

This book is a rare treasure of godly wisdom, totally scriptural, inspired by the Spirit, and born of practical experience. These principles will revolutionize and energize any church to reach its full potential. Every pastor *must* read this book! It is destined to be a classic.

Bill Bright, Founder, Campus Crusade for Christ International

I have hundreds of books and articles on the church. If I had to pick just one of them, I would choose Rick Warren's book. If I could, I'd make it required reading for every seminary student!

Jim Henry, President, Southern Baptist Convention

This is not just another "how to" book by a successful megachurch pastor. It shows just how far off the mark are many critics of "church growth" and "seeker-sensitive" approaches. Study this book carefully! Rick Warren knows how *the Lord* builds the church.

George Brushaber, President, Bethel College and Seminary

The church has been waiting for this book for a long time, and it is worth every minute we've waited. It is destined to become a classic in the literature of the new paradigm of church health.

Leonard Sweet, Dean, Drew Theological Seminary

BALANCED! ... PRACTICAL! ... POWERFUL! You will want to read and use this book.

Ken Hemphill, President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Rick Warren is the architect for the church of the 21st century, and this is the blueprint!

Bruce Larson, Minister at Large

This is the best book I've ever read on how to do church in today's world.

Lyle E. Schaller, Parish Consultant

Warren addresses *the* crucial question for churches: how to be both faithful and effective.

Marshall Shelley, Executive Editor, *Leadership*

This is absolutely the best book I've read on church growth! It needs to be read by lay men and women, not just pastors. It can save your church from decline, division, and death. I want the core leadership of every new Southern Baptist congregation to study this book.

Charles Chaney, Vice President, New Churches, Home Mission Board, SB

In every era, God raises up leaders to pioneer new possibilities for God's people. God gave Rick Warren the gift of vision and discernment, and the results can be seen in Saddleback Church and in thousands of other congregations around the world that have applied his teaching. Oh! If we Methodists (and other mainline too) could realize how much we need to learn from Rick Warren!

Ezra Earl Jones, General Secretary, United Methodist Church Board of Discipleship

*The Purpose-Driven Church* is the most biblically and practically balanced book I've read on healthy church growth. It is compelling, convicting, and convincing.

Henry J. Schmidt, President, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

This book is the blueprint for the authentic church of the 21st century. It is probably the best practical application of genuine church growth principles in America. It will be required reading for all Nazarene pastors in the K-Church project.

Bill Sullivan, Director, Church Growth, International Church of the Nazarene

This book contains as much proven church growth wisdom as any book ever written from the local church experience.

George G. Hunter III, Dean, School of World Missions, Asbury Theological Seminary

Dr. Warren's insight that the critical issue facing the church is not church *growth*, but church *health* is revolutionary! This book is choc-o-bloc with ideas that are so practical and down-to-earth that any pastor who fails to correct his perspective on the church should probably leave the ministry.

Archibald Hart, Dean, School of Psychology, Fuller Seminary

This is the best book on church growth I've yet seen. It is biblical, practical, and visionary; it is Christ-centered; it focuses on church health; it dispels myths about how churches grow; it gives down-to-earth help and a truly scriptural model for ministry. Every pastor and church leader should read it—and I say this about few books.

Lewis Drummond, Professor of Evangelism, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

I predict *The Purpose-Driven Church* will be *the* book for churches desiring to grow and prosper in the 21st century. It is required reading for all my classes. Put it at the top of your must-read list.

Gary McIntosh, Professor, Talbot School of Theology

I have waited for this book for a long time. It is the best of Rick Warren—his vision, clarity, energy, and effective articulation of concepts.

Joe Ellis, Distinguished Professor of Church Growth, Cincinnati Bible Seminary

One hundred years from now, young seminary students will have this book on their shelf beside their Bible and Spurgeon's *Lectures To My Students*. It will last for generations because its principles are timeless.

Bob Roberts, Pastor, Northwood Church, North Richland Hills, Texas

Destined to be a classic, the key to the greatness of this book is its passion and balance. Every student in the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism will be required to read it.

Thom S. Rainer, Dean, Billy Graham School, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Every seminary graduate should be handed this book along with a diploma! I will see that every Golden Gate graduate gets a copy. Healthier, happier, and more fruitful churches will result from applying these principles. I wish Rick had written it forty years ago when I began my ministry.

William Crews, President, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary

Rick Warren is building one of the great churches in America by getting back to biblical basics—not the *old methods* but the *eternal purposes* found in the Bible. Every pastor needs to read this book carefully to see how it is done.

Elmer L. Towns, Dean, School of Religion, Liberty University

This is the clearest, most comprehensive, and courageous book I've ever read on how to build a great church.

Walt Kallestad, Pastor, Community Church of Joy (ELCA), Glendale, Arizona

At the risk of sounding extravagant, I would, without hesitation, trade all my volumes on church life for this one book. Nobody does healthy church growth better than Rick Warren. He is its premier teacher and practitioner.

Jim Reeves, Faith Community Church, West Covina, California

*The Purpose-Driven Church* is perhaps the crown jewel of church growth literature. Every pastor and lay man who loves the church will do themselves a favor by reading this masterpiece.

Randy Pope, Pastor, Perimeter Church, Duluth, Georgia

If you want to dream great dreams, grow a healthy church, and accomplish God's purpose in your generation, this book is for you. The amazing story of Saddleback Church reads like a fresh encounter with the book of Acts.

Jack Graham, Pastor, Prestonwood Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Saddleback Church's growth is the miracle story of this century. I highly recommend *The Purpose-Driven Church* to every pastor who wants to build a great New Testament church.

Jerry Falwell, Chancellor, Liberty University

I'm praying that every pastor will read this book, believe it, be prepared to stand corrected by it, and change to match its sound, scriptural wisdom. Rick Warren is the one all of us should listen to and learn from.

Robert H. Schuller, Pastor, The Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, California

Rick Warren has been used to challenge my thinking in the area of church growth in an incredible way. This book is on the must-read list for every pastor.

Adrian Rogers, Pastor, Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee

God has used Rick Warren as an effective instrument, and this book reveals why. He's kept grounded on eternal values and rooted in the Vine of ultimate truth—Christ Jesus.

Jack Hayford, Pastor, The Church On The Way, Van Nuys, California

Rick Warren's insights made me wish I could begin my ministry all over again. This book is so biblical, so well-organized, and so well-articulated, it made me exclaim, "I wish every Christian understood that!" I hope every United Methodist will read this book.

Richard B. Wilke, Bishop, United Methodist Church

This book could have as significant an impact on the future of Christianity as any book released in recent years. Every church leader in America needs to read it.

Ronnie W. Floyd, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Springdale, AR

No other pastor in America is more effective in cultivating both conversions and spiritual maturity than Rick Warren. This book should come with a triple-your-money-back guarantee—it's that good!. I'm making it required reading for every leader in our church.

David W. Miller, Pastor, The Church at Rocky Peak, Chatsworth, California

At last ... in print ... the real secret of Saddleback. And best of all, it is filled with practical and applicable principles to help us all become more contemporary without compromise.

O. S. Hawkins, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

This book is one of the finest books on ministry ever written. It is *meat*, not theory. There isn't a church in America that can't benefit from its wisdom. I can't wait to take my board through it.

