

Anna Baker:

Well, hey, everyone. Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host, Anna Baker, the senior marketing manager at Vanderbloemen. In today's conversation, our founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen, talks with Jeff Surratt, who's previously held positions at Seacoast Church, Saddleback Church and Exponential, and Greg Ligon, who's been with Leadership Network since 1997, about their experience as pioneers in the multisite church movement.

Anna Baker:

Greg and Jeff have both worked in ministry for over 30 years, and have spent much of that time shepherding churches through the process of growth and expansion. They've written books about the multisite movement and have recently released an ebook entitled *Multisite Reimagined*, about the significance and potential for multisite churches during and following COVID-19. With an understanding of how church models are changing post pandemic, Greg and Jeff offer advice for church growth and adaptation for ministry leaders.

Anna Baker:

As we continue to navigate the impacts of COVID-19, we hope that, as a church leader figuring out where your ministry will go next, you'll find this conversation informative and insightful. Without further ado, here's William's conversation with Jeff and Greg.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, hey, everybody, and welcome again to another one of my chances to have conversations with friends. You all are listening in on some of my favorite times in my work, is getting to learn from and visit with some of the folks that I've known a long time, and boy, oh, boy. This pandemic that has been part of our life for so long now has really given us a chance to reframe and rediscover, and a lot of things that weren't moving have gotten accelerated and a lot of things been disrupted. Twenty or thirty years ago, it really wasn't a conversation people were having. We were just starting to get used to having it and then the pandemic hit, and oh, my goodness.

William Vanderbloemen:

There are lots of people that do a great job of multisite, but today I've got two good friends, Jeff Surratt and Greg Ligon. I'll just let you guys introduce yourselves. Maybe you can tell how we ended up knowing each other, if either of you can remember back that far, and tell us a little bit about yourself. Greg, tell us your story.

Greg Ligon:

Thanks, William. Appreciate the opportunity to be with you today. I've had the opportunity to have a front row seat at multisite for now 20-plus years. Just happened to be in the right place at the right time. A story for another time, but it was actually an assignment given to me by Dave Travis as kind of a, "If you'll take one for the team," assignment. He came back a year later and I said, "No, I'm sticking with this one. I'm loving the work that I'm doing." It's been really fun to see God, the work that God has done through the multisite movement.

Greg Ligon:

In recent days, as you've mentioned, we're in the middle of this COVID situation. We're seeing some things that in some ways were actually begun before the virus hit, and certainly have been accelerated by that. Jeff and I have had the opportunity to take a look at some of those things, and we're excited to be with you today.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's great. I really should have flipped this around, because for his entire life, Jeff has been tired of going after Greg, but Jeff Surratt, the better-known of the Surratts in the kingdom, is with us. Jeff, tell us your story.

Jeff Surratt:

Yeah. Thanks William. It's fun to be with you. Yeah, I am. I may not be the best known, but I am the greatest of the Surratts. Honestly, humility is what makes me the best.

William Vanderbloemen:

Pardon the interruption, but I just love sharing this line every now and then. My very favorite Ted Turner quote ... and you can appreciate this ... Ted said, "If I had a little more humility, I'd be perfect."

Jeff Surratt:

That's excellent.

William Vanderbloemen:

There you go.

Jeff Surratt:

I got started with multisite when I worked for my brother Greg, who was the founding pastor of a church called Seacoast out in Charleston, South Carolina. We couldn't figure out how to expand that. We were out of room. The city wouldn't let us grow. We just decided to open up another auditorium in another location and see what happens. It went from there.

Jeff Surratt:

About the same time, I met Greg. Greg was at Leadership Network, and he was starting the very first cohort of churches that were just trying to figure out what in the world this multisite thing was called. We didn't even have a name for it, I don't think, back then. It was just churches having more than one location. From there, Greg and I became friends. We got an opportunity to write a couple of books together about multisite. We've been on this journey together in different ways. Gosh, Greg, it's been almost 20 years now that we've connected around this topic.

Jeff Surratt:

William, honestly it's been fascinating over the last year, a little less than a year, I guess it's been, of every church in America suddenly became multisite. Every church was meeting in one church, in homes all over town. All of a sudden, video teaching became not just something for megachurches, but almost all churches began utilizing video teaching. It was interesting, because many of us discovered that there are ways that the video teaching is effective. Of course, multisite isn't video teaching, but it does allow you to do some things.

