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LETTER FROM SADDLEBACK

The Cellular Church

How Rick Warren built his ministry.

by Malcolm Gladwell

1.

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Saddleback Church, Rick Warren hired the Anaheim Angels' baseball stadium. He wanted to address his entire congregation at once, and there was no way to fit everyone in at Saddleback, where the crowds are spread across services held over the course of an entire weekend. So Warren booked the stadium and printed large, silver-black-and-white tickets, and, on a sunny Sunday morning last April, the tens of thousands of congregants of one of America's largest churches began to file into the stands. They were wearing shorts and T-shirts and buying Cokes and hamburgers from the concession stands, if they had not already tailgated in the parking lot. On the field, a rock band played loudly and enthusiastically. Just after one o'clock, a voice came over the public-address

system-"RIIICK WARRREN"-and Warren bounded onto the stage, wearing black slacks, a red linen guayabera shirt, and wraparound NASCAR sunglasses. The congregants leaped to their feet. "You know," Warren said, grabbing the microphone, "there are two things I've always wanted to do in a stadium." He turned his body sideways, playing an imaginary guitar, and belted out the first few lines of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." His image was up on the Jumbotrons in right and left fields, just below the Verizon and Pepsi and Budweiser logos. He stopped and grinned. "The other thing is, I want to do a wave!" He pointed to the bleachers, and then to the right-field seats, and around and around the stadium the congregation rose and fell, in four full circuits. "You are the most amazing church in America!" Warren shouted out, when they had finally finished. "AND I LOVE YOU!"

2.

Rick Warren is a large man, with a generous stomach. He has short, spiky hair and a goatee. He looks like an ex-athlete, or someone who might have many tattoos. He is a hugger, enfolding those he meets in his long arms and saying things like "Hey, man." According to Warren, from sixth grade through college there wasn't a day in his life that he wasn't president of something, and that makes sense, because he's always the one at the center of the room talking or laughing, with his head tilted way back, or crying, which he does freely. In the evangelical tradition, preachers are hard or soft. Billy Graham, with his piercing eyes and protruding chin and Bible clenched close to his chest, is hard. So was Martin Luther King, Jr., who overwhelmed his audience with his sonorous, forcefully enunciated cadences. Warren is soft. His sermons are conversational, delivered in a folksy, raspy voice. He talks about how he loves

Krispy Kreme doughnuts, drives a four-year-old Ford, and favors loud Hawaiian shirts, even at the pulpit, because, he says, "they do not itch."

In December of 1979, when Warren was twenty-five years old, he and his wife, Kay, took their four-month-old baby and drove in a U-Haul from Texas to Saddleback Valley, in Orange County, because Warren had read that it was one of the fastest-growing counties in the country. He walked into the first real-estate office he found and introduced himself to the first agent he saw, a man named Don Dale. He was looking for somewhere to live, he said.

"Do you have any money to rent a house?" Dale asked.

"Not much, but we can borrow some," Warren replied.

"Do you have a job?"

"No. I don't have a job."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a minister."

"So you have a church?"

"Not yet."

Dale found him an apartment that very day, of course: Warren is one of those people whose lives have an irresistible forward momentum. In the car on the way over, he recruited Dale as the first member of his still nonexistent church, of course. And when he held his first public service, three months later, he stood up in front of two hundred and five people he barely knew in a high-school gymnasium-this shiny-faced preacher fresh out of seminary-and told them that one day soon their new church would number twenty thousand people and occupy a campus of fifty acres. Today, Saddleback Church has twenty thousand members and occupies a campus of a hundred and twenty acres. Once, Warren wanted to increase the number of small groups at Saddleback-the groups of six or seven that meet for prayer and fellowship during the week-by three hundred. He went home and prayed and, as he tells it, God said to him that what he really needed to do was increase the number of small groups by three thousand, which is just what he did. Then, a few years ago, he wrote a book called "The Purpose-Driven Life," a genre of book that is known in the religious-publishing business as "Christian Living," and that typically sells thirty or forty thousand copies a year. Warren's publishers came to

see him at Saddleback, and sat on the long leather couch in his office, and talked about their ideas for the book. "You guys don't understand," Warren told them. "This is a hundred-million-copy book." Warren remembers stunned silence: "Their jaws dropped." But now, nearly three years after its publication, "The Purpose-Driven Life" has sold twenty-three million copies. It is among the best-selling nonfiction hardcover books in American history. Neither the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, nor the Washington Post has reviewed it. Warren's own publisher didn't see it coming. Only Warren had faith. "The best of the evangelical tradition is that you don't plan your way forward-you prophesy your way forward," the theologian Leonard Sweet says. "Rick's prophesying his way forward."