Larry Osborne, Pastor, North Coast Church (Evangelical Free), Vista, California

*The Purpose-Driven Church* gives us the comprehensive picture. It demonstrates biblical reflection, theological integrity, spiritual perception, evangelistic passion, pastoral concern, and refreshing common sense.

Eddie Gibbs, Associate Rector, All Saints' Parish, Beverly Hills, California

After all the church growth hype by people who've never done it, this book is a breath of fresh air. It's hard to argue with biblical principles and the voice of experience. Get this book and do what it says!

Jerry Sutton, Pastor, Two Rivers Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee

The chapter "Designing a Service for Seekers" alone is worth the price of this book. If only I had been taught these principles when I was in seminary!

James Merritt, 1995 President, SBC Pastors' Conference

If you want to examine the differences between healthy and unhealthy churches from a mature, experienced perspective, this is the book to read.

Paul D. Robbins, Exec. Vice President, Christianity Today, Inc.

I consider Rick Warren to be one of the greatest thinkers in the church today. In this book, he shows how passion, skill, and God's guidance can create a world-changing congregation. It will prove to be a classic!

Dwight "Ike" Reighard, Pastor, New Hope Baptist Church, Fayetteville, Georgia

*The Purpose-Driven Church* philosophy changed my life and the life of our church. Rick Warren is a genius with the ability to convert complex truths into understandable concepts.

Ed Young, Jr., Pastor, Fellowship of Las Colinas, Irving, Texas

This is a book we all need to *reread* once a year. Its insights will be applicable for generations to come. Each chapter causes you to pause often and pray.

Doug Murren, Pastor, Eastside Foursquare Church, Kirkland, Washington

**Rick Warren**

*The*  
**PURPOSE  
DRIVEN  
CHURCH**

**OVER 1 MILLION SOLD WORLDWIDE**

**Every Church Is Big  
in God's Eyes**

 **ZONDERVAN®**

**ZONDERVAN.com/  
AUTHORTRACKER**  
*follow your favorite authors*

ZONDERVAN

*The Purpose Driven Church*

Copyright © 1995 by Rick Warren

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook.

Visit [www.zondervan.com/ebooks](http://www.zondervan.com/ebooks).

This title is also available in a Zondervan audio edition.

Visit [www.zondervan.fm](http://www.zondervan.fm).

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Warren, Richard, 1954 -

The purpose-driven church: growth without compromising your message and mission /  
Rick Warren.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-20106-9 (hardcover)

1. Church and growth. 2. Evangelistic work. I. Title.

BV652.2.W38 1995

253—dc20

95-40707

---


All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Other Scripture versions quoted in this book are listed on the page after the dedication page, and that list hereby becomes part of this copyright page.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

*Interior design: Joe Vriend*


*Printed in the United States of America*



I dedicate this book  
to the bivocational pastors around the world:  
shepherds who faithfully and lovingly serve  
in churches that aren't large enough  
to provide a full-time salary. You are the  
true heroes of the faith in my view.  
May this book encourage you.

I also dedicate this book  
to seminary and Christian college professors:  
educators called to prepare the next generation  
of pastors. What an awesome, holy task you have!  
May God bless and honor your ministry.

Finally, I dedicate this book  
to the pastors and staff who have served  
with me at Saddleback Church.  
It has been a great adventure together.  
I love you deeply.



# BIBLE VERSIONS

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked LB are taken from *The Living Bible*. Copyright © 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked TEV are taken from *Today's English Version*. Copyright © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992.

Scripture quotations marked NCV are taken from the *New Century Version*. Copyright © 1987, 1988, 1991 by Word Publishing, a division of Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked Phillips are taken from *The New Testament in Modern English*. Copyright © 1958, 1959, 1960, 1972 by J. B. Phillips.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.



# CONTENTS



*Foreword by Dr. W. A. Criswell* 11  
Surfing Spiritual Waves 13

## Part One · Seeing the Big Picture

1. The Saddleback Story 25
2. Myths About Growing Churches 47

## Part Two · Becoming a Purpose-Driven Church

3. What Drives Your Church? 75
4. The Foundation for a Healthy Church 85
5. Defining Your Purposes 95
6. Communicating Your Purposes 111
7. Organizing Around Your Purposes 121
8. Applying Your Purposes 137

## Part Three · Reaching Out to Your Community

9. Who Is Your Target? 155
10. Knowing Whom You Can Best Reach 173
11. Developing Your Strategy 185

## Part Four · Bringing In a Crowd

12. How Jesus Attracted Crowds 207
13. Worship Can Be a Witness 239
14. Designing a Seeker-Sensitive Service 251
15. Selecting Your Music 279
16. Preaching to the Unchurched 293

Part Five · Building Up the Church

- 17. Turning Attenders into Members (*Congregation*) 309
- 18. Developing Mature Members (*Committed*) 331
- 19. Turning Members into Ministers (*Core*) 365
- 20. God's Purpose for Your Church 393

Scripture Index 398



## FOREWORD

God could not have given me a more beloved and effective “son in the ministry” than Rick Warren. I first met Rick in 1974 when he was just a lad—a crazy college student who drove 350 miles to attend the California Baptist Convention in San Francisco. Through the message at that convention, God called Rick Warren to invest his life as a pastor-teacher. I am honored beyond words to be called his “father in the ministry.”

In 1980, Rick graduated from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and moved with his wife to southern California to begin Saddleback Church in the living room of their home. He began with just one family. Now, fifteen years later, Saddleback Valley Community Church is recognized as the fastest-growing Baptist church in the *history* of America. It averages over 10,000 people in worship attendance each week on a beautiful, spacious seventy-four-acre campus. This is sufficient evidence that Rick Warren knows whereof he speaks. In 1995, Saddleback was selected as the Key Church of the Year by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

*The Purpose-Driven Church* is the exciting story of Saddleback. This book explains the convictions, principles, and practices that have been mightily used by God in building one of the most effective churches on the North American continent.

Rick Warren's ministry is grounded and rooted in the infallible and inerrant Word of God, Spirit-anointed servant leadership, and a genuine heart of love for his people. Some would call Saddleback a "megachurch," but this church has grown *without compromising the mission or the doctrine* of a New Testament church. What God has done at Saddleback is amazing.

During the past two to three decades, many churches have relied primarily on biological and transfer growth, but not Saddleback. It is committed to the idea that vibrant churches in the twenty-first century must be wholeheartedly committed to conversion growth. Rick Warren understands the mind-set of the unchurched of this world. If churches are to be successful in evangelizing our society, which is becoming more pagan by the day, they must learn to think like an unbeliever.

To his credit, Rick discourages other churches from trying to become "photocopies" of Saddleback. Rather, he encourages local churches to penetrate our materialistic, humanistic society with the transforming message of Christ by using contemporary and relevant methods without compromising the truth of the Gospel. That's what this book is all about.

*The Purpose-Driven Church* will help *every* local church, regardless of size, to recapture the mission of the New Testament church. My prayer to God is that thousands of pastors, staff members, Sunday school teachers, and spiritual leaders will read this book. I heard a fellow say once, "Minds are like parachutes; they work best when they are open." That's the way to read this book!

May God bless you in whatever ministry assignment you have. Be faithful to Christ and his church until he returns.

