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One church, two locations

By [Erik Tryggestad](#) | [The Christian Chronicle](#)

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“This is a new concept in Churches of Christ,” Pitman Creek minister Steve Roseberry said. “In the name of autonomy, we’ve been reluctant to take this on.” Unlike a traditional church plant — where a congregation establishes a separate legal entity — the resulting congregation will share a common staff, eldership, budget and vision, Crisp said. Instead of seeing the merger as the end of his church’s autonomy, Roseberry said that becoming a multi-site church demonstrates the kind of unity discussed in 1 Corinthians 12, which describes the church as one body of believers made up of many different parts. “We’re all members, one to another,” Roseberry said. “That extends across congregational lines.”

ANATOMY OF A MERGER On the Sunday of the merger announcement, members at Highland Oaks navigated long rows of stackable chairs, looking for a seat at the early worship service. The church is renovating its auditorium to accommodate the growing number of souls who drive up to an hour through Dallas’ suburban sprawl to worship. At Pitman Creek, a small group of church members was spread out across the 700-seat auditorium. After the announcement, they joined hands and sang hymns, celebrating two baptisms. Pitman Creek’s elders approached Highland Oaks last year to explore ways they could partner to help the small congregation. Established in 1949, Pitman Creek grew to nearly 800 members at one point in its history, but a series of trials, including disagreements about worship styles, caused the membership to drop. The neighborhood around the building matured, Roseberry said, and young families moved north to new churches in Frisco, Allen and McKinney. “Once a church has plateaued and is declining, it’s very difficult to turn it around,” Roseberry said. After prayerfully considering their options, leaders from both congregations agreed not to sell Pitman Creek’s facility, a 50,000-square-foot campus about a mile north of the busy George Bush Tollway. “For the sake of the kingdom, it would be a shame to lose that site as an outpost of the kingdom of God,” Highland Oaks minister Tim Spivey said. Before the merger, the Pitman Creek church will host its final service in April or May, Highland Oaks elder Barry Packer said. “They have a rich history, and it is important to us that this transition be one of positive reflection on what God has done in their church over the past years,” he added. Four of Highland Oaks’ 14 elders and their wives began worshipping with the Pitman Creek church recently, Packer said.

SATELLITE CHURCH, OR CHURCH PLANT? For many religious groups, multi-site churches are routine. In a 2005 study, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that 27 percent of America’s megachurches — Protestant congregations with weekly attendance above 2,000 — used multiple sites, and many more planned to launch satellite campuses. In Rochester Hills, Mich., leaders of the Rochester church had talked for years about their desire to plant a church, said John Laster, the church’s equipping minister. But recently “it became apparent that the idea was more of a fantasy,” he said. The congregation with about 1,000 members and three worship services wanted to reach its community without losing members of its leadership team. “When we looked at the stewardship of resources, a multi-site strategy was considerably more viable than planting, growing larger on our existing site or relocating,” Laster said. The church identified about 40 families who live in Macomb County, east of Rochester Hills, and plans to invite about 100 members to help launch a satellite campus, named Christ Church, on Sept. 9. This fall the Southwest church in Jonesboro, Ark., is launching what minister Jimmy Adcox calls a “hybrid, multi-site, church plant.” The church will start a separate worship service on the campus of Arkansas State University, a school of about 12,000 students about three miles from the church building. Though under the leadership of the Southwest church, the ministry will have its own characteristics, Adcox said.

CHURCH ‘ISN’T DEFINED BY THE BUILDING The Highland Oaks church also has planted churches. In 2004, the church received the assets of the former Austin Street church in Garland, Texas. Highland Oaks used some of the money from the dissolution, totaling \$1.27 million, to plant independent churches, Spivey said. In recent years Highland Oaks has helped launch a Spanish-language congregation in the Dallas area and has partnered with several California churches to launch a congregation that meets in an inner-city neighborhood of Hollywood. Whether following the new, multi-site model leads to additional sites for the Highland Oak church, the process gives members the chance to reexamine the definition of “church” itself, Spivey said. “The church isn’t defined by the building it meets in, but by that which transcends brick and mortar,” he said. “We’re all going into this with the conviction that we can do more for God’s glory together.” April 1, 2007

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