Not long after the Anaheim service, Warren went back to his office on the Saddleback campus. He put his feet up on the coffee table. On the wall in front of him were framed originals of the sermons of the nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon, and on the bookshelf next to him was his collection of hot sauces. "I had dinner with Jack Welch last Sunday night," he said. "He came to

church, and we had dinner. I've been kind of mentoring him on his spiritual journey. And he said to me, 'Rick, you are the biggest thinker I have ever met in my life. The only other person I know who thinks globally like you is Rupert Murdoch.' And I said, "That's interesting. I'm Rupert's pastor! Rupert published my book!" Then he tilted back his head and gave one of those big Rick Warren laughs.

3.

Churches, like any large voluntary organization, have at their core a contradiction. In order to attract newcomers, they must have low barriers to entry. They must be unintimidating, friendly, and compatible with the culture they are a part of. In order to retain their membership, however, they need to have an identity distinct from that culture. They need to give their followers a sense of community-and community, exclusivity, a distinct identity are all, inevitably, casualties of growth. As an economist would say, the bigger an organization becomes, the greater a free-rider problem it has. If I go to a church with five hundred members, in a magnificent cathedral, with spectacular services and music, why should I volunteer or donate any

substantial share of my money? What kind of peer pressure is there in a congregation that large? If the barriers to entry become too low-and the ties among members become increasingly tenuous-then a church as it grows bigger becomes weaker.

One solution to the problem is simply not to grow, and, historically, churches have sacrificed size for community. But there is another approach: to create a church out of a network of lots of little church cells--exclusive, tightly knit groups of six or seven who meet in one another's homes during the week to worship and pray. The small group as an instrument of community is initially how Communism spread, and in the postwar years Alcoholics Anonymous and its twelve-step progeny perfected the small-group technique. The small group did not have a designated leader who stood at the front of the room. Members sat in a circle. The focus was on discussion and interaction-not one person teaching and the others listening-and the remarkable thing about these groups was their power. An alcoholic could lose his job and his family, he could be hospitalized, he could be warned by half a dozen doctors-and go on drinking. But put him in a room of his peers once a week-make him share the burdens of others and have his burdens shared

by others-and he could do something that once seemed impossible.

When churches -in particular, the megachurches that became the engine of the evangelical movement, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties-began to adopt the cellular model, they found out the same thing. The small group was an extraordinary vehicle of commitment. It was personal and flexible. It cost nothing. It was convenient, and every worshipper was able to find a small group that precisely matched his or her interests. Today, at least forty million Americans are in a religiously based small group, and the growing ranks of small-group membership have caused a profound shift in the nature of the American religious experience."

As I see it, one of the most unfortunate misunderstandings of our time has been to think of small intentional communities as groups 'within' the church," the philosopher Dick Westley writes in one of the many books celebrating the rise of small-group power. "When are we going to have the courage to publicly proclaim what everyone with any experience with small groups has known all along: they are not organizations

'within' the church; they are church."

Ram Cnaan, a professor of social work at the University of Pennsylvania, recently estimated the replacement value of the charitable work done by the average American church—that is, the amount of money it would take to equal the time, money, and resources donated to the community by a typical congregation—and found that it came to about a hundred and forty thousand dollars a year. In the city of Philadelphia, for example, that works out to an annual total of two hundred and fifty million dollars' worth of community "good"; on a national scale, the contribution of religious groups to the public welfare is, as Cnaan puts it, "staggering." In the past twenty years, as the enthusiasm for publicly supported welfare has waned, churches have quietly and steadily stepped in to fill the gaps. And who are the churchgoers donating all that time and money? People in small groups. Membership in a small group is a better predictor of whether people volunteer or give money than how often they attend church, whether they pray, whether they've had a deep religious experience, or whether they were raised in a Christian home. Social