W. A. Criswell, *Pastor Emeritus*  
First Baptist Church  
Dallas, Texas

# Surfing Spiritual Waves

*I am the LORD your God, who churns up  
the sea so that its waves roar.*

Isaiah 51:15

Southern California is well known for its beaches. It's the part of the country that popularized the music of the Beach Boys, beach party movies, and of course, surfing. Although the surfing fad has evolved into skateboarding for most American kids (who have no surf), the *real* sport is still popular in southern California. Many of our schools offer physical education courses in surfing.

If you take a class on surfing, you'll be taught everything you need to know about surfing: how to choose the right equipment; how to use it properly; how to recognize a "surfable" wave; how to catch a wave and ride it as long as possible; and, most important of all, how to get off a wave without wiping out. But you'll never find a course that teaches "How to Build a Wave."

Surfing is the art of riding waves that God builds. God makes the waves; surfers just ride them. No surfer tries to create waves. If the waves aren't there, you just don't surf that day! On the other hand, when surfers see a good wave, they make the most of it, even if that means surfing in the middle of a storm.

A lot of books and conferences on church growth fall into the "How to Build a Wave" category. They try to manufacture the wave of God's Spirit, using gimmicks, programs, or marketing techniques to create growth. *But growth cannot be produced by man!* Only God makes the church grow. Only God can breathe new life into a valley of dry bones. Only God can create waves—waves of revival, waves of growth, and waves of spiritual receptivity.

As Paul pointed out about the church at Corinth, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, *but God made it grow*” (1 Cor. 3:6, italics added). Notice the partnership: Paul and Apollos did their part, but God caused the growth. The sovereignty of God is a factor overlooked in almost all current church-growth literature.

Our job as church leaders, like experienced surfers, is to recognize a wave of God’s Spirit and ride it. It is not our responsibility to *make* waves but to recognize how God is working in the world and join him in the endeavor.

Watching surfers from the shore makes catching waves look pretty easy. Actually, it is quite difficult and requires great skill and balance. Catching a spiritual wave of growth isn’t easy, either. It takes more than desire or even dedication; it takes insight, patience, faith, skill, and most of all, *balance*. Pastoring a growing church, like surfing, may look easy to the uninitiated, but it isn’t. It requires a mastery of certain skills.

Today, God is creating wave after wave of people receptive to the Gospel. Due to a plethora of problems in our world, more people seem to be open to the Good News of Christ than at any other time this century. Unfortunately, because our churches haven’t been taught the needed skills, we are missing the spiritual waves that could bring revival, health, and explosive growth to our churches.

At Saddleback Church we’ve never tried to build a wave. That’s God’s business. But we *have* tried to recognize the waves God was sending our way, and we’ve learned to catch them. We’ve learned to use the right equipment to ride those waves, and we’ve learned the importance of balance. We’ve also learned to get off dying waves whenever we sensed God wanted to do something new. The amazing thing is this: *The more skilled we become in riding waves of growth, the more God sends!*

In my opinion, we live in the most exciting time in history for the church. Unparalleled opportunities and powerful technologies are available to our congregations. More importantly, we are

experiencing an unprecedented movement of God’s Spirit in many parts of the world today. More people are coming to Christ now than at any other time in history.

I believe God is sending waves of church growth wherever his people are prepared to ride them. The largest churches in the history of Christianity are in existence at this very moment. Most of them are not in the United States. While the stories of these churches are exciting to hear, I believe that the greatest churches are yet to be built. You may be the very person God chooses to use in that way.

God’s Spirit is moving mightily in waves around the world. My prayer at the start of each day goes like this: “Father, I know you’re going to do some incredible things in your world today. Please give me the privilege of getting in on some of what you’re doing.” In other words, church leaders should stop praying, “Lord, bless what I’m doing” and start praying, “Lord, help me to do what you are blessing.”

In this book, I’ll identify some of the principles and processes God is using to reach this generation for Christ. I would not presume to teach you how to create a wave of the Spirit. It can’t be done. But I *can* teach you how to recognize what God is doing, how to cooperate with what God is doing, and how to become more skilled in riding a wave of God’s blessing.

The problem with many churches is that they begin with the wrong question. They ask, “What will *make* our church grow?” This is a misunderstanding of the issue. It’s like saying, “How can we build a wave?” The question we need to ask instead is, “What is *keeping* our church from growing?” What barriers are blocking the waves God wants to send our way? What obstacles and hindrances are preventing growth from happening?

All living things grow—you don’t have to *make* them grow. It’s the natural thing for living organisms to do if they are healthy. For example, I don’t have to *command* my three children



*The wrong question: What will  
make our church grow?*

*The right question: What is  
keeping our church from  
growing?*



to grow. They naturally grow. As long as I remove hindrances such as poor nutrition or an unsafe environment, their growth will be automatic. If my kids don't grow, something has gone terribly wrong. Lack of growth usually indicates an unhealthy situation, possibly a disease.

In the same way, since the church is a living organism, it is natural for it to grow if it is

healthy. The church is a body, not a business. It is an organism, not an organization. It is alive. If a church is not growing, it is dying.

When a human body is out of balance we call that disease, which indicates *dis-ease* of the body. Likewise, when the body of Christ becomes unbalanced, disease occurs. Many of these diseases are illustrated and identified in the seven churches of Revelation. Health will occur only when everything is brought back into balance.

The task of church leadership is to discover and remove growth-restricting diseases and barriers so that natural, normal growth can occur. Seventy years ago Roland Allen, in his classic text on missions, called this kind of growth "the *spontaneous* expansion of the church." It is the kind of growth reported in the book of Acts. Is your church spontaneously growing? If that kind of growth is not happening in a church we should ask, "Why not?"


I believe the key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will be church *health*, not church growth. That's what this book is really about. Focusing on growth alone misses the point. When congregations are healthy, they grow the way God intends.



Healthy churches don't need gimmicks to grow—they grow naturally.


Paul explained it like this: “It is from him that all the parts of the body are cared for and held together. So it grows in the way God wants it to grow” (Col. 2:19 NCV). Notice that God *wants* his church to grow. If your church is genuinely healthy, you won't have to worry about it growing.

---



*The key issue for churches  
in the twenty-first century  
will be church health,  
not church growth.*

---



## TWENTY YEARS OF OBSERVING

For the past twenty years, I have been a student of growing churches, regardless of their size. In my travels as a Bible teacher, evangelist, and later as a trainer of pastors, I have visited hundreds of churches around the world. In each instance I made notes on why some were healthy and growing and why others were unhealthy, had plateaued, or were dying. I've talked to thousands of pastors and interviewed hundreds of church leaders, professors, and denominational leaders about what they've observed in churches. Years ago I wrote to the one hundred largest churches in America and spent a year researching their ministries. I've read nearly every book in print on church growth.

I've spent even more time going through the New Testament. I've read it over and over, studying it with “church-growth eyes,” searching for principles, patterns, and procedures. The New Testament is the greatest church-growth book ever written. For the things that *really* matter, you can't improve on it. It's the owner's manual for the church.

I've also loved reading church history. It is amusing to me that many concepts currently labeled “innovative” or “contemporary”

are not new ideas at all. Everything seems new if you are ignorant of history. Many methods parading under the banner of “change” have been used in the past in a slightly altered form. Some of them have worked and some of them haven’t. It is a well-known truth that if we are ignorant of the lessons of the past, we usually end up making the same mistakes as the people did before us.