Jeff Surratt:

As Greg and I just started comparing notes with the different churches that we were talking to, we started finding some commonalities of what we saw emerging. We said, "Let's really dive into this." We gathered some of the better known multisite pioneers from all over the country that we had known for 15 or 20 years. We said, "What do you guys see? What are you guys thinking?" It was fun.

Jeff Surratt:

Out of that, we had written an ebook together, and more than the ebook, it's just we're really seeing God do some interesting things that churches are doing in an innovative way. Back to that idea from 20 years ago of what would it look like to continue to be one church, just continue to work to be together, but to actually meet in multiple locations? That's the gist of what we're we're working on right now.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. That's really cool, and it's changed. There are no new ideas. It's just how you take the idea and adapt it to the new day, right? I have a friend of mine who's Catholic who's like, "William, we were the first multisite, sorry. We've been using a prayer book for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years. This is not new," but the day is new.

William Vanderbloemen:

With the new day, as you mentioned, I read several places, but one stat that I've seen many, many times is pre pandemic, churches in North America, Protestant churches in North America, 10% of them were streaming their services live online every week. Now, something like 10% are not. You've had this massive acceleration. The landscape shifted. What are you guys seeing as some new realities for multisite that you may not have been able to name a year ago?

Greg Ligon:

Yeah, right. Actually, March 10th to the 12th, I was in Atlanta with a group of next-gen pastors, working with Leadership Network still at that point in time. These guys, we'd just had an afternoon together. We were at dinner that night, and one of the guys looked up from a text or an alert that he'd gotten on his phone and said, "Oh, my gosh." We said, "What's going on?" He said, "Well, they've just canceled the crowds for March Madness." Little did we know 24 hours later ... not even that long, we gathered the next morning ... we would no longer be able to have worship services in our sanctuaries and our worship places later that week.

Greg Ligon:

We've always at Leadership Network done these processes, where we talked about what the scenarios might look like. In that situation, we moved from scenario planning to reality TV. About half the guys didn't have a campus, or didn't have anything substantial beyond maybe playing the recording of the previous week's service. From the 10th through the 15th, most of them were able to stand up an online campus.

Greg Ligon:

Of course, that's one of the things that we saw early on, is everyone had to do that. We saw a lot of really amazing innovation, I think, that happened during those first four to six weeks in terms of how do you do that effectively, moving beyond just streaming a worship experience to really beginning to look

at what might that experience look like that would more fully engage the audience, those that were coming. In the early days after the pandemic and after the closings of the buildings, we were seeing really high levels of engagement. That's one of the things I think that was begun or was accelerated as a result of the pandemic.

Greg Ligon:

As we've moved through these last now six, seven, eight, nine months now, and particularly about a couple of months in when churches began to turn their attention to moving back into live, getting back into the live spaces and being back together in worship, I think some of the innovation, early innovation that happened in that season, has been lost, or perhaps it'd be better put as just put on hold a bit, because there was this challenge associated with how do you resource for that. We've got a staff that's been accustomed to producing live experiences. How do we do that and do the online?

Greg Ligon:

I think that's one of the growing edges, probably one of the most important growing edges, I would say, in terms of this Multisite Reimagined. As we move into this next season, I think churches are going to have to figure out how do you do both. I think the pandemic has forced us to think about how we do each of those. As it forced us to think about how we do live experiences, certainly it's forced us to think about how we do online church, and what does discipleship and what does engagement and connection look like in that environment.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. Jeff, what are you seeing that's a new reality?

Jeff Surratt:

Yeah, what's fascinating. I was with a pastor yesterday of a great church out here in Colorado, and pre pandemic, they were packing their building out five times on a Sunday morning, looking hard at going multisite, trying to figure that out. Of course, the pandemic hit, had to figure out online. What's fascinating that I'm seeing that he is doing, and this is just a picture of what I'm seeing across the country, is they now have shifted hard toward house church, and it was something that wasn't even on their radar. House church, microsite, whatever you call it, and they have shifted hard into that.

