

Re-purposed: What is a church for?

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

What, precisely, is a good church? How would you know one when you see it? A popular answer these days is that a good church is a “purpose-driven” church.

The phrase and the concept come from Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California, one of the largest and fastest-growing churches in American history. It has almost 10,000 “core members” and over 50,000 people on its rolls.

Warren is also the author of *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*. The former book has sold over 1 million copies in 20 languages, the latter has been No. 1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list. For churches that want to grow, Warren’s model seems the recipe *du jour*, imitated by churches across the denominational spectrum in this country and around the world.

Warren’s work is not merely another attempt to baptize secular versions of marketing, nor is it another salvo in the “worship wars.” It is a biblically grounded and theologically intentional effort to rethink and reform church practice for the 21st century. Though I approached his work with some hesitation, wary of glossy book covers and tall tales of instant church growth, I found Warren’s work to be different. It seeks to be deeply and broadly biblical, and it is seasoned with lively vignettes from the life of what has been an extraordinarily vibrant congregation.

Warren is clearly a masterful communicator and organizer. The success of his church, of his publishing ventures, and of the now-myriad products with the “purpose-driven” tag are all evidence of his remarkable personal gifts.

Warren asks readers to consider what single purpose drives their churches. If they are unable to say what it is, he encourages them to define an ecclesial purpose based on scripture. Such work builds morale, reduces frustration, allows concentration, attracts cooperation and assists evaluation (catchy phrases and alliteration are common in his work).

He offers the example of Saddleback's statement: "to bring people to Jesus and *membership* in his family, develop them to Christlike *maturity*, and equip them for their *ministry* in the church and life *mission* in the world, in order to *magnify* God's name." Such clear definition of purpose helps a church evaluate its allocation of time, energy and money so as to reach out to non-Christians. Saddleback's goal, clearly, is not just to fill pews (which Saddleback doesn't have!) but to evangelize the unchurched and move them toward the core of the church's life, then to leadership in the church and eventually to developing their own ministries.

This movement—from noncommitment to deep ecclesial commitment—is mirrored in *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which aims to do for readers what Saddleback seeks to do for churchgoers. It begins with basic apologetics to lure a casual reader into interest in ultimate things, becomes gradually more christological, and then ends with demands for mission in the world—all in the course of a 40-day reading program. Saddleback's vision of a "good" church reaches far beyond the bounds of its ever-growing walls.

Much can be learned from Saddleback. Warren rightly insists the church's first vocation is not to drum up its own activities, but to be attentive to the prior activity of God. Saddleback demands far more of its multitudes than mere church attendance, and it actually drops from the rolls people who do not move toward membership and evidence this growth by making covenants, giving generously and developing from members into ministers. Warren has words of warning for denominations like mine inclined toward having top-heavy administration and tying up people's energy with endless committee meanings. He wants this time and talent redirected into missions.

Much can also be gleaned on a pragmatic level about how best to open a church's arms to outsiders—not least Warren's insistence that the church gets no credit for new members, only for members turned into ministers. Many who criticize Warren's work and the movement it has begun may be protecting their preference for a mere maintenance ministry and their own laziness, which prevents them from pounding the pavement, knocking on doors and getting involved in communities.

With that said, some hard questions need to be asked about the "purpose-driven" movement. The Spirit seems to be saying something to churches through this movement, but exactly what?

The first question has to do with *numbers*. “The New Testament is the greatest church-growth book ever written,” Warren states. To support this claim he points to the crowds that followed Jesus, Paul’s willingness to “become” different things to different people (1 Cor. 9:20-23), and the enthusiasm shown in the Book of Acts at the number of converts.

According to Warren, the way to imitate this ministry of Jesus and Paul is to meet people’s “felt needs,” and to bring them into the church by way of a nonthreatening evangelistic service that presents only good news, since people have had enough bad news all week. Those who would disagree with this reading of scripture are charged with being jealous of growing churches.

While I am grateful that Warren seeks to ground his presentation in scripture, I would dispute his reading of scripture. Jesus’ own ministry is marked by a complex back-and-forth movement between attracting crowds and repelling them, between offering people grace and pronouncing judgment. His first sermon in his home synagogue ends with his own community trying to kill him (Luke 4). He tells his disciples he speaks in parables *so that* people might not understand (Mark 4:12). His long discourse on the importance of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man ends with many of his followers walking away, and those who stay do so out of resignation more than enthusiasm (John 6:52-68). His preaching is filled with demands that would not appear at a Sunday-morning service at Saddleback, including the call to hate one’s parents and self (Luke 14:26), to take up one’s cross (Mark 8:34) and to take a narrow and difficult road instead of the crowded highway (Matt. 7:13-14), as well as promises that the first would be last (Luke 13:30). And at his cross—the climax of our salvation—Jesus was utterly deserted, except for a crowd that jeered him.