My greatest source of learning, however, has been watching what God has done in the church I pastor. It gave me an education that no book, no seminar, and no professor could have ever given me. I started Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, in 1980, and spent the next fifteen years testing, applying, and refining the principles, processes, and practices in this book. Like a research and development center, we’ve experimented with all kinds of approaches to reaching, teaching, training, and sending out God’s people. Saddleback has served as a laboratory for everything written in this book. The results have been very gratifying and have, I believe, brought glory to God. I am continually humbled by God’s power to use ordinary people in extraordinary ways.

I’ve waited twenty years to write this book because I did not want to write it prematurely. Instead, I’ve let the concepts percolate and develop and mature. Nothing in this book is theory. The last thing we need is another church-growth theory. What is needed are answers to real problems that have been proven effective in actual church settings.

The principles in this book have been tested over and over, not only at Saddleback Church, but in many other purpose-driven churches of all sizes, shapes, locations, and denominations. While most of the illustrations are from Saddleback, that is only because I am most familiar with our church. It seems that every day I get a letter from another church that has adopted the purpose-driven church paradigm and has been able to ride waves of growth that God has sent their way.

## TO PASTORS WITH LOVE


This book is written for anyone interested in helping his or her church grow, but because I am a pastor, my writing style is naturally slanted from a pastor's perspective to other pastors. I come from a long line of pastors. My great-grandfather was converted through Charles Spurgeon's historic ministry in London and came to the United States as a pioneer circuit-riding pastor.

Both my father and my father-in-law have been pastors. Both recently celebrated their fiftieth anniversaries in ministry. My sister is married to a pastor, and I spent part of my childhood growing up on a seminary campus where my father served on staff. So I have a deep love for pastors. I love being around them. I hurt with them when they hurt. I believe they are the most underrated leaders in our society.

My greatest admiration is for the thousands of *bivocational* pastors who support themselves with a second job in order to shepherd churches that are too small to provide a full-time salary. They are the heroes of the faith, in my view. They will receive great honor in heaven. Because I have been fortunate to afford training and experiences unavailable to them, I feel an obligation to share what I have learned with them in this book.


I also believe that pastors are the most strategic change agents to deal with the problems society faces. Even many politicians are coming to the conclusion that spiritual revival is our only solution. Recently I read this statement from former Cabinet member William Bennett in *American Enterprise* magazine: "The most serious problems afflicting our society today are manifestly moral, behavioral, and spiritual, and therefore are remarkably

---



*Pastors are the most strategic  
change agents to deal with the  
problems in our society.*

---



resistant to government cures.” Does it seem ironic to you that at a time when politicians are saying we need a *spiritual* solution many Christians are acting like politics is the solution? While there is no doubt that the moral decline in our society has produced a battlefield, it also has given us an incredible mission field! We must remember that Christ also died for those on the other side of the cultural war.

It is a great privilege and an awesome responsibility to be a pastor of a local church. If I didn't believe pastors have the best chance of making a difference in our world, I'd be doing something else; I have no intention of wasting my life. Today the pastoral ministry is a hundred times more complex than it was just a generation ago. Even in the best circumstances, ministry is incredibly difficult. But there are also many more resources to help you if you avail yourself of them. The key is to never stop learning.

If you are a pastor, my prayer is that this book will encourage you. I hope it will be both instructional *and* inspirational. The books that have helped me most have blended facts and fire. My desire is that you'll grasp not only the principles I share, but also the passion I feel about God's purposes for his church.

I love the church of Jesus Christ with all my heart. Despite all its faults (due to *our* sinfulness) it is still the most magnificent concept ever created. It has been God's chosen instrument of blessing for two thousand years. It has survived persistent abuse, horrifying persecution, and widespread neglect. Parachurch organizations and other Christian groups come and go, but the church will last for eternity. It is worth giving our lives for and it deserves our best.

## “I'VE HEARD THIS BEFORE!”

As you read through this book I'm sure you'll come across concepts and think, *I've heard this before*. I hope you have! This

book contains many of the principles shared in the Purpose-Driven Church Seminar, which I've taught to over 22,000 pastors in the past fifteen years. In addition, church leaders from forty-two different countries and sixty different denominations have ordered tapes of the seminar, so some of the concepts are now well known.

My bookshelves contain more than a dozen books written by people I've trained who have put my ideas in print before I did. That doesn't matter to me. We're all on the same team. As long as pastors are helped, I'm pleased by it. Honestly, one of the reasons I waited twenty years to write this book is because I was too busy *doing* it!

Over one hundred doctoral theses have been written on the growth of Saddleback Church. We've been dissected, scrutinized, analyzed, and summarized by minds far better endowed than mine. "Hasn't enough been written already?" you may ask. "Why *another* book?" What I hope to offer in this book is the insider's perspective. What outsiders notice about a growing church rarely explains the real causes of growth.

You've heard that it is "wise to learn from experience." But it is wiser yet to learn from the experiences of others. It is less painful too! Life is too short to learn everything by personal experience. You can save yourself a lot of time and energy by gleaning from others the lessons they learned the hard way. That's the purpose of books like this one. If I can spare you the pain we experienced while learning these principles by trial and error, I'll be pleased.

When a surfer wipes out because he didn't ride a wave correctly, he doesn't give up surfing. He paddles back out into the ocean to wait for the next big wave God sends in. One thing I've observed about successful surfers: *They are persistent.*

You may have experienced a few "wipeouts" in your ministry. I certainly have. You may have missed a few waves. That doesn't

mean you should quit. The ocean hasn't dried up. On the contrary, at this very moment God is creating in the world the best waves I've ever seen. It is my hope, as a fellow surfer, to share a few tips on how to ride what God is doing in his world. Let's go catch a wave.

*A life devoted to things is a  
dead life, a stump; a God-shaped  
life is a flourishing tree.*

*Proverbs 11:28 (Ells)*

*Blessed are those who trust in  
the Lord... They are like trees  
planted along the riverbank, with*

## **PART ONE** **SEEING THE BIG PICTURE**

*water. Such trees are not  
bothered by the heat or worried  
by long months of drought.  
Their leaves stay green, and they  
go right on producing delicious  
fruit. Jeremiah 17:7-8 (NLT)*





# The Saddleback Story

*One generation will commend your works  
to another; they will tell of your mighty acts.*

Psalm 145:4

*Praise the greatness of the LORD,  
who loves to see his servants do well.*


Psalm 35:27 (NCV)

In November 1973, a buddy and I skipped out on our college classes and drove 350 miles to hear Dr. W. A. Criswell speak at the Jack Tar Hotel in San Francisco. Criswell was the renowned pastor of the largest Baptist church in the world, the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. For me, as a young Southern Baptist, the opportunity to hear Criswell in person was the equivalent of a Catholic getting to hear the pope. I was determined to hear this living legend.

I had felt God's call to ministry three years earlier and had begun speaking as a youth evangelist while still in high school. Although I was just nineteen years old, I'd already preached revival meetings in about fifty churches. I had no doubt that God had called me to ministry, but I was unsure if God wanted me to become a pastor.


I believe W. A. Criswell is the greatest American pastor of the twentieth century. He pastored at First Baptist for fifty years, wrote fifty-three books, and developed the most widely copied church model of this century. Not only was he a powerful preacher and leader, he was an organizational genius. Most people think of tradition when they think of Criswell, but actually his ministry was incredibly innovative. It only became known as traditional after everyone copied him!

