What comes to mind when you read the words “church merger”? For many, particularly those who are strong on the autonomy of local churches, merger suggests struggling churches making a desperate bid for survival. Such mergers are like circling the wagons to prevent, or at least delay, further losses. But an increasing number of church mergers involve vibrant churches seeking to be more effective in advancing the Kingdom of God. In “Better Together,” Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird report a “wave of mission-driven church mergers”. In these mergers, “two local churches...leverage their common DNA and complementary differences to generate greater synergy for a stronger regional impact.” Such mergers are “vehicles of change, not preservers of the status quo.”

Tomberlin and Bird write from experience (former pioneered the multi-site strategy at Willow Creek and consults widely with merging churches) and research (Bird is the Research Director at Leadership Network). They are realistic about the challenges associated with merging churches, but share a number of stories of successful mergers that have resulted in significant missional impact and church growth. The stories include churches of various sizes, styles and settings.

Noting that “Intensive Care Unit” mergers (between two declining churches) are very unlikely to succeed, the authors describe three more promising models. In a “Rebirth” merger, a declining church is absorbed by a more vibrant church. The members of the absorbed church find renewed life as part of their new church. “Adoption” mergers see a “stable of stock” church integrating into the vision and strategies of a stronger growing church. The adopted church adds things to the adopting church that enrich the family they have become. Other mergers that resemble “Marriage” see two healthy growing churches combining under a united vision and reconfigured leadership. Merging churches need to be clear about the type of merger they are undertaking to reduce the risk of future conflict.

Whatever the type of merger, the key to success is a united compelling vision centered on growth through mission. The authors note that merging to do mission more effectively has the potential to expand the impact of vibrant churches and to revitalize plateauing or declining churches. The new wineries provide capacity for new wine.

The authors encourage churches considering a merger to consider three crucial questions:

- Could we accomplish more together than separately?
- Would our community be better served?
- Could the Kingdom of God be further extended by our merger?

Another key to successful merger is relationships built on mutual respect and trust. Initially this needs to occur between the churches. Pastors because the resolution of staff tenure and roles is a critical issue, particularly in “manage” mergers. The authors discuss this and other practical issues including governance and property (surveys reveal multi-site mergers have a higher level of success and acceptance than merging onto one site).

The authors detail the stages in transitioning to a merged church and provide helpful insights into how to manage the relational and organizational challenges. They remind us that “churches don’t join churches; people do.” Not surprisingly, they highlight the need to “over-communicate” at every stage. The book includes some helpful examples of how merged churches have done this successfully using “Frequently Asked Questions” documents. These are a useful tool for churches undergoing any significant change.

In the authors’ experience and research, successful mergers involve a “lead church” and a “joining church.” The “lead church” provides the primary culture that will continue with the joining congregation becoming more like it. Either church may initiate a merger. The book offers guidance on how to determine if your church is a good candidate for a merger and what to look for in a merger partner. One aspect of this is churches facing the reality of their current state — strong, stable, struggling or declining? Another is being clear about the church’s vision, mission, values and strategy. The clearer a church is about its identity, beliefs and how it functions, the better positioned it is to seek and approach compatible churches.

The authors note that every church merger needs a facilitator that both congregations can trust to help them navigate what can be a messy journey. The Baptist Union of Victoria’s Church Health and Capacity Building Team can provide this service to churches.

Beyond its inspiring stories and helpful wisdom, the great value of this book is that it puts merging on the table as a positive option for churches that are looking to increase their capacity to advance the Kingdom of God. More churches should explore the potential of doing better together.