Jeff Surratt:

Now, once a month, they ask all of their people to attend house churches. They just started it within the last three months or so. They have, I think, 35 house churches up and running. One of them meets in a barn, and the barn, they're baptizing people out in the barn. A lot of the people that are leading the house churches have never been to ... we're getting a little bit before we started recording. Journey Church is a popular name, so this was Journey Church. A lot of the people that lead house churches have never set foot inside a building that the church owns.

Jeff Surratt:

Here's what's interesting to me, is this idea of house church has been around as long as the church has existed. The New Testament church obviously was a house church, and movements have risen and fallen and risen and fallen. The idea of a microchurch really was popular. Just the terminology became popular about three or four or five years ago, at least with the people that I hang out with. Now what I'm seeing

is I think we see an impetus, that this isn't just something over on the fringe, it isn't something just a few people are experimenting with. People are seeing it not just as a reaction to we can't all gather together. They're seeing as this might be the most evangelist thing we can do to be both a gathering church that's fairly large, but also a house church movement. I think the potential there is tremendous.

Jeff Surratt:

Again ... and I don't want to get into the area, William, where obviously you're much more the expert on ... but like Greg mentioned, for online church to see that happen, we have to see shifts in mindset. We have to see shifts in staffing. We have to put our resources in a different direction. I think that's where the ... and this is just the way I'm wired up ... that's where the fun is. The fun is figuring out how do we do well what we did before, but how do we shift into this new online reality, this new house church reality, and some of the other things that we're seeing happening right now?

Greg Ligon:

I love how you said moving from a reaction to being more proactive about how this model might work. Actually it's one of the phrases we used early on in the movement, is the multisite movement, at least in the modern version of that that started 20 years ago was pretty much a reaction to being out of space. Large churches were going, and they were just trying to figure out how they can continue to grow when they didn't have the ability to add more services or add more square footage in the geography where they were.

Greg Ligon:

As they began to experiment with multilocations and video and those kinds of things, they realized it actually worked. It moved from being this reactive strategy to being very much of a proactive movement, and that's where the movement actually really began to grow. That's one of the things that excites me. I'm seeing some of that again.

Greg Ligon:

Multisite has really become a part of the normal in many, many cases, and even more so in recent days, but I'm also beginning to see this new wave of innovation saying, "Okay, this is working. There's some things about this online thing that are working. How can we take advantage of that? How can we be proactive about using this as a way to advance the gospel?"

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I think one of the first images that comes to mind, Greg, when you use the word normal is around here, we started out working mostly with churches that someone like Leadership Network would have worked with, really large churches that were willing to try a new idea, hire somebody to help you find your staff person. That's a pretty new idea, so the larger churches. Five, six years ago, I said, "Look, we're putting the flag in the dirt. We're saying we're going to serve."

William Vanderbloemen:

Everybody said, "We're going to serve the small church?" I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no. We're going to serve the normal-sized church." The churches that we've worked a lot with are not normal. Normal is ... and I want to get to a question about multisite, because multisite had pretty much been reserved for

larger churches. I know it was starting to trend down toward churches of 800 or 1,000, but that's still really abnormal.

William Vanderbloemen:

Normal is my mother's church, where they've got 150 people show up on a weekend. It's a great church. It's been around. It's a little younger, slightly younger than the United States. It's been around and established. They've got a brand-new pastor, a young guy who's killing it, but his first year ... he arrived in January and then, "Oops." I said, "How did you end up to start streaming online?" He said, "Well, my wife has a camera." His wife held the camera. His kids, this-size kids, were helping lead worship, whatever that meant, since the organ wasn't working.

William Vanderbloemen:

Multisite is now something that the normal-sized church is having to all of a sudden have an accelerated learning curve in. Are you guys seeing this happen? If so, what are some lessons? Because there's undoubtedly people that are listening that are in normal-sized churches that are like, "How does this apply to me?" Does that make sense?

Jeff Surratt:

Yeah, it definitely does. I think one of the biggest learnings right away for normal-sized churches was how do we get this thing online, and I think, like your mom's church, discovered getting there is not that hard. That is not a huge hurdle. It can be as big a hurdle as you want. You can go buy broadcast equipment, and you could do all that. You don't have to. If you have an iPhone, you can be streaming on Facebook this afternoon. I think that's the first step.