action is not a consequence of belief, in other words. I don't give because I believe in religious charity. I give because I belong to a social structure that enforces an ethic of giving. "Small groups are networks," the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has studied the phenomenon closely, says. "They create bonds among people. Expose people to needs, provide opportunities for volunteering, and put people in harm's way of being asked to volunteer. That's not to say that being there for worship is not important. But, even in earlier research, I was finding that if people say all the right things about being a believer but aren't involved in some kind of physical social setting that generates interaction, they are just not as likely to volunteer."

Rick Warren came to the Saddleback Valley just as the small-group movement was taking off. He was the son of a preacher—a man who started seven churches in and around Northern California and was enough of a carpenter to have built a few dozen more with his own hands—and he wanted to do what his father had done: start a church from scratch.

For the first three months, he went from door to door in the neighborhood around his house, asking people why they didn't attend church.

Churches were boring and irrelevant to everyday life, he was told. They were unfriendly to visitors. They were too interested in money. They had inadequate children's programs. So Warren decided that in his new church people would play and sing contemporary music, not hymns. (He could find no one, Warren likes to say, who listened to organ music in the car.) He would wear the casual clothes of his community. The sermons would be practical and funny and plainspoken, and he would use video and drama to illustrate his message. And when an actual church was finally built—Saddleback used seventy-nine different locations in its first thirteen years, from high-school auditoriums to movie theatres and then tents before building a permanent home—the church would not look churchy: no pews, or stained glass, or lofty spires. Saddleback looks like a college campus, and the main sanctuary looks like the school gymnasium. Parking is plentiful. The chairs are comfortable. There are loudspeakers and television screens everywhere broadcasting the worship service, and all the doors are open, so anyone can slip in or out, at any time, in the anonymity of the enormous crowds.

Saddle-back is a church with very low barriers to entry.

But beneath the surface is a net-work of thousands of committed small groups. "Orange County is virtually a desert in social-capital terms," the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, who has taken a close look at the Saddleback success story, says. "The rate of mobility is really high. It has long and anonymous commutes. It's a very friendless place, and this church offers serious heavy friendship. It's a very interesting experience to talk to some of those groups. There were these eight people and they were all mountain bikers-mountain bikers for God. They go biking together, and they are one another's best friends. If one person's wife gets breast cancer, he can go to the others for support. If someone loses a job, the others are there for him. They are deeply best friends, in a larger social context where it is hard to find a best friend."

Putnam goes on, "Warren didn't invent the cellular church. But he's brought it to an amazing level of effectiveness. The real job of running Saddleback is the recruitment and training and retention of the thousands of volunteer leaders for all the small

groups it has. That's the surprising thing to me-that they are able to manage that. Those small groups are incredibly vulnerable, and complicated to manage. How to keep all those little dinghies moving in the same direction is, organizationally, a major accomplishment."

At Saddleback, members are expected to tithe, and to volunteer. Sunday-school teachers receive special training and a police background check. Recently, Warren decided that Saddleback would feed every homeless person in Orange County three meals a day for forty days. Ninety-two hundred people volunteered. Two million pounds of food were collected, sorted, and distributed.

It may be easy to start going to Saddleback. But it is not easy to stay at Saddleback. "Last Sunday, we took a special offering called Extend the Vision, for people to give over and above their normal offering," Warren said. "We decided we would not use any financial consultants, no high-powered gimmicks, no thermometer on the wall. It was just 'Folks, you know you need to give.' Sunday's offering was seven million dollars in cash and fifty-three million dollars in commitments. That's one Sunday. The average commitment was fifteen

thousand dollars a family. That's in addition to their tithe. When people say megachurches are shallow, I say you have no idea. These people are committed."

Warren's great talent is organizational. He's not a theological innovator. When he went from door to door, twenty-five years ago, he wasn't testing variants on the Christian message. As far as he was concerned, the content of his message was non-negotiable.