---



*Ministry is a marathon.  
It's not how you start  
that matters but how  
you end.*

---



We often hear today about celebrity pastors whose stars flame bright for a few years and then fizzle out. It's easy to make an impressive start. But Criswell's ministry lasted half a century in *one* church! It was no flash in the pan. It withstood the test of time. To me that is genuine success:  
*loving and leading consistently and*

*ending well.* Ministry is a marathon. It's not how you start out that matters but how you end. So, how do you make it to the end? The Bible says, "Love never fails" (1 Cor. 13:8). If you minister out of love you can never be considered a failure.

As I listened to this great man of God preach, God spoke personally to me and made it very clear that he was calling me to be a pastor. Then and there, I promised God I'd give my entire life to pastoring a single church if that was his will for me.

After the service, my buddy and I stood in line to shake hands with Dr. Criswell. When my turn finally arrived, something unexpected happened. Criswell looked at me with kind, loving eyes and said, quite emphatically, "Young man, I feel led to lay hands on you and pray for you!" Without delay, he placed his hands on my head and prayed these words that I will never forget: "Father, I ask that you give this young preacher a double portion

of your Spirit. May the church he pastors grow to twice the size of the Dallas church. Bless him greatly, O Lord.”

As I walked away with tears in my eyes, I said to my friend Danny, “Did he pray what I think he prayed?” “He sure did,” said Danny, also with wet eyes. I could not possibly imagine that God could ever use me like Dr. Criswell had prayed, but that holy experience confirmed in my heart that God had called me to pastor a local church.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE METHODS

Every theology has a context. You won’t understand Luther’s theology without understanding Luther’s life and how God was sovereignly working in the world at that time. Likewise, you can’t fully appreciate Calvin’s theology without understanding the circumstances in which he forged his beliefs.

In the same way, every *methodology* has a story behind it. Many people look at the so-called “megachurches” and assume those churches have always been big. They forget that every large church started off as a small church. And no church becomes large without struggling through years of problems, setbacks, and failures. For instance, Saddleback met for fifteen years before being able to build our first building. This one factor alone helped shape our strategy of reaching, retaining, and growing believers in Christ. It kept our focus on people and created a church culture very open to change.


To understand many of the methods in this book, you need to understand the context in which they were developed. Otherwise you might be tempted to copy things we did without considering the context. *Please do not do this!* Instead, look beneath the methods to see the transferable principles on which they are based. I’ll identify the principles, but first you need to know a little of Saddleback’s history.

Very little of Saddleback’s ministry was preplanned. I didn’t have any long-range strategy before I started the church. I simply

knew God had called me to plant a new church built on the five New Testament purposes, and I had a bag of ideas I wanted to try out. Each innovation we've developed was just *a response* to the circumstances in which we found ourselves. I didn't plan them in advance. Most people think of "vision" as the ability to see the future. But in today's rapidly changing world, vision is also the


ability to accurately assess current changes and take advantage of them. Vision is being alert to opportunities.

---



*Vision is the ability to see the opportunities within your current circumstances.*

---



Because Saddleback is a young church and I am the founding pastor, we've been able to experiment with far more ideas than the average church—mostly

due to the fact that we didn't have decades of tradition to deal with. (However we had many *other* problems that older churches don't have!) In the early years we had nothing to lose, so we tried out all kinds of ideas. Some of our ideas were spectacular failures. And I wish I could claim that all our successes happened just the way we planned them—but it would be untrue. I'm not that smart. Most of our successes have been the result of trial and error and some of our discoveries were purely accidental.

One of my favorite movies is *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. At one cliff-hanging point in the story someone asks Indiana Jones, "What are we going to do now?" Jones replies, "How do I know? I'm making it up as we go along!" I have felt like that many, many times as pastor at Saddleback. We'd make up something and, if it worked, we'd pretend as though we'd planned it all along!

Mark Twain once said dryly, "I knew a man who grabbed a cat by the tail and learned forty percent more about cats than the man who didn't." We've been grabbing the cat by the tail since

the beginning at Saddleback Church—and we have the cuts and scars to prove it.

The truth is, we've tried more things that *didn't* work at Saddleback than did. We've never been afraid of failure; we just call everything an "experiment." I could fill another book with stories of our failures and call it *1000 Ways to NOT Grow a Church!*

## MY SEARCH FOR PRINCIPLES

In 1974, I served as a student missionary to Japan. I lived with a Southern Baptist missionary couple in their home in Nagasaki. One day, while rummaging through the missionary's library, I picked up an old copy of *HIS*, a Christian student magazine published by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

As I thumbed through its pages, a picture of a fascinating older man with a goatee and sparkling eyes caught my attention. The article's subtitle said something like "Why Is This Man Dangerous?" As I sat there and read the article on Donald McGavran, I had no idea that it would dramatically impact the direction of my ministry as much as my encounter with Criswell had.

The article described how McGavran, a missionary born in India, had spent his ministry studying what makes churches grow. His years of research ultimately led him to write *The Bridges of God* in 1955 and a dozen more books on growing churches that are considered classics today.

Just as God used W. A. Criswell to sharpen the focus of my life mission from ministry in general to being a pastor, God used the writings of Donald McGavran to sharpen my focus from pastoring an already established church to planting the church that I would pastor. As Paul declared in Romans 15:20, "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation."

McGavran brilliantly challenged the conventional wisdom of his day about what made churches grow. With a biblical basis


and simple but passionate logic, McGavran pointed out that God wants his church to grow; he wants his lost sheep found!

The issues raised by McGavran seemed especially relevant to me as I observed the painfully slow growth of churches in Japan. I made a list of eight questions that I wanted to find the answers to:

- How much of what churches do is really biblical?
- How much of what we do is just cultural?
- Why do some churches grow and others die on the vine?
- What causes a growing church to stop growing, plateau, and then decline?
- Are there common factors found in every growing church?
- Are there principles that will work in every culture?
- What are the barriers to growth?
- What are the conventional myths about growing churches that aren't true anymore (or never were)?


The day I read the McGavran article, I felt God directing me to invest the rest of my life discovering the principles—biblical, cultural, and leadership principles—that produce healthy, growing churches. It was the beginning of a lifelong study.

---



*To design the  
right strategy  
you must ask the  
right questions.*

---



In 1979, while finishing my final year at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, I decided to do an independent study of the one hundred largest churches in the United States at that time. First, I had to identify these churches, which was no small

task. I was working as a grader for Dr. Roy Fish, professor of evangelism at Southwestern Seminary. Roy, also my mentor and friend, helped me identify many of these churches. Others I found

by searching through denominational annuals and Christian magazines.

I then wrote to each of these churches and asked a series of questions I had prepared.

Although I discovered that large, growing churches differ widely in strategy, structure, and style, there were some common denominators. My study confirmed what I already knew from Criswell's ministry: Healthy, large churches are led by pastors who have been there a long time. I found dozens of examples.


A long pastorate does not *guarantee* a church will grow, but changing pastors every few years guarantees a church *won't* grow.

