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# Increasing Impact: Churches That Are Setting a New Course

by Warren Bird

It was a day Greg Nettle had dreamed about—the morning he would stand before the **RiverTree Christian Church**, Massillon, OH ([www.rivertreechristian.com](http://www.rivertreechristian.com)) congregation and announce plans to build a \$70 million campus on farm property he and church members had prayed about for 10 years.

The building fund had been growing. Members were energized. RiverTree would finally get the space and prominent location it so desperately needed.

But Greg awoke with a sick feeling.

“I had a dream that I was standing before God, and he asked me what I did with all the money people gave,” Greg says. “All I could say was, ‘Here’s the campus we built.’ ”

So on the day of the big announcement, Greg instead asked his congregation what it would think about staying uncomfortable and crowded, and instead allocate the building fund to help at-risk children.

The crowd erupted into a standing ovation.

“We feel we’re closer to the heart of God than we’ve ever been,” says Greg, who has led RiverTree to sponsor well over 1,000 children through Compassion International. “The more we give away, the more our faith has grown. People want to be part of a generous church that’s going to make a difference.”

RiverTree provides a powerful picture of a pivotal issue for “rising influence” churches—a group of pioneering North American congregations identified by Leadership Network staff based on innovation in ministry, and high impact in their community and among pastoral peers.

One distinctive is that leaders of these churches want to be less bound by buildings and debt, yet they depend on facilities and finances to serve growing congregations and carry out their externally-focused ministries. This is only one of several important distinguishing characteristics of today’s “rising influence” churches.

## More on This New Leadership Pattern

You can learn more about several different significant trends that are driving high-influence churches in “*The Heartbeat of Rising Influence Churches*”—a resource that explores trends, predictions, questions and helpful resources that are guiding some of America’s leading congregations. [REVIEWERS: that article now follows . . . ]

# The Heartbeat of Rising Influence Churches

By Warren Bird

A strange thing happens at **Mountain Christian Church**, Joppa, MD ([www.mountainchristian.org](http://www.mountainchristian.org)) every time they raise the bar on what it means to be an obedient follower of Christ: More people buy in and the congregation grows.

“The more effort we put on growing up disciples, the more we grow,” says pastor Ben Cachiaras. “Our biggest numerical growth happens whenever we’ve put the greatest effort in growing our people into maturity.

“We keep thinking it’s going to be one of those times where Jesus said, ‘This is a hard saying,’ and people will walk away. But this generation is hungry for it. They’re ready for something hard. They say, ‘If that’s what it means to follow Jesus, I’m in!’ ”

Ben’s church mirrors what’s happening across a wave of what we’re calling “rising influence” churches—North American congregations identified by Leadership Network staff that are showing repeated innovation in ministry, and high impact both in their local communities and among pastoral peers.

Along with a heartbeat to challenge their people to radical obedience, these churches are marked by an intense desire to reach the lost and serve the marginalized in their communities. Their ministries are similar in passion to those in churches of the previous seeker-targeted generation, but today’s version often differs in approach.

Multisite ministry is almost a given in these rising influence congregations. The larger the church’s attendance, the more likely it is to be multisite – whether urban, suburban or rural.

And most are wrestling with the dilemma of being a thriving church that requires growing budgets and facilities—but with a desire to shed as much debt and overhead as possible so that more of their finances can be deployed into local and global ministry. As the Leadership Network Advance profile of Greg Nettle at RiverTree Christian Church, Massillon, OH ([www.rivertreechristian.com](http://www.rivertreechristian.com)) highlighted, churches often take creative and sometimes radical steps designed to reduce staff and facility costs as the major portion of their church budget.

One constant among these churches that are blazing the trail for the next generation: God is continuing to build His church in fresh and innovative ways, especially in how they are reaching young adults. I’m in awe at what God is doing. I walked away from almost every interview with one these rising influence leaders thinking, “If my wife and I lived in your town, we would want to be part of your church!”

## Metrics

- **Spiritual responsiveness can be found in every corner of the country.** My travels took me to on-site interviews with more than 50 pastors in over 20 states (plus I did a number of additional interviews by Skype or phone). From New England to Florida, from California up to Washington, and numerous points in between, I learned about churches that were making a huge difference for Christ. The sharpest geographic contrast happened one day in Ohio as I went from rural to urban. In the morning I interviewed a pastor in the heartland of the state. They had bought farmland for their growing congregation, and kept the silo which they painted with their church name. Later that day I interviewed a pastor in downtown Cleveland. Both reported a great responsiveness to the gospel in their communities through their churches.

- **Likewise spiritual responsiveness is not limited by race or economic level.** In my complete interview group the average senior pastor age was 39 and the average attendance was 4,346 and growing. Churches ranged from two years old to over 200. I spoke with leaders whose churches were predominantly white, black, Asian and Hispanic, as well as those leading multiethnic churches. The parking lots of some churches were full of tricked out SUVs and luxury cars, while at other places my subcompact rental car was one of the nicer vehicles in the area. Across many races and at every economic level, pastors were finding new opportunities to win a hearing for Jesus Christ.