Jeff Surratt:

I think for normal-sized churches, what's cool about that is that's just the tip of the iceberg of what you can do. Now, all of a sudden there is an opportunity for a normal-sized church to present all kinds of content in all kinds of formats, so on YouTube and Facebook, on your own page, to go way beyond that Sunday experience of just watching the music and the pastor.

Jeff Surratt:

Something I heard Bobby Gruenewald, who Greg and I remember when Bobby walked into a cohort that we were having in Oklahoma City and he said, "Hey, guys, I think we're going to try to do church online." We all said, "Dude, that's insane. Who would do that?" Turns out he was right, we were wrong. Bobby said the other day that the key of online is not amount of content that you put out, or even quality of content. It's the connection that you build.

Jeff Surratt:

For a normal-sized church, you can build that connection. It's people connecting with each other. It's engagement. Honestly, I think the ... I want to say a foreign word that I'll say incorrectly, so I don't want to say that word ... but the currency, I think, going forward, more than how many people sit in our seats or even how much money do people put in the offering, it's how engaged are people in the things that we're doing.

Jeff Surratt:

For a normal-size church, you don't need to go spend a ton of money on technology and all those things. What could you be putting out content-wise, and then how can you help build engagement among your congregation and the new people that you meet? Honestly, I think this is one of the most exciting multisite pieces for normal-sized churches. Again, like you said, they don't need to be a megachurch that goes and spends \$10 million to expand. They can do it with an iPhone and a Facebook account.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. Greg, how about you? What are you seeing for that normal-sized church?

Greg Ligon:

Yeah. I mean, just to echo some of what Jeff said, very much it's the accessibility is there. That was one that there's been ebbs and flows of that throughout the multisite movement is based on the technology, but now the technology is accessible to anyone. I mean, my mom, who's 85, has an iPhone, and she's on Facebook every day. Literally, Facebook and her online church has been her lifeline during this pandemic.

Greg Ligon:

The ability to do that, and then the variety of mediums in which to do that. Facebook tends to attract a little bit older audience, as we know, but every platform, Instagram, and ... I'm drawing a blank. I'm an old guy. Instagram.

William Vanderbloemen:

You're on Facebook, aren't you, Greg?

Greg Ligon:

That's right. I was trying to grab YouTube. All those platforms make it accessible to a multitude of audiences, or a multiplicity of audiences.

Jeff Surratt:

I would say too, staying on that same normal-sized church, the other thing that we're seeing and it's going to accelerate ... and I know, William, you've been involved in this a lot ... but is this whole idea of church mergers. I think that we are going to see new flavors of church merger, not simply, "Well, if we don't merge with somebody, we're not going to be able to pay our bills."

Jeff Surratt:

That's going to happen and it's going to accelerate, but I think we're also going to see healthy, normal-sized churches saying, "You know what, if we were to connect, if we would connect with this other church, we could do more ministry. We could be more effective in our community. We could reach a generation that we're not reaching. We're healthy, but we ... " to borrow the title of our friend Warren Bird and Jim Tomberlin's book, Better Together, " ... we could be more effective if we did this together." We're seeing that accelerate and I think it's going to just really ramp up from here, of normal-sized churches joining either with another church of their size, but probably more likely into a network around maybe a larger church.

Greg Ligon:

Yeah. We did research about five years ago in terms of mergers, and at that point in time about 30% of all multisite campuses were a result of a merger. Then about 18 months ago we did a follow-up study, and that follow-up study indicated that had moved to 40%, and of course that was pre pandemic. I think that that number is just going to increase.

Greg Ligon:

You mentioned Warren and Jim's book, Better Together. I think just recently, in their rerelease of that book, they provided a new statistic. I think it was like 82% or 83% of churches that had done a merger will do it again. It's been a very positive experience for them.

William Vanderbloemen:

I would bet. I don't think we've seen it yet. You guys correct me if I'm wrong, but I would bet we will see, in the next two, three years, the merger of two very large churches. We're yet to see that. Really we haven't seen mergers. We've seen adoptions and acquisitions, but a real ... like in Houston, two big oil and gas companies actually coming together. I think we're going to see that happen. I think it's going to come, because the church has become distributed into so many homes that now the question of locale is not nearly as sacred as it once was. I could be wrong.

