

# INTRODUCTION

“**D**o you want to supersize your drink and fries for just forty cents more?”

Supersizing a drink and fries seems reasonable to our fast-food culture. But what if I asked you if you wanted a regular or a supersized church? And what if I asked you about supersizing your church’s impact? Before you answer these two questions, let me ask you one more. Does a bigger church always make a bigger impact?

We often measure church impact only from a numerical standpoint—how many programs, how many members, how big a campus. However, numbers alone do not tell the whole story. There are many more dimensions to what God is doing in your church and community than simple numbers. I believe that *God*-sizing your impact is far more important than striving to supersize it. Rather than focusing exclusively on higher numbers, we can focus on making a real difference in our churches and communities.

Your church is poised to make a God-sized impact. If you are passionate about fulfilling the Great Commission—and the

fact that you are reading this book is a good indication that you are!—then you want to maximize your church’s influence. God has given each of us an opportunity to lead and participate in a kingdom adventure. Our challenge is to fulfill the divine mandate he has given us. The apostle Paul said it this way: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (1 Corinthians 9:24–25).

Let’s begin a journey of discovery. Many times we have come to believe that our communities cannot be reached for Christ because of the hardness of people’s hearts. Although that may be true in specific cases, another fundamental reality is often also at work. Often we reach our limit of influence because we demand that our churches be structured a certain way, from pastoral care to ministry to education. Our journey of discovery will bring us to the edge of a vital question: Is it more important for our churches to meet our needs or to transform our communities? God-sizing our churches isn’t about whether they are big or small—it’s about whether our strategic vision and values match the heart of God.

I write this with great personal passion. I believe that God wants our churches to reach more people for Jesus Christ, to establish and secure them in their faith, and to equip them for kingdom work in the world. God longs for lost people to know him and for saved people to share him with others: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the

faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6–7).

Researcher Dave Olsen, in his book *The American Church in Crisis*, estimates that more than 90 percent of American churches are either at a plateau or declining compared to the population growth in their communities. Rather than us giving in to despair however, I think that God is even now beginning to show us his vision for the future. God is right now beginning a movement of healthy, externally focused churches in smaller areas that are making a God-sized difference in their local communities. As my friend Mark Wilson reminds readers on his blog ([www.revitalizeyourchurch.blogspot.com](http://www.revitalizeyourchurch.blogspot.com)), “Your church can touch the world, regardless of your location. You can make a big difference right where you are!”

Imagine moving beyond the business-as-usual impact so many churches currently accept—not to a supersized impact concerned only with numbers, but a God-sized impact that transforms churches and communities of every size with the good news of God’s Son through the power of God’s Spirit. All over this country, churches of every size believe that they can make a God-sized difference.

What about you?

## Chapter 1

# DREAMING GOD-SIZED DREAMS

In 1996, at a snow-covered church campground in Greenlake, Wisconsin, I heard God ask me a question: *Will you dare to dream big dreams forme?*

My first response was *No!*

I had been wrestling with God for quite some time about my future in ministry, but on that snowy day, I was reading the story of church planter Rick Warren in *The Purpose-Driven Church*. I thought I was quite familiar with the story, given that we had lived in Southern California when Saddleback was beginning. That day, God seemed to be speaking into my heart, and a dream of a local church that would reach unchurched people and change the world started to form. My initially icy response to God melted as the fire of passion began to burn in my heart.

Many of us are initially reluctant to dream big. Intuitively, we know that dreaming big leads to big changes in our lives and ministries. Big change requires risk as we exchange security for the unknown. Yet I am convinced that God is asking many of

you the same question he asked me in 1996: *Will you dare to dream big dreams for me?*

Please do me two favors before you continue reading. First, dream a big dream of what God could do through you and your church if there were no obstacles in the way. Five years from now, if there were no limitations on finances, leadership, facilities, or programs, how could God change the world through your local church? Picture it. What would worship look like? How would evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, and ministry take place? What life changes would people experience? Look at every ministry dimension with as much clarity as you can.

Second, take every dimension of your five-year dream, and multiply it by a factor of ten. Let your spirit, heart, and mind soar as you consider what God could do that would be *ten times your grandest dream*. When you envision that, you'll *just* be starting to grasp what God is able to do. When we dare to dream big dreams for God, and then allow God to work in and through us with his wisdom, love, and power, we're beginning to God-size!

I'd like to tell you a story of a God-sized dream in action. My friend Mike Holba pastors Ripon Community Church in Ripon, Wisconsin. Listen to the ways God is working in and through his church to make a God-sized difference:

The first time I experienced a God-sized dream coming to fruition, I was planting my first church in Ripon, Wisconsin. As we drove into the small town of Ripon, I never would have guessed that we were about to exchange our minivan for a front-row seat on God's roller coaster.