Theologically, Warren is a straight-down-the-middle evangelical. What he wanted to learn was how to construct an effective religious institution. His interest was sociological. Putnam compares Warren to entrepreneurs like Ray Kroc and Sam Walton, pioneers not in what they sold but in how they sold. The contemporary thinker Warren cites most often in conversation is the management guru Peter Drucker, who has been a close friend of his for years. Before Warren wrote "The Purpose-Driven Life," he wrote a book called "The Purpose-Driven Church," which was essentially a how-to guide for church builders. He's run hundreds of training seminars around the world for ministers of small-to-medium-sized churches. At the beginning of the Internet boom, he

created a Web site called pastors.com, on which he posted his sermons for sale for four dollars each. There were many pastors in the world, he reasoned, who were part time. They had a second, nine-to-five job and families of their own, and what little free time they had was spent ministering to their congregation. Why not help them out with Sunday morning? The Web site now gets nearly four hundred thousand hits a day.

"I went to South Africa two years ago," Warren said. "We did the purpose-driven-church training, and we simul-cast it to ninety thousand pastors across Africa. After it was over, I said, 'Take me out to a village and show me some churches.'"

In the first village they went to, the local pastor came out, saw Warren, and said, "I know who you are. You're Pastor Rick."

"And I said, 'How do you know who I am?' " Warren recalled. "He said, 'I get your sermons every week.' And I said, 'How? You don't even have electricity here.' And he said, 'We're putting the Internet in every post office in South Africa. Once a week, I walk an hour and a half down to the post office. I download it. Then I teach

it. You are the only training I have ever received.'"

A typical evangelist, of course, would tell stories about reaching ordinary people, the unsaved laity. But a typical evangelist is someone who goes from town to town, giving sermons to large crowds, or preaching to a broad audience on television. Warren has never pastored any congregation but Saddleback, and he refuses to preach on television, because that would put him in direct competition with the local pastors he has spent the past twenty years cultivating. In the argot of the New Economy, most evangelists follow a business-to-consumer model: b-to-c. Warren follows a business-to-business model: b-to-b. He reaches the people who reach people. He's a builder of religious networks. "I once heard Drucker say this," Warren said. "Warren is not building a tent revival ministry, like the old-style evangelists. He's building an army, like the Jesuits."

4.

To write "The Purpose-Driven Life," Warren holed up in an office in a corner of the Saddleback campus, twelve hours a day for seven months. "I would get up at four-thirty, arrive at my special office at five, and I would write from five to five," he said. "I'm a people person, and it about

killed me to be alone by myself. By eleven-thirty, my A.D.D. would kick in. I would do anything not to be there. It was like birthing a baby." The book didn't tell any stories. It wasn't based on any groundbreaking new research or theory or theological insight. "I'm just not that good a writer," Warren said. "I'm a pastor. There's nothing new in this book. But sometimes as I was writing it I would break down in tears. I would be weeping, and I would feel like God was using me."

The book begins with an inscription: "This book is dedicated to you. Before you were born, God planned this moment in your life. It is no accident that you are holding this book. God longs for you to discover the life he created you to live—here on earth, and forever in eternity." Five sections follow, each detailing one of God's purposes in our lives—"You Were Planned for God's Pleasure"; "You Were Formed for God's Family"; "You Were Created to Become Like Christ"; "You Were Shaped for Serving God"; "You Were Made for a Mission"—and each of the sections, in turn, is divided into short chapters ("Understanding Your Shape" or "Using What God Gave You" or "How Real Servants Act"). The writing is simple and unadorned.

The scriptural interpretation is literal: "Noah had never seen rain, because prior to the Flood, God irrigated the earth from the ground up." The religious vision is uncomplicated and accepting: "God wants to be your best friend." Warren's Christianity, like his church, has low barriers to entry: "Wherever you are reading this, I invite you to bow your head and quietly whisper the prayer that will change your eternity. Jesus, I believe in you and I receive you. Go ahead. If you sincerely meant that prayer, congratulations! Welcome to the family of God! You are now ready to discover and start living God's purpose for your life."

