

Living with purpose

A philosophy of faith and service moves hearts and minds

By Patrick Kampert Tribune staff reporter

April 25, 2004

In the first 18 years of his life, Jim Botts remembers attending church exactly once. He was a factory supervisor in Elgin by day, a drug dealer by night and a touring death-metal drummer for the band Life Sentence on the weekends. He met his wife when she tagged along to a drug buy with one of his customers.

After he became a Christian, he went back to school and got Bible and business degrees. But with no religious background, he became frustrated with the tradition-bound churches he attended, where people were more concerned about committee meetings and the color of the carpet than reaching out to the poor.

"Unfortunately, Christians are more widely known for what they're against than what they're for," Botts said. "If my neighbor drinks and I don't drink, I can't be around him? That's pitiful. That's not Christian at all."

His wife encouraged him to leave his business job in Denver and return to the Fox Valley to help a failing church start over. Botts decided to build The Crossing church in Crystal Lake from the ground up using principles contained in the writings of Rick Warren, whose book "The Purpose-Driven Life" has now sold more than 16 million copies. The Crossing has grown to 250 people from 35 in just two years.

Although few churches revamp their entire structure around "The Purpose-Driven Life" as The Crossing did, Warren's influence is spreading rapidly. To date, 15,000 churches have used the book in a "40 Days of Purpose" campaign. Another 15,000 are signed up for the fall.

Despite the massive growth of the Christian music and publishing industry, Botts says too many people are still playing religious games: "They've got a bumper sticker and a little fish on their car and all that, but they're unchanged. I don't love my wife any differently and on the job I still steal stuff," Botts charged. "But the purpose-driven life is a process of life change. I can guarantee it—because I've lived it. My friends know it. They said, 'Whatever's changing you, I want to know it.'"

Warren, who pastors Saddleback Church in the Orange County suburb of Lake Forest, Calif., where over 20,000 people attend regularly (39,000 attended on Easter), calls "The Purpose-Driven Life" an "ANTI-self-help book." In fact, the first line of the book is: "It's not about you."

He says we were made to serve God and others, not the other way around, and lays out what he calls the five purposes of life based on Jesus' teachings:

-- Worship ("Love God with all your heart.")

- Ministry ("Love your neighbor as yourself.")
- Evangelism ("Go and make disciples.")
- Fellowship (Get involved in a local church.)
- Discipleship (Grow spiritually and become like Christ .)

Warren says his book isn't pioneering any new ground, but he thinks he knows why it has struck a chord. "We've had this 'me generation' for so long," he said. "Everything in our culture says, 'It's all about you.' People are looking for a greater purpose than themselves."

An action plan

The age in which we live, filled with war and terrorism, creates spiritual hunger, he said, and people are looking for a faith that moves them to action. "Your faith is not just something you believe; it's something you do," Warren said. "We had a Reformation 500 years ago which was a reformation of belief: What does the church *believe*? I believe we're on the verge of a New Reformation: What is the church called to *do*?"

Alan Wolfe, a Boston College sociologist and author of "The Transformation of American Religion: How We Really Live Our Faith" said he's generally skeptical about religious best-sellers, such as "The Prayer of Jabez" or the "Left Behind" series, but thinks Warren's work stands apart from the rest.

"I think Rick Warren is on to something," he said. "I admire him, because he listens to people. He's heard that something is not quite right in the culture of our country, and he has a brilliant way of responding to people in a way that people don't find threatening."

Warren says the U.S. is due for a new Great Awakening similar to the one in the 1700s that was fanned by the fiery apocalyptic preaching of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and John Wesley. But Warren's approach is a world away from Edwards, Wolfe notes. "It is a big departure from 'God is in your face and you should quake before him,' that kind of message," Wolfe said.

For his part, Warren says he hears all the time that Saddleback is, as he puts it, "a shallow, superficial church that caters to the whims of consumeristic Christianity." But he points out that Saddleback's membership requirements include a pledge to tithe (give 10 percent of your income to the church) and to go on humanitarian mission trips.

"I'll take the commitment of any 500 of our members and stack them against any church in America," he said. "When you're small, they ignore you; when you're big, they resent you."

A broad reach

The enthusiasm for "The Purpose-Driven Life" can be found in mainline denominations and evangelical churches, in cities and suburbs. It also reaches across ethnic and cultural barriers.

In the Chicago area, more than 200 churches are participating in "40 Days of Purpose" (some used it as a Lenten series). Among them is St. Walter's Catholic Church in Roselle, which had hoped 100 people would sign up for small home groups for the "40 Days of Purpose" program studying Warren's book. Instead, 700 got involved.

Beth Martinski, a stay-at-home mom, joined a small group of parishioners at the urging of her friend Lisa Berkshire. The parishioners meet and talk about serving others and establishing a sense of community in their church. Martinski said Sept. 11-and even the recent train bombings in Madrid-caused her to re-examine her faith. She says Warren's book has transformed her. "It

really has changed my focus," she said. "I don't stress out about things as much as I used to. Everything has a purpose and a time and a place."

Rev. Francis McDonald, a priest for 43 years and St. Walter's pastor for 18, said he hopes Warren's book, saturated with over 1,500 Bible verses in modern translations, will lead his parishioners back to Scripture. "Father Mac said we are strangers to the Bible and he wanted that changed," Berkshire said.

That's also the goal for Heriberto Prudencio, pastor of Iglesia Luterana Sagrado Corazon in Waukegan, which has an average attendance of 75 to 100 at its Spanish services. "We have to motivate them to read the Bible and to read the book," he said. "Most of them have no experience in Bible reading." To Prudencio, the message of the book is simple: "We come from God and we are going back to God. So we have to get prepared here."

Life's questions

At various times in his life, Jesse Coger thought he was going back to God sooner than he expected. He has been shot, stabbed and hit in the head with a hammer. He went through rehab numerous times only to end up back on crack or alcohol. He has been homeless.

"I always wondered," the 50-year-old Chicagoan said, "what was I born for? Why couldn't I stop getting high? Why did God allow me to live when all my friends were dying?"

Coger found the answers he was looking for at Greater St. John Baptist Church in Chicago's North Austin neighborhood, which has grown to 1,100 members from 75 since pastor Ira Acree adopted Warren's "purpose-driven" approach. "In a purpose-driven church," Acree said, "the bottom line is having pastors teaching and preaching for life change, not for entertainment."

To that end, Acree's church has established college scholarships for students in the impoverished Austin area and provides seminars and financial assistance for first-time home buyers in his congregation. Coger said his own purpose as a changed man is clear: to serve others, whether it's visiting sick people in hospitals or giving communion to people who are homebound. "Once I'm helping somebody else, my problem doesn't seem so big anymore," he said. "When you bring happiness to somebody else, it brings happiness back. It's hard to explain, but it works."