

THE SADDLEBACK STORY

An excerpt from the book, "The Purpose Driven Church" by Rick Warren, copyright 1995

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!

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 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

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

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.

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

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

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.

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

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

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 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,

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

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.

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

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

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 had 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 20:18a (TEV), which says, “Get good advice and you will succeed.”

At night I poured 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 to. 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

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

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.

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

*Wherever
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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 was 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 to 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 faster 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 the 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

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.

Is it 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!

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 or 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 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 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

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

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 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 the 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.