Can you imagine what the kids would be like in a family where they got a new daddy every two or three years? They would most likely have serious emotional problems. In the same way, the longevity of the leadership is a critical factor for the health and growth of a church family. Long pastorates make deep, trusting, and caring relationships possible. Without those kinds of relationships, a pastor won't accomplish much of lasting value.

Churches that rotate pastors every few years will never experience consistent growth. I believe this is one reason for the decline of some denominations. By intentionally limiting the tenure of pastors in a local congregation, they create "lame duck" ministers. Few people want to follow a leader who isn't going to be around a year from now. The pastor may want to start all sorts of new projects, but the members will be reticent because they will be the ones having to live with the consequences long after the pastor has been moved to another church.

Knowing the importance of longevity in growing a healthy church I prayed, "Father, I'm willing to go anyplace in the world

---



*Most healthy, large churches are  
led by a pastor who  
has been there a  
long time.*

---


you want to send me. But I ask for the privilege of investing my entire life in just one location. I don't care where you put me, but I'd like to stay wherever it is for the rest of my life."

## WHERE IN THE WORLD?

After that prayer, I tacked up a map of the world on our living room wall at home and began praying with my wife, Kay, for guidance about where we'd locate after seminary. This is the first step anyone should take in planting a new church: Pray for guidance. Proverbs 28:26 (LB) says, "A man is a fool to trust himself! But those who use God's wisdom are safe." Before anything else, you must first get God's perspective on your situation.


My wife and I originally thought that God was calling us to be missionaries overseas. Since I'd already served as a student missionary to Japan, we focused especially on countries in Asia. But as we prayed for guidance for about six months, God impressed upon us that we were not to serve overseas. Instead, we were to plant a new church in a major metropolitan area of the United States.

---



*A church's health is measured by its sending capacity, not its seating capacity.*

---



Instead of becoming missionaries ourselves, Kay and I sensed God's leading to establish a *missionary-sending* church. God would use us to enlist and train others in America to become overseas missionaries. This was a disappointment to me, but looking back, I now see the wisdom of God's plan. Saddleback Church has already made a greater impact through the many missionaries we've sent out than if I'd gone myself.

I believe that you measure the health or strength of a church by its *sending* capacity rather than its *seating* capacity. Churches are in the sending business. One of the questions we must ask



in evaluating a church's health is, "How many people are being mobilized for the Great Commission?"

This conviction, one I've held from Saddleback's beginning, led me to design the process described in this book for turning members into ministers and missionaries.

## FOCUSING ON AMERICA

Once we realized we wouldn't be serving overseas, Kay and I began to pray about where we'd begin a new church in the United States. Since I had no sponsor, it could be anywhere. So I once again tacked up a map on our living room wall ( this time, a map of the United States) and circled every major metropolitan area outside of the South.

My background has been Southern Baptist for four generations, and I have relatives all across the South. But my thinking was that I would go someplace where most of my seminary buddies were unwilling to go. I prayed about beginning a church in Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Albuquerque, Phoenix, and Denver. Then I discovered that the three most unchurched states in America were Washington, Oregon, and California. So I narrowed my focus to four areas on the West Coast: Seattle, San Francisco, San Diego, and Orange County. These four metropolitan areas were all growing in the late 1970s, and that caught my attention.

During the summer of 1979, I practically lived in university libraries doing research on the United States census data and other demographic studies on these four areas. Proverbs 13:16 says, "Every prudent man acts out of knowledge." To me that meant I should find out all I could about an area before I committed to invest the rest of my life there. Before making any major decision it is important to ask, "What do I need to know first?"

Proverbs 18:13 (LB) says, "What a shame—yes, how stupid!—to decide before knowing the facts!" The reason many

new churches fail is because they are started with uneducated enthusiasm. It takes more than enthusiasm to start a church; it takes wisdom. Having faith does not mean ignoring the facts about the community you have chosen.

I was twenty-five years old, five months away from seminary graduation, and Kay was nine months pregnant with our first child. I'd call her from the library several times each day to see if she'd started labor yet.

One afternoon I discovered that the Saddleback Valley, in Orange County, southern California, was the fastest-growing area in the fastest-growing county in the United States during the decade of the 1970s. This fact grabbed me by the throat and made my heart start racing. I knew that wherever new communities were being started at such a fast pace there would also be a need for new churches.

As I sat there in the dusty, dimly lit basement of that university library, I heard God speak clearly to me: "That's where I want you to plant a church!" My whole body began to tingle with excitement, and tears welled up in my eyes. I had heard from God. It didn't matter that I had no money, no members, and had never even seen the place. From that moment on, our destination was a settled issue. God had shown me where he was going to make some waves, and I was going to have the ride of a lifetime.

The next thing I did was find out the name of the Southern Baptist Director of Missions (District Superintendent) for Orange County, California. His name was Herman Wooten. I wrote him the following letter: "My name is Rick Warren. I am a seminary student in Texas. I am planning to move to south Orange County and start a church. I'm not asking for money or support from you; I just want to know what you think about that area. Does it need new churches?"

In the providence of God, an amazing thing happened. Although we'd never met, Herman Wooten had somehow heard

about me and my desire to plant a new church after graduating. At the same time I was writing to him, he was writing to me this letter: “Dear Mr. Warren, I have heard that you may be interested in starting a new church in California after seminary. Have you ever considered coming to the Saddleback Valley in south Orange County?” Our letters crossed in the mail! When I opened the mailbox two days later and saw a letter from the same man I’d just written to, I began to cry. Kay and I both knew God was up to something.

Two months later, in October, I flew to Orange County and spent ten days seeing the area for the first time. During the day I talked to anyone I could. I consulted realtors, chamber of commerce people, bankers, county planning officials, residents, and other pastors in the area. I took copious notes on everything I learned. I was claiming the promise of Proverbs 20:18 (TEV), which says, “Get good advice and you will succeed.”

At night I pored over local maps and brochures, spreading them out on the living-room floor of Dr. Fred Fisher, a retired Golden Gate Seminary professor who had invited me to stay in his home in the north part of Orange County. As I studied the materials I collected, I memorized the names of all the major streets in the Saddleback Valley.

After a week I flew Kay out to see the area for the first time. I have always relied on my wife’s spiritual discernment to confirm God’s leading in my life. If Kay had felt any reluctance toward moving, I would have taken that as a warning light from God. Happily, Kay’s response was, “I’m scared to death, but I believe this is God’s will, and I believe in you. Let’s go for it.” As Paul said in Romans 8:31, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” We climbed up on the highest hill we could find, and, looking over the Saddleback Valley filled with thousands of homes, committed to investing our lives in building the Saddleback Valley Community Church.

## CALIFORNIA, HERE WE COME

I graduated from seminary that December. In the final days of 1979, Kay and I packed what little we owned in a U-Haul truck and moved from Texas to southern California. Our furniture had been handed down from one newlywed couple to another. We were the fifth couple to have it. It was pretty pathetic looking stuff, but it was all we had. As we packed, it seemed implausible that this poor young couple was moving to one of the wealthiest communities in America.

We arrived in southern California full of hope. We had a new decade before us, a new ministry, a four-month-old baby, and God's promise to bless us. But we also arrived with no money, no church building, no members, and no home. We did not know a single person living in the Saddleback Valley. It was the greatest step of faith we had ever taken up to that time.