It is tempting to interpret the book's message as a kind of New Age self-help theology. Warren's God is not awesome or angry and does not stand in judgment of human sin. He's genial and mellow. "Warren's God 'wants to be your best friend,' and this means, in turn, that God's most daunting property, the exercise of eternal judgment, is strategically downsized," the critic Chris Lehmann writes, echoing a common complaint:

"When Warren turns his utility-minded feel-speak upon the symbolic iconography of the faith, the

results are offensively bathetic: "When Jesus stretched his arms wide on the cross, he was saying, 'I love you this much.'" But God needs to be at a greater remove than a group hug."

The self-help genre, however, is fundamentally inward-focussed. M. Scott Peck's "The Road Less Traveled"-the only spiritual work that, in terms of sales, can even come close to "The Purpose-Driven Life"-begins with the sentence "Life is difficult." That's a self-help book: it focusses the reader on his own experience. Warren's first sentence, by contrast, is "It's not about you," which puts it in the spirit of traditional Christian devotional literature, which focusses the reader outward, toward God. In look and feel, in fact, "The Purpose-Driven Life" is less twenty-first-century Orange County than it is the nineteenth century of Warren's hero, the English evangelist Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon was the Warren of his day: the pastor of a large church in London, and the author of best-selling devotional books. On Sunday, good Christians could go and hear Spurgeon preach at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. But during the week they needed something to replace the preacher, and so Spurgeon, in one of his best-known books, "Morning and Evening," wrote seven hundred and thirty-two short homilies, to be read in

the morning and the evening of each day of the year. The homilies are not complex investigations of theology. They are opportunities for spiritual reflection. (Sample Spurgeonism: "Every child of God is where God has placed him for some purpose, and the practical use of this first point is to lead you to inquire for what practical purpose has God placed each one of you where you now are." Sound familiar?) The Oxford Times described one of Spurgeon's books as "a rich store of topics treated daintily, with broad humour, with quaint good sense, yet always with a subdued tone and high moral aim," and that describes "The Purpose-Driven Life" as well. It's a spiritual companion. And, like "Morning and Evening," it is less a book than a program. It's divided into forty chapters, to be read during "Forty Days of Purpose." The first page of the book is called "My Covenant." It reads, "With God's help, I commit the next 40 days of my life to discovering God's purpose for my life."

Warren departs from Spurgeon, though, in his emphasis on the purpose-driven life as a collective experience. Below the boxed covenant is a space for not one signature but three: "Your name," "Partner's

name," and then Rick Warren's signature, already printed, followed by a quotation from Ecclesiastes 4:9:

"Two are better off than one, because together they can work more effectively. If one of them falls down, the other can help him up. . . . Two people can resist an attack that would defeat one person alone. A rope made of three cords is hard to break."

"The Purpose-Driven Life" is meant to be read in groups. If the vision of faith sometimes seems skimpy, that's because the book is supposed to be supplemented by a layer of discussion and reflection and debate. It is a testament to Warren's intuitive understanding of how small groups work that this is precisely how "The Purpose-Driven Life" has been used. It spread along the network that he has spent his career putting together, not from person to person but from group to group. It presold five hundred thousand copies. It averaged more than half a million copies in sales a month in its first two years, which is possible only when a book is being bought in lots of fifty or a hundred or two hundred. Of those who bought the book as individuals, nearly half have bought more than one copy,

sixteen per cent have bought four to six copies, and seven per cent have bought ten or more. Twenty-five thousand churches have now participated in the congregation-wide "40 Days of Purpose" campaign, as have hundreds of small groups within companies and organizations, from the N.B.A. to the United States Postal Service.

"I remember the first time I met Rick," says Scott Bolinder, the head of Zondervan, the Christian publishing division of HarperCollins and the publisher of "The Purpose-Driven Life." "He was telling me about pastors.com. This is during the height of the dot-com boom. I was thinking, What's your angle? He had no angle. He said, 'I love pastors. I know what they go through.' I said, 'What do you put on there?' He said, 'I put my sermons with a little disclaimer on there: "You are welcome to preach it any way you can. I only ask one thing-I ask that you do it better than I did."' So then fast-forward seven years: he's got hundreds of thousands of pastors who come to this Web site. And he goes, 'By the way, my church and I are getting ready to do forty days of purpose. If you want to join us, I'm going to preach through this and put my sermons up. And I've arranged with my publisher that if you do join us with this

campaign they will sell the book to you for a low price.' That became the tipping point-being able to launch that book with eleven hundred churches, right from the get-go. They became the evangelists for the book."