When asked to describe our experiences planting a church here in Ripon, I often say, "It's like having front-row seats for a miracle." At least that's how I describe it on the good days. On the other days, when I am still trying to figure out what God is up to, I often say, "It's like we're in the front row of a roller coaster and God is operating the ride. It's thrilling, exhilarating, and sometimes scary! But, because we have faith in the Operator, we know we'll be safe."

I would have never predicted that this seven-thousand-person town would see so many miracles, that so much would be possible. But God in his ultimate wisdom and holiness did. We began our church with no people, almost no money, and very little experience. All we had was a simple desire to try to determine what God wanted, and then do it. Genesis 6:22, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him," became our special passage. It worked pretty well for Noah, so why not us?

We began making plans and dreaming of what God might do. But I am slightly embarrassed to admit that even though I am a dreamer and a goal setter, my dreams were way too "small town" for this tiny community. God's were huge!

With God at the controls, we simply targeted people who were turned off by church, but not by God, and we went from five people to one hundred in six months. Average attendance rose

to two hundred during the next six months, and to four hundred over the next few years.

At our first baptism service, we baptized sixty-five people in nearby Green Lake. The water was so cold that my surgically repaired knee was numb by the time I got out of the water. After five years, we have now baptized almost 3 percent of the city's population!

Two hundred people participate in our small groups, and we now provide food to nearly four hundred people each month through our Thrift Store/Food Pantry ministry. We have also planted two daughter churches in other towns similar to our own.

The miracles that we have witnessed are too numerous to list. Hundreds of people have now dedicated their lives to following Jesus. The story of "Joanne" is an exemplary testament to God's power in the life of anyone willing to open the door when Jesus knocks.

A few months before the church launched, Joanne sent me an e-mail saying:

"I am one of those people who is disenchanted with the church. I want to choose how much time I spend with church and do not want to be prodded into Bible studies, etc. I don't want people being judgmental and have not yet found a church that does not make judgments. I don't want a church to tell me how much money I should be giving. I don't want to feel like an outsider in a clique of Bible thumpers. I need

a minister whom I can feel comfortable baring my soul to if need be. Do I sound hopeless—or like the average disenchanting church person? Please drop me an e-mail. I will not be the least bit insulted if you tell me that I am climbing the wrong cross, and this church will not meet my expectations.”

It might sound crazy, but I was so excited reading that e-mail! People like Joanne are the reason we plant churches. She was exactly who I was looking for, far from God but full of potential. Joanne has since given her life to Jesus, been baptized, and has invited many, many people to attend. Her brother died recently, and with my blessing, she conducted his memorial service herself.

After a very passionate message, she concluded her thoughts with the following statement:

“I don’t know all of your beliefs. I know that everyone is in a different place and that’s okay. Faith is a journey. Sometimes we stay on the road, sometimes there is a detour, and sometimes we’re just lost. The important thing is that we eventually reach our destination. I believe that Jesus died for our sins. God’s love for us is not earned; it is freely given.”

Considering her first e-mail, I would call Joanne’s conversion a miracle. I was dreaming human-sized big dreams, but God wanted to multiply the impact of our church on this small town



in ways I never would have thought possible. We have actually lived out Ephesians 3:20 over these last five years in tiny Ripon, Wisconsin, and there are now hundreds of people here who can quote that verse and say with belief, “To God be the glory,” because of what he has done here.

Now that’s what I call God-sizing!

Business as usual won’t cut it anymore. The church has been a bedrock foundation of Western society for hundreds of years, but today the church is standing on the edge of irrelevance. We need a fresh, bold, articulate vision for ministry that can be played out in local communities across the country, regardless of their size. George Barna goes one step further when he says, “Let’s cut to the chase. After nearly two decades of studying Christian churches in America, I’m convinced that the typical church as we know it today has a rapidly expiring shelf life.”<sup>1</sup>

Churches across America, large and small, are grappling with barriers to their growth and questioning their future. Some researchers have suggested the United States experiences a net loss of 2,500 churches per year!<sup>2</sup> When local churches are forced to close their doors, they certainly can’t fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20 in their local communities. If business as usual is resulting in fewer and fewer churches each year—and less discipleship and less evangelism, too—it’s time to do something different!

My passion in this book is to equip you to hear from God about your ministry and to go where he tells you to go. God-sizing is *not* about making your church a big church. It is about fulfilling the kingdom agenda of God in your community for

his glory. God wants our churches to grow in order to reach new