

# Largest Church in U.S. Gets New Digs

**Lakewood Church, the nation's largest congregation, now meets in a renovated sports arena that seats 16,000 people**

Mercedes Garces remembers when Lakewood Church pastor John Osteen predicted that the ministry he founded would one day occupy Houston's Compaq Center.

"Everything is possible with God," said Garces, who has attended the church with her husband, Abel, for 14 years. "We believed it. At least I did."

Osteen passed away in 1999, but on July 16 his bold claim became a reality when 16,000 people crammed into the former sports and entertainment venue for the grand opening of the nation's largest church facility. Another 3,000 watched from an overflow area.

"How do you like our new home?" asked John's son, current pastor Joel Osteen, who in the last five years has seen the church grow from 8,000 to 30,000, making it the nation's largest. The crowd responded with one of many thunderous ovations.

Even before the doors opened two hours prior to the event, hundreds of people gathered outside waiting to get a closer look at the renovated facility. Once inside, church members and guests saw little resemblance to the arena that hosted NBA and WNBA championship games and rock concerts featuring the likes of U2, the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley.

The floor has been replaced by additional seating, and the stage, designed by four-time Emmy Award-winner Rene Lagler, features a hydraulically operated orchestra pit, elaborate choir lofts, a pair of cascading waterfalls and a large golden globe that spins.

Throughout the evening, the congregation heard from dignitaries such as Joel Osteen's mother, Dodie; his brother, Paul; and Texas Gov. Rick Perry. Other notable attendees included evangelists R.W. Schambach and Norvel Hayes, U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, Houston Texans quarterback David Carr and about 30 members from the original Lakewood church.

"The growth of this church has been nothing less than phenomenal," Perry said. "It's been that way because there was a big welcome mat out. ... And why shouldn't it be that way? When you strip away all that makes us different, we're all very much one in a great sense. We're all made in the image of God."

Osteen used the grand opening as an opportunity to encourage those in the crowd or watching live on Trinity Broadcasting Network and Daystar Television Network. "If you have a dream in your heart, my prayer tonight is that that dream is going to really take root," Osteen said. "And you're going to know that you know that you can be all that God's created you to be. You can accomplish everything God's put in your heart."

Irvine Team, a leading design and construction strategy team based in Houston, oversaw the 2-1/2-year renovation process that cost \$95 million. "This is a superb sanctuary," said Team President Dennis Irvine. "It's a state-of-the-art, television-friendly environment. ... It has been painstakingly thought-out and very well executed."

The facility houses an interactive children's ministry area that seats another 3,500 people. Adjacent to the church is a new five-story building that houses the church offices, media services, broadcast production suites and youth ministries.

Osteen said the new facility has several advantages, including a more centralized location, better access to parking and a more complete setup for its television broadcasts that reach an estimated 7 million people worldwide. "At our other place we were limited because of the street sizes and things," Osteen said. "So just having a place that's designed for 16,000 or 20,000 ... will let our base grow so that we can touch the city and touch the world even more."

He also said the record-setting facility could inspire other ministries to think big. "I think God's helped us to be an example," he said. "When I grew up, it was a big deal to have a church of a thousand. But I believe we can have churches where 20,000 people come, like this."

**Chad Bonham in Houston**