We made it to Orange County on a Friday afternoon, just in time to catch an infamous southern California traffic jam. I've never understood why they call the slowest traffic the rush hour! We inched along the freeway at a snail's pace, hungry and tired, with a crying infant.

Since I had grown up in a rural town of less than five hundred residents, I was completely unprepared for traffic like this. As I gazed out over miles and miles of cars at a complete standstill in freeway traffic I thought, *What in the world have I gotten myself into? God, you chose the wrong guy for this assignment! I think I've made a big mistake.*

Finally, at 5 P.M. we arrived at the Saddleback Valley. I pulled off the freeway and stopped at the first real estate office I could find. I walked in and introduced myself to the first realtor I met. His name was Don Dale. I said with a big smile, "My name is Rick Warren. I'm here to start a church. I need a place to live, but I don't have any money." Don grinned and laughed out loud. I laughed too. I had no idea what would happen next. Don said,


“Well, let’s see what we can do.” Within two hours Don found us a condo to rent, got us the first month’s rent for free, and agreed to become the first member of Saddleback Church! God does provide.

While driving to the condo, I asked Don if he attended church anywhere. He said he didn’t. I replied, “Great! You’re my first member!” And that is exactly what happened. I began Saddleback Church with that realtor’s family and mine. Two weeks later we held our first Bible study in our condo with seven people present.

After we moved on faith, it was exciting to see the financial support we needed begin to materialize. Pastor John Jackson led the Crescent Baptist Church in Anaheim, California, to become our official sponsoring church and provide six hundred dollars a month in financial support. Then, the First Baptist Church of Lufkin, Texas, and the First Baptist Church of Norwalk, California, both committed two hundred dollars a month toward our fledgling congregation.


One morning I received a phone call from a man I’d never met who offered to pay our rent for two months. He said he’d heard about the new church and wanted to help out. Another time, with a nearly empty checking account, Kay and I went scouting garage sales to buy nursery equipment for the first service. We found what we needed and wrote out a check, knowing we were spending our last food money. When we got home, I opened the mailbox and found a check from a woman in Texas who had heard me speak one time and somehow traced us to California. The check was the amount we’d just spent on nursery equipment: \$37.50.

---



*God always uses imperfect  
people in imperfect situations to  
accomplish  
his will.*

---



I would have preferred to have had the new church financially underwritten *before* we moved to California, but it didn't work

---

*Wherever God guides,  
he provides.*

---

out that way. Instead, we moved on faith. My sense of calling was so strong I was eager to get started. I love the Living Bible paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 11:4: "If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done." If you insist

on solving all the problems before you make a decision, you'll never know the thrill of living by faith. God always uses imperfect people in imperfect situations to accomplish his will.

As we saw God confirm our decision to begin the church in many, many ways in those early days, we learned an important lesson: *Wherever God guides, he provides.* If you are a church planter, underline that previous sentence. It will be a great source of comfort and strength in your difficult days. Whatever he calls us to do, he will enable and equip us to do. God is faithful! He keeps his promises.

## WHAT KIND OF CHURCH WOULD WE BE?

I had not been in southern California very long before I realized it was an area that already had many strong, Bible-believing churches. Some of the best-known pastors in America ministered within driving distance of our new church. On any Sunday you could go hear Chuck Swindoll, Chuck Smith, Robert Schuller, John MacArthur, E. V. Hill, John Wimber, Jack Hayford, Lloyd Ogilvie, Charles Blake, Greg Laurie, Ray Ortlund, or John Huffman. If you timed your arrival right, you could hear two or three of these guys on the same Sunday morning. And most of them could be heard on the radio or TV in southern California.

In addition, there were at least two dozen solid Bible-teaching churches in the Saddleback Valley when I arrived. I quickly

concluded that all of the Christians in the area were already happily involved in a good church or at least had plenty of options.

I decided that we would make no effort at all to attract Christians from other churches to Saddleback. We would not even borrow workers from other area churches to start Saddleback. Since I felt called to reach unbelievers, I determined to *begin* with unbelievers, rather than with a core of committed Christians. This was not the way all the books on church starting said to do it, but I felt certain that it was what God was calling us to do. Our focus would be limited to reaching the unchurched for Christ, people who for one reason or another did not attend any existing church.

We've never encouraged other believers to transfer their membership to our church; in fact, we have openly discouraged it. We don't want transfer growth. In every membership class we say, "If you are coming to Saddleback from another church, you need to understand up front that this church was not designed for you. It is geared toward reaching the unchurched who do not attend anywhere. If you are transferring from another church you are welcome here only if you are willing to serve and minister. If all you intend to do is attend services, we'd rather save your seat for someone who is an unbeliever. There are plenty of good Bible-teaching churches in this area that we can recommend to you."

This position may sound harsh, but I believe we are following the example of Jesus. He defined his ministry target by saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). At Saddleback we continually remind ourselves of this statement. It has helped us stay true to the original focus of our church: to bring the unchurched, irreligious people of our community to Christ.

In order to understand the mind-set of unchurched southern Californians, I spent the first twelve weeks after moving to the Saddleback Valley going door-to-door talking to people. Even

though I knew what these people *really* needed most was a relationship to Christ, I wanted to listen first to what *they* thought their most pressing needs were. That's not marketing; it's just being polite.

I've learned that most people can't hear until they've first been heard. People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. Intelligent, caring conversation opens the door for evangelism with nonbelievers faster than anything else I've used. It is *not* the church's task to give people whatever they want or even need. But the fastest way to build a bridge to the unchurched is to express interest in them and show that you understand the problems they are facing. Felt needs, whether real or imaginary, are a starting point for expressing love to people.

I didn't know enough to call my survey of the community a "marketing" study. To me, it was just a matter of meeting the people I intended to reach. Those who had been coming to our small Bible study helped me take the community survey. The irony was this: Many of those who came to our home Bible study and helped me survey the unchurched in our community were unbelievers themselves.

## SETTING THE DATE: E-DAY!

Next, we made the decision to begin Sunday services on Easter Sunday, which was a mere twelve weeks from the day Kay and I had moved to Orange County. I had no intention of staying in the home Bible study phase for longer than three months; I wanted to start public worship services as soon as possible. I also didn't want to miss the opportunity to begin the church on Easter Sunday.

I reasoned that if an unchurched family decided to attend just one service a year it would most likely be Easter Sunday. It was the ideal day to start a service designed to attract the unchurched. I realized that they might not come back the next week, but at



least I'd have a crowd for the first service—and I'd get some names for a mailing list.

During the weeks prior to Easter, our home Bible study on Friday nights grew to about fifteen people. Each week I'd teach a Bible study, and then we'd work on preparations for our first public service. We also discussed our findings from our weekly community survey. After about eight weeks I summarized what we'd learned about the unchurched and their hang-ups about church in a philosophy of ministry statement. It became the blueprint for our evangelism strategy.

Next, I wrote an open letter to the unchurched of the community based on what we'd learned. I knew nothing about direct mail, marketing, or advertising. I just figured that an open letter to the community might be the fastest way to get the word out about our new church. I also knew that a large percentage of the Saddleback Valley lived behind "gated" communities and there was no way I'd be able to make cold-call visits to those homes.