Jeff Surratt:

I agree. I think we are going to see that. I think that a piece of that comes from the business world, where there are companies that Amazon has bought and yet that company has maintained their identity. I was listening the other day to the CEO of Whole Foods. Amazon of course owns Whole Foods. The CEO who started Whole Foods, and he talked about how Whole Foods still exists as its own brand within Amazon, and yet they now have the distribution and the marketing of Amazon. The two companies, they're wholly owned by Amazon, but they still exist with a separate identity.

Jeff Surratt:

I think that's what we're going to see, William, more that we haven't seen where you're talking about two large churches. I think we definitely are going to see it. I think sometimes, those churches may maintain a little bit of a different identity. We look at the Marriott model, where Marriott has multiple brand names within their umbrella, and yet they're all part of the Marriott family. I think we're going to see families of churches, where the expression, maybe it's an urban church, maybe it's suburban, maybe it's rural, but it all fits within this.

Jeff Surratt:

What we've seen mostly is cloning, right? If you're going to be multisite, you're going to be a clone of the original. I think we're going to see more of, "No, we're not looking for clones. We see an advantage of doing this together. We also see an advantage of individual identities." I think under that kind of scenario, honestly, William, I could more likely see very large churches coming together, where neither church is saying, "We're going to have to dump all of our identity and become a part of this other church."

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. I think they used to call that denominations.

Jeff Surratt:

Right. Right. I agree with you. I think what's interesting is I've had people say, "Hey, isn't multisite just a new form of the denomination?" My answer to that is for many denominations, there was a positive reason that it formed. For some of them that reason has disappeared, but they're still hanging on. I don't think there's anything wrong with a new ... and this is a guy with a long nondenominational background. I see no problem with us moving into the positive pieces of denominations being brought into a new reality.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, now we are wandering into staffing, because by my read, particularly growing up Presbyterian, we didn't have a Bishop, we had the Presbytery, which the U.S. Government was designed after Presbyterian polity. Imagine Congress being the Bishop, right? That might make you terrified, but the idea was in your local region, who's going to be the quality control around who comes in and who goes out as ministers, and are they going to match theologically?

William Vanderbloemen:

They don't have to do things like we do them, but are they going to match theologically, because that's the Presbyterian calling card? Over time ... and I'm being critical of my own home ... but over time it really just turned into a shared pension plan. The theology and the quality control is gone, because there was no one quality. It was too ubiquitous. I think it's a very natural tendency.

William Vanderbloemen:

I've said all through the pandemic, the first thing God curses in all of the Bible, He says it's not good for us to be alone. He actually cursed that before sin entered the world. I mean, think about that. It is totally natural for churches to not want to be alone and to want to be gathered into groups and into tribes. We've seen it, whether it's the ARC Conference or the Exponential Conference. It's all just forerunners of the same sort of thing. It's going to be really cool to see how that comes out.

William Vanderbloemen:

If I'm a pastor, I'm sitting and listening. "Okay, these are cool ideas, but how is this going to impact my life in the next couple of years? Give me a couple of takeaways." Greg, you go first. What would you say are one or two things that the pastor out there listening today ought to be aware of that are going to be coming across the horizon that might affect their life?

Greg Ligon:

Yeah. Well, I'll go back to something I said a little bit earlier in the process, and I think that digital is here to stay. It is going to be a part of the church moving forward, and so a pastor has to figure that out. I understand there's some huge challenges and huge questions in terms of how that actually is going to find its final expression, or its expression even this next season.

Greg Ligon:

I mean, we're in this scenario. We have been for the last year. We can only plan a couple of weeks at a time, and even those plans get blown up. I think the reality for today, for 2021, as you're beginning this year, is that you have to begin to think about how you're going to engage digital, engage digitally online, and what that's going to look like for your church.

Jeff Surratt:

Yeah. I agree. Part of that is exactly what you're doing with this podcast, William, where you're dropping a season and it's on demand. That's the reality of the church. Church is no longer the thing that you go to on Sunday morning for most people. It's an on-demand, 24/7, just like Netflix and podcasts and everything else, so how do I adapt to that?