The book's high-water mark came earlier this year, when a fugitive named Brian Nichols, who had shot and killed four people in an Atlanta courthouse, accosted a young single mother, Ashley Smith, outside her apartment, and held her captive in her home for seven hours.

"I asked him if I could read," Smith said at the press conference after her ordeal was over, and so she went and got her copy of "The Purpose-Driven Life" and turned to the chapter she was reading that day. It was Chapter 33, "How Real Servants Act." It begins:

"We serve God by serving others.

The world defines greatness in terms of power, possessions, prestige, and position. If you can demand service from others, you've arrived. In our self-serving culture with its me-first mentality, acting like a servant is not a popular concept.

Jesus, however, measured greatness in terms of service, not status. God determines your greatness by how many people you serve, not how many people serve you."

Nichols listened and said, "Stop. Will you read it again?"

Smith read it to him again. They talked throughout the night. She made him pancakes. "I said, 'Do you believe in miracles? Because if you don't believe in miracles -- you are here for a reason. You're here in my apartment for some reason.' " She might as well have been quoting from "The Purpose-Driven Life." She went on, "You don't think you're supposed to be sitting here right in front of me listening to me tell you, you know, your reason for being here?" When morning came, Nichols let her go.

Hollywood could not have scripted a better testimonial for "The Purpose-Driven Life." Warren's sales soared further. But the real lesson of that improbable story is that it wasn't improbable at all. What are the odds that a young Christian—a woman who, it turns out, sends her daughter to Hebron Church, in Dacula, Georgia—isn't reading "The Purpose-Driven Life"? And is it surprising that Ashley Smith

would feel compelled to read aloud from the book to her captor, and that, in the discussion that followed, Nichols would come to some larger perspective on his situation? She and Nichols were in a small group, and reading aloud from "The Purpose-Driven Life" is what small groups do.

5.

Not long ago, the sociologist Christian Smith decided to find out what American evangelicals mean when they say that they believe in a "Christian America." The phrase seems to suggest that evangelicals intend to erode the separation of church and state. But when Smith asked a representative sample of evangelicals to explain the meaning of the phrase, the most frequent explanation was that America was founded by people who sought religious liberty and worked to establish religious freedom. The second most frequent explanation offered was that a majority of Americans of earlier generations were sincere Christians, which, as Smith points out, is empirically true. Others said what they meant by a Christian nation was that the basic laws of American government reflected Christian principles—which sounds potentially theocratic, except that when Smith asked his respondents to specify

what they meant by basic laws they came up with representative government and the balance of powers.

"In other words," Smith writes, "the belief that America was once a Christian nation does not necessarily mean a commitment to making it a 'Christian' nation today, whatever that might mean. Some evangelicals do make this connection explicitly. But many discuss America's Christian heritage as a simple fact of history that they are not particularly interested in or optimistic about reclaiming. Further, some evangelicals think America never was a Christian nation; some think it still is; and others think it should not be a Christian nation, whether or not it was so in the past or is now."

As Smith explored one issue after another with the evangelicals—gender equality, education, pluralism, and politics—he found the same scattershot pattern. The Republican Party may have been adept at winning the support of evangelical voters, but that affinity appears to be as much cultural as anything; the Party has learned to speak the evangelical language. Scratch the surface, and the appearance of homogeneity and ideological consistency

disappears. Evangelicals want children to have the right to pray in school, for example, and they vote for conservative Republicans who support that right. But what do they mean by prayer? The New Testament's most left-liberal text, the Lord's Prayer-which, it should be pointed out, begins with a call for utopian social restructuring ("Thy will be done, On earth as it is in Heaven"), then welfare relief ("Give us this day our daily bread"), and then income redistribution ("Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors"). The evangelical movement isn't a movement, if you take movements to be characterized by a coherent philosophy, and that's hardly surprising when you think of the role that small groups have come to play in the evangelical religious experience. The answers that Smith got to his questions are the kind of answers you would expect from people who think most deeply about their faith and its implications on Tuesday night, or Wednesday, with five or six of their closest friends, and not Sunday morning, in the controlling hands of a pastor.