I wrote and rewrote that letter about a dozen times. I kept thinking, *What would I say if I had one chance to speak to all of the unchurched of this community? How can I say it in a way that disarms their prejudices and objections to attending church?*

The first sentence of that letter clearly stated our focus and position. It said: "At last! A new church for those who've given up on traditional church services." It went on to explain the kind of church we were starting. We hand-addressed and hand-stamped 15,000 letters and mailed them out ten days before Easter. I guessed that if we could get a 1 percent response from the letter, then 150 people might show up on Easter.

## OUR FIRST SERVICE

I knew that if our church was going to attract and win the unchurched, it was going to take a different kind of service than

I grew up with. What *style* of worship would be the best witness to unbelievers? We spent a lot of time thinking through every element of the service. We even planned a “dress rehearsal” for our Easter service.

I said to the fifteen people attending our home Bible study group: “Next Sunday we’ll meet at the high school and practice our service. We’ll practice singing the songs, I’ll preach like there’s a crowd of 150 people, and we’ll work out all the bugs in the order of service. This will insure that when all the visitors show up next week it will at least *appear* that we know what we’re doing.”

When Palm Sunday arrived, we expected only the fifteen Bible study attenders to show up for our “trial run” service. But God had other plans. The letter we had mailed out to 15,000 homes was delivered early to some of them. We hadn’t expected the letter to arrive in homes until a few days before Easter. Due to an efficient post office, sixty people showed up at the dress rehearsal and five of them gave their lives to Christ that day!

At that trial run service I outlined the vision I believed God had given me for Saddleback Church. The first task of leadership is to define the mission, so I tried to paint, in attractive terms, the picture as clearly as I saw it. Over the years we’ve returned again and again to that vision statement for midcourse corrections. Our vision has never really focused on getting big or erecting buildings; instead, our vision has been to produce disciples of Jesus Christ.

I remember how scared I felt after sharing the vision at the dress rehearsal service. I was overwhelmed with the fear of failure. *What if it doesn’t happen? Is this vision really from God, or is it just a wild dream of an idealistic twenty-six-year-old?* It was one thing to privately dream of what I expected God to do; it was another matter to publicly state that dream. In my mind, I had now passed the point of no return. In spite of my fears, I now had

## THE SADDLEBACK VISION

*From Pastor Rick's first sermon, March 30, 1980*

**It is the dream** of a place where the hurting, the depressed, the frustrated, and the confused can find love, acceptance, help, hope, forgiveness, guidance, and encouragement.

**It is the dream** of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with the hundreds of thousands of residents in south Orange County.

**It is the dream** of welcoming 20,000 members into the fellowship of our church family—loving, learning, laughing, and living in harmony together.

**It is the dream** of developing people to spiritual maturity through Bible studies, small groups, seminars, retreats, and a Bible school for our members.

**It is the dream** of equipping every believer for a significant ministry by helping them discover the gifts and talents God gave them.

**It is the dream** of sending out hundreds of career missionaries and church workers all around the world, and empowering every member for a personal life mission in the world. It is the dream of sending our members by the thousands on short-term mission projects to every continent. It is the dream of starting at least one new daughter church every year.

**It is the dream** of at least fifty acres of land, on which will be built a regional church for south Orange County—with beautiful, yet simple, facilities including a worship center seating thousands, a counseling and prayer center, classrooms for Bible studies and training lay ministers, and a recreation area. All of this will be designed to minister to the total person—spiritually, emotionally, physically, and socially—and set in a peaceful, inspiring garden landscape.

I stand before you today and state in confident assurance that these dreams will become reality. Why? Because they are inspired by God!

to move full speed ahead. Convinced that my dream would bring glory to God, I decided to never look back.

Saddleback Church held its first public service the following Sunday, Easter, April 6, 1980. Two hundred five people showed up to attend. *We had caught a wave.* I will never forget the feeling of watching all those people I'd never seen before walking up the sidewalk to the Laguna Hills High School Theater. With a mixture of excitement, fear, and awe I said to Kay, "This is really going to work!"

A mother holding her newborn baby for the first time could not have felt more joy. The birth of a church was taking place. Yet I was also humbled by the awesome responsibility I sensed that God was assigning to me that day.

It was an unusual assembly for a beginning of a new church. There weren't more than about a dozen believers at that first service. Instead, it was filled with unchurched southern Californians. We had hit our target right in the bull's-eye.

Having so many unchurched people at the service actually made it quite comical. When I asked people to open their Bibles, nobody had one. When we tried to sing some songs, no one sang because they didn't know the tunes. When I said, "Let's pray," some of the people just looked around. I felt as if I was standing before a Kiwanis or Rotary meeting!

But, to my amazement, the people kept coming back week after week. Each time a few more would commit their lives to Christ. By the tenth week after we began services, eighty-two of the unchurched people who had attended at Easter had given their lives to Christ. We were riding the wave of God's Spirit as best we could. Our preparation had paid off. A congregation was beginning to form.

Our first membership class drew twenty people. Eighteen of them were unbelievers, so I had to begin by teaching the most elementary truths of the Christian life. By the end of the six-week

class, all eighteen unbelievers had accepted Christ, were baptized, and were welcomed into membership.

Baptisms have always been unique at Saddleback. We've used pools, the Pacific Ocean, and other churches' baptistries, but most frequently we've used the spas and hot tubs that are standard equipment in many Orange County homes. Thousands have been baptized in what we fondly refer to as "Jacuzzis for Jesus."


Those being baptized are encouraged to invite as many of their unbelieving friends as possible to witness their baptism. Some have even sent out embossed invitations. Our monthly baptisms are always big events. One time we baptized 367 people on a single morning. My skin was wrinkled by the time the other pastors and I climbed out of the heavily chlorinated high school pool. I remember joking that, if we weren't Baptists, I could have just sprayed everyone with a fire hose!

## GROWING PAINS

Saddleback has experienced continuous growing pains throughout its brief history. To accommodate our continuous growth we used seventy-nine different facilities in the first fifteen years of Saddleback's history. Each time we'd outgrow a building, we'd move that program or service somewhere else. We often said that Saddleback was the church you could attend—if you could find us. We would joke that this was the way we attracted only really smart people.


We used four different high schools, numerous elementary schools, bank buildings, recreation centers, theaters, community

---



*Saddleback used  
seventy-nine  
different locations to  
meet in during its  
first fifteen years.*

---



centers, restaurants, large homes, professional office buildings, and stadiums, until finally we erected a 2,300-seat high-tech tent. We were filling the tent for four services each weekend before we built our first building. I feel that most churches build too soon and too small. The shoe must never tell the foot how big it can grow.

I'm often asked, "How big can a church grow without a building?" The answer is, "I don't know!" Saddleback met for fifteen years and grew to 10,000 attenders without our own building, so I know it's possible to grow to at least 10,000! A building, or lack of a building, should never be allowed to become a barrier to a wave of growth. People are far more important than property.

During Saddleback's first fifteen years, over 7,000 people gave their lives to Christ through our evangelism efforts. If you found yourself up to your neck in baby Christians, what would *you* do? Our sanity and survival depended upon developing a workable process to turn seekers into saints, turn consumers into contributors, turn members into ministers, and turn an audience into an army. Believe me, it is an incredibly difficult task to lead people from self-centered consumerism to being servant-hearted Christians. It is not a task for fainthearted ministers or those who don't like to get their religious robes wrinkled. But it *is* what the Great Commission is all about and it has been the driving force behind all that has happened so far at Saddleback.