Jesus has some “bad news” for us. He would seem to criticize what we feel to be our own needs and seek to give us new needs, the preaching of which may drive people away. What the “purpose-driven” approach needs to provide, it seems to me, is a *more* biblically grounded vision of the person of Jesus and the work of the church—one that won’t necessarily draw the crowds.

A second question involves the importance of *place* in ministry. Warren describes God’s call to him in the late 1970s to start a church in a fast-growing, major metropolitan area. That call led him to Orange County, California. He suggests that the best church growth is possible with a new congregation which has no building to

outgrow, and which can be intentional in its description of church membership before people start joining.

Two concerns arise. First, this approach doesn't fit with many denominations' vision of ministry. As a Methodist, I go where the bishop sends me, not where I see the best potential for growth. If I am sent to a church that is hundreds of years old and set in a dying post-manufacturing community, in a South so saturated with churches almost every family has its own chapel, then my goals for ministry will necessarily be quite different from Warren's in Orange County in 1979.

Further, it is not even clear that Warren's model for ministry is the best one for a community like Warren's. A friend of mine is a nondenominational pastor in a similar setting, and he says his church cannot open its doors without growing. It grows one upper-middle class, SUV-driving family of four at a time. He has become frustrated with this vision of ministry to the affluent and wants to start a church in a run-down inner-city neighborhood where relationships can be built among downwardly mobile people of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. It is at least worth considering whether this latter is a more appropriate—scripturally and christologically—vision of the church.

A third question concerns the church's handling of *interpersonal difficulties*. Warren describes his unpleasant experience in a "family-reunion" style church in Texas. The church was located in a rural community that was not growing, which made for a church without growth. Warren celebrates Saddleback's ability to travel light, to dismiss members who do not share the "purpose-driven" vision.

I am familiar with the "family-reunion" style rural church, and I am vulnerable to feeling envy for the "purpose-driven" kind. Yet I wonder if it is not precisely the ornery, difficult, longtime members of old, small, rural churches that make such a place Christlike. When we read about Paul struggling mightily so that Christians in small churches will learn to live in Christian harmony, perhaps we see an alternative vision of church—one in which all the theological muscle of the author of Philippians is marshaled merely to get Euodia and Syntyche to get along (Phil. 4:2).

When working in such a setting, I have tried to emphasize that we must preach the gospel to outsiders not necessarily in order to grow, but because Christians are supposed to be people who witness. It shapes us to do so, and it is a failure in our own Christian formation not to. The Great Commission does not insist on

manageable, measurable results, much less spectacular ones; it insists that we be telling and baptizing and teaching people.

I worry also about Warren's insistence that people want to be in church with people who are like them. I worry about a definition of faithfulness that delivers on this "felt need." What of the inevitable difficulty that arises when a church insists on inviting ethnically or economically different people into its fellowship? People may leave—but will God not be glorified?

Peter Storey, the former Methodist bishop in South Africa, once told an American church growth expert that his country had tried "homogenous living units" (the expert's phrase, not Warren's) and decided they were a bad idea. In South Africa, these had been known under the term "apartheid." I am not accusing Warren or the "purpose-driven" movement of racism. I am only pointing out that our "felt needs" can turn out to be highly problematic.

My final questions concern *liturgy*. I know, Baptists don't have liturgy. (Saddleback is a Southern Baptist church, though it wears this affiliation lightly.) But Methodists and other churches do. We do not share Warren's exasperation at bringing a nonbeliever to church on one occasion and finding out that it was a communion Sunday. For some churches, communion—with God and one another, instantiated sacramentally—simply *is* church. Warren warns against churches that "overdo mystical, religious symbols" in their buildings. But what of church traditions for which these are nonnegotiable elements?

Furthermore, it is not obvious to me that nonbelievers are repulsed by what is foreign, odd or "mystical"—not when Hollywood movies gross billions precisely by delivering symbols that defy easy assimilation and require work to understand. I argue this point perhaps less against Warren and more against fellow church members in bodies whose ecclesiologies should drive them to act differently, yet whose lust for numbers and dollars turns them toward mimicking Saddleback (something Warren himself consistently discourages).

The point is that many of the premises of the "purpose-driven" church are debatable. Warren may have no need to carry on such debate. Others of us do. It is less obvious from this vantage point precisely what a good or successful or faithful church is.

I have spent much time reassuring the kind of church Warren left behind in rural Texas that Jesus has words of comfort for those who are least, last, hurting, tired and suffering. These words are less clearly applicable to the “fastest growing Baptist church in the history of America,” and one of the “most effective churches on the North American continent,” to cite the description in the foreword to *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Warren himself adopts a much more modest tone). But they are applicable to most churches. God’s purposes for our common life are not so transparent as the “purpose-driven” movement pretends, and the criteria for successful ministry are not so obvious.