Jeff Surratt:

I think the other thing is what we were just talking about, moving beyond a silo picture of what the church is and really figuring out not just how do I open more campuses, but I love what you said, William, is that churches, it's not good to be alone. I think for any pastor who is wrestling with this new reality, part of that new reality is how can I move out of this silo. How can our church become, whether it's joining a network, starting a network or it's just a relational piece, but how can I raise the temperature?

Jeff Surratt:

Because we have seen in the pandemic, churches that are isolated and totally alone, just like people that are isolated and totally alone, they don't do well. It's the churches, at least in my experience, that have been well networked, the pastors that have been well networked, are the ones who are doing well and they're innovating and they're healthy. It's the guys and the ladies that are leading by themselves that are struggling. I think that's not just a pandemic thing.

Jeff Surratt:

I think that's where God is leading the church. For any individual pastor, the question I'd be asking, one, is are we figuring out this asynchronous, 24/7 digital piece? Then the other piece is how are we working together both within our networks, our denomination or relational? How are we moving to more of a together rather than alone picture of church?

Greg Ligon:

One other thing I'd say real quickly ... and I can't take credit for this one, I have to tip my hat to Dave Travis, my colleague at Generis ... but he's begun to talk about the move in the church from platform to pastoral, and now an increasing and accelerated shift to personal. The megachurch in its heyday was really about the platform. It was what happened in the room. It was the big show we got ready for every weekend. Then there's been a slower move to the pastoral, that really got accelerated with COVID. We began to hear people say the old school's the new school. We're calling everybody in our church, you know? We're picking up the phone, calling everybody in the church.

Greg Ligon:

I think now, as we move into this new season, it's going to have to become even more intimate at the personal level. How do we really help people be disciples that disciple other people? How do we really help people care for one another in significant ways? That's going to be part of the challenge. I mean, we know the challenge. Although the reality is digital, we know some of the challenges associated with that, right? It's not all rosy. There's some difficulties with that, in terms of connection and relationship and those kinds of things. That's going to give us all the more reason to really double down on what does it mean to really equip people to be personally serving one another in this season.

William Vanderbloemen:

We've been preparing for a search for a whole new kind of pastor. I mean, there's a laundry list of things. Can you preach into a phone and also to a room, right? That's going to have to happen. Above all other things, it's exactly what you just said. I've not heard Dave mention this.

William Vanderbloemen:

We've said, in the old-school way of talking about the threefold office of Christ, the prophet, the priest and the king, that prophetic, or the, "Give me good content," that's just not even something you can offer as a local church anymore, because there's good content everywhere. I mean, it's out there. It's out the window.

William Vanderbloemen:

I was talking to my pastor earlier today, and he said he just keeps getting emails from people saying, "If you would just preach like this pastor, watch this link, we would have a revival." He's like, "This is killing me." The content, it's out. The leadership stuff, a lot of that can now be outsourced, a lot of things. What cannot be outsourced is the priestly gift of getting right up next to the sheep. I think you're going to see a rise of a hyperlocal ministry and a priestly gift, pastors who smell like their sheep.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, digital's great. I'm all for it. We just finished a series. I got to my new church and so did the pandemic. It's pastors who spent their first year in ministry in the pandemic, and the line that kept coming up ... I don't even know who said it first, but it's just so horrible ... is you had a virtual honeymoon. I mean, who wants that? That's like the worst. That destroys the entire purpose of the honeymoon, right? Digital can only go so far. I think the up close and personal is going to be where it's at.

William Vanderbloemen:

Hey, guys, I really appreciate this. The name of the ebook, Jeff, tell me.

Jeff Surratt:

Multisite Reimagined.

William Vanderbloemen:

Multisite Reimagined. Is there a quick link where people can go to receive that?

Greg Ligon:

Yes. You can go to [generis.com/multisite-reimagined](https://www.generis.com/multisite-reimagined). [Generis.com/multisite-reimagined](https://www.generis.com/multisite-reimagined).

William Vanderbloemen:

We'll include all those links in the show notes. If you're not on the list for the show notes, just go to [vandercast.com](https://www.vandercast.com). We won't beat you up with a bunch of email, but we will send you a preview of what's coming and links to everything that we've mentioned today.

Anna Baker:

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