A **church merger** involves two or more churches combining to become one church under unified leadership.
- Historically, mergers were seen as a last resort, but now they are a **strategic tool for revitalization and multiplication**.
- The multisite movement has shifted the merger model from "**one plus one equals one**" (a failing approach) to "**one plus one equals three**" (a thriving new entity).
- Mergers allow churches to **retain community presence, revitalize struggling congregations, and extend Kingdom impact**.

Three Critical Questions for a Successful Merger

- **Is this merger possible?**
 - Typically determined by **senior leaders and church boards**.
 - Alignment in theology, vision, and mission is essential.
- **Is this merger feasible?**
 - Evaluated by **addressing 25 key issues** related to governance, leadership, finances, facilities, culture, and congregation expectations.
 - The health of the churches involved matters more than size.

- **Is this merger desirable?**
 - Involves **congregational engagement and decision-making**, usually through a vote.
 - Requires **buy-in from key leaders, staff, and the congregation**.

Four Models of Church Mergers

1. **Rebirth Merger** – The joining church is fully absorbed into the lead church, adopting its leadership, vision, and structure.
2. **Adoption Merger** – The lead church integrates key aspects of the joining church, such as staff or ministries, into its existing model.
3. **Marriage Merger** – Two churches come together as equals, forming a new identity together (this is rare and challenging).
4. **ICU (Survival) Merger** – A last-ditch effort to save a church that is at risk of closing, often requiring a full restart.

Key Factors for a Healthy Merger

- **Leadership Clarity:** One church must clearly lead, and one must follow. “Partnership” language can create unrealistic expectations.
- **Vision Alignment:** The joining church must embrace the lead church’s mission and future direction.
- **Facility Stewardship:** Not all church buildings need to remain worship spaces—some may become community centers, schools, or ministry hubs.
- **Congregational Buy-in:** Success is not retaining everyone but engaging those who believe in the shared vision.

Quotable Quotes

- **"Successful church mergers are like a dance where one leads, and the other follows."** – Jim Tomberlin
- **"Many churches would rather die than change—and most will die unless they choose to adapt."** – Warren Bird
- **"A merger is not a takeover. It is an opportunity for a second life and a new future."** – Jim Tomberlin
- **"If the 1950s ever come back, many churches are ready. But we need to be ready for 2050."** – Warren Bird

Action Steps

For Churches Already Multisite

If you are a multisite church, what should you do after this session?

- ☐ **Assess potential merger opportunities** in your area—especially with struggling churches looking for renewal.
- ☐ **Build relationships** with pastors in your community through networking and shared ministry events.
- ☐ **Create a merger-friendly culture** by preparing your staff and congregation to receive new locations and members well.
- ☐ **Develop a clear merger process** using the **25 key issues framework** from [Better Together](#).
- ☐ **Avoid rushed decisions**—ensure thorough evaluation, legal due diligence, and leadership unity.

For Churches Considering Multisite

If your church is considering multisite expansion, how should you approach mergers?

- ☐ **Define reality**—determine if your church is **strong, stuck, or struggling**.
- ☐ **Read [Better Together](#)**—it provides a step-by-step guide to successful mergers.
- ☐ **Begin informal conversations** with struggling churches that might benefit from merging.
- ☐ **Establish a prayerful and strategic team** to evaluate opportunities.
- ☐ **Think beyond survival**—ensure that the merger serves the mission of God and not just an attempt to save a failing church.

Final Thoughts

Church mergers are becoming a **major driver of church multiplication** in North America. When done well, they can **extend the Kingdom, revitalize communities, and maximize resources**. However, they require **prayerful discernment, careful leadership, and an unwavering commitment to a shared vision**.

For further guidance, read [Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work](#) by Jim Tomberlin & Warren Bird.