### Sidebar- What Characterizes High Influence Churches?

*Compared to other churches, these innovative leaders tend to:*

1. Be better read and better networked with other entrepreneurs both in and out of the church
2. Spot new opportunities, start new things, develop fresh ideas – and experiment continually with them
3. Have a highly effective senior leadership team, supportive board, and high morale congregation
4. Excel in connecting with the younger generation – children, youth, and young adults
5. Have a contemporary worship style for one or more of their services
6. Demonstrate a clear vision, alignment, and sense of divine calling
7. Focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ – seeing people come to faith, grow in their faith, mature in their faith, and reproduce themselves in others

## Trends

- **Rising influence pastors are deeply concerned about connecting with, reaching and serving lost people.**

Many rising influence pastors answer my “what keeps you up at night?” question the same as Todd Cook, pastor of Sagebrush Community Church, Albuquerque, NM ([www.sagebrushcommunity.com](http://www.sagebrushcommunity.com)). But Todd may be even more intense than most in what disturbs his sleep.

“It upsets me to no end, even infuriates me that my state and town don’t have a relationship with Christ,” Todd told me. “For whatever reason, the church hasn’t communicated the incredible love story of the Gospel in a way that compels people toward it.

“Worse, too many people think we’re not even relevant—like driving by McDonald’s looking for hamburgers, but not thinking McDonald’s will have a hamburger.”

Todd makes a strong case for churches that are paving the way in evangelism. These church leaders may all voice it in different terms, but they’re all concerned about the people their church has the potential to impact. And they desperately want to have a profound impact on the lostness of their communities.

Their Dad’s church was likely more geared toward *attracting* those lost souls. They cared deeply about connecting with them and inviting them to come and see. Today’s church pastor strategizes more about how they can go to *where lost people are*, minister the love of Christ and relationally invite people to be a part of Christian community.

- **These pastors continually raise the bar of discipleship, though each church differs in how the specific challenge looks.**

When I talk with rising influence leaders about discipleship, I often hear words like “radical,” “extreme,” and “culture-challenging.” Many leaders, such as Ben Cachiaras highlighted above, even carry a bias against becoming a large church if it goes a mile wide with newcomers, but it keeps them an inch deep in their faith. “We want to prove that we can become a genuine community, a missional movement of Christ followers, more than the show – a nd a place where somehow you can monitor our spiritual vitality,” Ben says of his 4,200-attendance church that was founded in 1824.

Ben says Mountain Christian Church is making strides in deep-seated discipleship by “taking seriously” both halves of the Great Commission—both the evangelism of “making disciples,” and the next step of “teaching them to obey.” He adds: “We’re very relationally based, and every relationship is a context for discipleship. We’re tapping into the longings about the church’s effectiveness to make disciples.”

- **Service to the local community is standard practice, and it continues to increase.**

Outreach is the heartbeat of **Water of Life Community Church**, Fontana, CA ([www.wateroflifecc.org](http://www.wateroflifecc.org)). They strive to touch people where they need it most so they will feel Christ’s love in a manner they will best understand. Giving people a basket of groceries when their cabinets and stomachs are empty demonstrates the church’s relevance, creates a desire in them to know why the church would do this, and sometimes opens the door for people to accept Jesus into their lives. As the church blesses others it grows both the congregation’s heart and the kingdom of God.

In any given month Water of Life might raise money through a blood drive for orphans in Cambodia and Thailand, raise funds for Goodwill, including truckloads of donations, feed over a thousand people weekly at a downtown food warehouse, sponsor adopt-a-block outreaches where several thousand people are served, host a “God’s Party” where money is given away for those in financial need, and feed hundreds of children fed all over the world, especially through the church’s relationships in Nigeria, Kenya, Cambodia and Haiti.

“I’m always trying to figure out ways to expand what we’re doing,” says pastor Dan Carroll. “We’re always training our people to do outreach. No one does outreach quite like we do, so we’re gearing up to start a conference to train others in how we do it.”

Water of Life isn’t alone. Motivated by the view that caring for the poor and sharing the gospel are both essential, rising influence churches are striving to transform their neighborhoods and the people in them. “Service is the best evangelism you could do,” Ben Cachiaras says. “When ‘evangelism’ becomes more than a program and instead a whole way of life centered in service, then the light of the gospel goes everywhere in the community, wherever we are. We teach our people to see needs and get after it. That’s where evangelism is happening and that’s magnetic.”