"Small groups cultivate spirituality, but it is a particular kind of spirituality," Robert

Wuthnow writes. "They cannot be expected to nurture faith in the same way that years of theological study, meditation and reflection might." He says, "They provide ways of putting faith in practice. For the most part, their focus is on practical applications, not on abstract knowledge, or even on ideas for the sake of ideas themselves."

We are so accustomed to judging a social movement by its ideological coherence that the vagueness at the heart of evangelicalism sounds like a shortcoming. Peter Drucker calls Warren's network an army, like the Jesuits. But the Jesuits marched in lockstep and held to an all-encompassing and centrally controlled creed. The members of Warren's network don't all dress the same, and they march to the tune only of their own small group, and they agree, fundamentally, only on who the enemy is. It's not an army. It's an insurgency.

In the wake of the extraordinary success of "The Purpose-Driven Life," Warren says, he underwent a period of soul-searching. He had suddenly been given enormous wealth and influence and he did not know what he was supposed to do with it. "God led me to Psalm 72, which is Solomon's prayer for more influence," Warren

says. "It sounds pretty selfish. Solomon is already the wisest and wealthiest man in the world. He's the King of Israel at the apex of its glory. And in that psalm he says, 'God, I want you to make me more powerful and influential.' It looks selfish until he says, 'So that the King may support the widow and orphan, care for the poor, defend the defenseless, speak up for the immigrant, the foreigner, be a friend to those in prison.' Out of that psalm, God said to me that the purpose of influence is to speak up for those who have no influence. That changed my life. I had to repent. I said, I'm sorry, widows and orphans have not been on my radar. I live in Orange County. I live in the Saddleback Valley, which is all gated communities. There aren't any homeless people around. They are thirteen miles away, in Santa Ana, not here." He gestured toward the rolling green hills outside. "I started reading through Scripture. I said, How did I miss the two thousand verses on the poor in the Bible? So I said, I will use whatever affluence and influence that you give me to help those who are marginalized."

He and his wife, Kay, decided to reverse tithe, giving away ninety per cent of the tens of millions of

dollars they earned from "The Purpose-Driven Life." They sat down with gay community leaders to talk about fighting AIDS. Warren has made repeated trips to Africa. He has sent out volunteers to forty-seven countries around the world, test-piloting experiments in microfinance and H.I.V. prevention and medical education. He decided to take the same networks he had built to train pastors and spread the purpose-driven life and put them to work on social problems.

"There is only one thing big enough to handle the world's problems, and that is the millions and millions of churches spread out around the world," he says. "I can take you to thousands of villages where they don't have a school. They don't have a grocery store, don't have a fire department. But they have a church. They have a pastor. They have volunteers. The problem today is distribution. In the tsunami, millions of dollars of foodstuffs piled up on the shores and people couldn't get it into the places that needed it, because they didn't have a network. Well, the biggest distribution network in the world is local churches. There are millions of them, far more than all the franchises in the world. Put together, they could be a force for good."

That is, in one sense, a typical Warren pronouncement-bold to the point of audacity, like telling his publisher that his book will sell a hundred million copies. In another sense, it is profoundly modest. When Warren's nineteenth-century evangelical predecessors took on the fight against slavery, they brought to bear every legal, political, and economic lever they could get their hands on. But that was a different time, and that was a different church. Today's evangelicalism is a network, and networks, for better or worse, are informal and personal.

At the Anaheim stadium service, Warren laid out his plan for attacking poverty and disease. He didn't talk about governments, though, or the United Nations, or structures, or laws. He talked about the pastors he had met in his travels around the world. He brought out the President of Rwanda, who stood up at the microphone—a short, slender man in an immaculate black suit—and spoke in halting English about how Warren was helping him rebuild his country. When he was finished, the crowd erupted in applause, and Rick Warren walked across the stage and enfolded him in his long arms.

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