- **Multisite continues to open new doors of ministry and growth, becoming almost as normal as having multiple services.**

Multisite is working for church plants in New England because it fits the largely Catholic region’s “parish” mentality. Elsewhere prisons and halfway houses are becoming new multisite venues. Church leaders such as Pastor Bob Merritt of Eagle Brook Church in Hugo, MN ([www.eaglebrookchurch.com](http://www.eaglebrookchurch.com)) are utilizing a multisite strategy to envision reaching an entire metropolitan area, in his case, Minneapolis-St Paul. In other words, multisite has more traction than ever and it is becoming almost a given strategy and constant door opener for high-influence churches.

“We need to keep our donors excited, keep the vision hot for them, keep them engaged,” Bob says of Eagle Brook Church, which has grown in attendance from 350 to 15,000 during his 10 years as senior pastor there.

The church opened its fifth campus this fall with a four-service launch in a high school. What's next? A sixth campus, of course, as part of a dream to "circle" the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul. "It's a big circle," Bob says.

In churches like Eagle Brook, multisite is becoming as common as starting an early morning service. The audience at each location may be different. The service and venue may look somewhat unique at every stop. But in the end, it's still one church, and rising influence churches are very proficient at launching new locations.

### **SIDEBAR: Looking toward "New Horizon Trends" in 2012**

During 2012 Leadership Network will feature a number of special reports, video interviews and podcasts designed to highlight and explore the roughly 100 interviews I conducted with high influence senior pastors across 2011. Each new release will be highlighted in Leadership Network Advance (free subscription: [www.leadnet.org/update](http://www.leadnet.org/update)) and also announced via Twitter (both @leadnet and @warrenbird). They will likely include:

- First impressions: overview of the kinds of churches I visited and pastors I met
- What keeps high-influence pastors awake at night
- How the senior pastor's role changing in large churches
- What pastors say "must" happen in the next few years in their churches
- Where front-line pastors find new ideas
- Wild and crazy things pastors are doing, especially younger pastors
- Megachurch senior pastor succession

## Questions

- **How can we rethink church finances?** Rising influence leaders want to know how do they "feed the monster" of a growing, thriving church *and also* accomplish all their goals in serving their community and beyond? While this question is not new, it is perhaps more intense than the interest of their predecessors because of their enlarged focus on externally focused ministry, especially to those who are more economically disadvantaged. Likewise global missions has become far more than sending and supporting missionaries. Churches today are likely to send short-term missions teams to serve in a two-way partnership, a development that also has serious financial implications.

The nature of these booming congregations demand modern, attractive—and expensive—facilities and budgets that only swell year over year. But at the same time, pastors of these churches deeply desire to *give away* as much as possible. "I lay in bed thinking about all the ways I would like to liberate money to help in overseas missions, but we don't know what to do to," Dan Carroll says. Like other leaders, Carroll wants to be less bound by buildings and debt, yet the church depends on facilities and finances to get the job done

- **How do we best structure for the future?** On all my interviews I asked pastors to describe the structure of their senior team. The reply for the vast majority began with, "Well it's changing next week" or "we're in transition right now" or some other statement that reflects fluidity. While they all have a highly effective senior leadership team (see sidebar, "What Characterizes High Influence Churches?"), they all seem to be making up their structure as they go along, always trying to improve their existing approach to better fit current growth and future opportunities.

## Predictions

Many of the rising influence churches I interviewed are looking for new, meaningful, biblically based ways to describe and measure spirituality. Some are exploring new ways to engage the arts in pathways of spiritual growth. Others are setting benchmarks for their community becoming a better place as their people "become Christ" in the marketplace and nearby neighborhoods. Still others are trying to define organic models of how people can reproduce themselves in others as a measure of their maturity in Christ.

This discontent seems healthy, and God just might use it to produce the greatest generation of Christians – and churches – that our era has known.

## About Leadership Network

Leadership Network's mission is to accelerate the impact of 100X leaders. These high-capacity leaders are like the hundredfold crop that comes from seed planted in good soil as Jesus described in Matthew 13:8. Leadership Network is a division of OneHundredX, a global ministry with initiatives around the world.

To learn more about Leadership Network go to [www.leadnet.org](http://www.leadnet.org)

## About 11 for 11

The idea behind 11 for 11 is to profile eleven specific ministry innovations (one per month) during 2011. The total series will also include Global Connections Churches, Rapid Growth Churches, Trends in Collaborative Leadership, Large Church Senior Pastors, Missional Renaissance, Externally Focused Churches, Multisite Churches, Next Generation Pastors, Leadership Development, and Generous Churches.

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## About the Author

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*Church Morph: How Megatrends Are Reshaping Christian Communities* by Eddie Gibbs (Baker Academic, 2009)

*Cracking Your Church's Culture Code: Seven Keys to Unleashing Vision and Inspiration* by Sam Chand (Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series, 2010)

*The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants* by Scott Thumma and Warren Bird (Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series, 2011)

*Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* by Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird (Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series, 2010)