

IN MEMORIAM: Dodie Osteen, 'Their Oasis of Love Reaches a Troubled World'

An old feed barn on the wrong side of town is as unlikely a place as you will ever find to start a church that will touch a troubled world. But the improbable has never stopped John and Dodie Osteen – in fact, in a way they thrive on it.

"The way you make sure God's the one who is in control," he says.

In 1958 the energetic couple staked out the sawdust sanctuary and called it Lakewood Baptist Church. On the rough and poor east side of Houston, they nonetheless filled the 234 seats. It was the year of the greatest changes in the Osteens' lives and a year that would set the pace for the ministry that would eventually literally span the world.



Dodie Osteen, at a Lakewood Baptist Church prayer service. Mrs. Osteen passed July 30, 2025, aged 91.

Today, the old feed barn is gone, but Lakewood is not. Still on the same site, it has grown to cover 51 acres on which sit a brand-new 8,200-seat arena-type sanctuary, an array of old warehouses and a dozen or so barracks. The odd medley of 37 structures is a far cry from the plushness of some of Houston's other churches, one of which boasts racquetball courts and heaven-and-hell stained-glass windows. Instead, Lakewood has created simple environs, hoping everyone will feel welcome.

And people have come—up to 20,000 who call this their church home regularly drive an average of 25 minutes each way. Black, white, Hispanic—the congregation is about one-third of each. Among them are professional baseball players, bank presidents,

factory workers, schoolteachers, plumbers. People from around the world. Lakewood has become a beacon for missionaries and native pastors wanting training, many of whom come to a distinguished annual conference.

With this hands-on approach to meeting the needs of the local congregation and missions, Lakewood has become known as “an oasis of love in a troubled world.”

But it is odd how it has come about, almost with no striving or careful calculation. Most super churches today depend upon an extensive small-group structure or a large counseling staff to take care of the day-to-day ministry needs of the congregation. Many large churches have extensive organizational structures, including such things as a five-year church growth plan. Lakewood has none of this.

Rather, the Osteens are insistent that every person is a minister, that those sitting in the pews must forge the relationships and facilitate healing. Furthermore, they strictly adhere to their “pay-as-you-go” theory, never purchasing anything they can’t pay for at the time. And they also have a “pray-as-you-go” policy, which means they don’t act unless the leadership knows God is directing them to move forward.

“It’s almost like it just happens,” marvels Dodie at the simple organizational structure. “It’s the Holy Spirit at work.”

There is a basic structure—Sunday School, new-believers counseling, a singles outreach, a prison ministry, a large world-missions department, youth meetings, the Healing Center for Marriages and more. Staff members supervise certain areas, but most of the work is left up to the individuals who sit in the pews each Sunday. Nearly 1,500 volunteers lead 50 groups which reach out to about 4,000 people.

John and Dodie Osteen oversee this massive ministry. He is the

vigorous, patriarchal pastor who concentrates on Bible basics; she is the compassionate first lady of the church who leads prayer every service and will have the congregation sing "Happy Birthday" if you ask her.

The Osteens say they use many of the same ministry principles they did when only a handful met, but today they have the help of four of their six children and a son-in-law. They have expanded to television, which is directed and produced by their youngest son, Joel. They have reached literally around the world with crusades. And this year they will start a film outreach and monthly support of 500 native missionaries in India.

John Osteen was born 67 years ago in Paris, Texas. As a child he basically didn't attend church, except occasionally on holidays. In his late teen years the nightclub scene was his venue. But he had one friend, a Jesus freak before there was such a thing, who took every opportunity to drop a little sermon into their conversation.

Osteen has retold the story a thousand times: "One night in 1939 I was coming home from a nightclub about one or two o'clock in the morning. As I made my way across Ft. Worth, Texas, I began to think about God, hell, heaven and eternity... I fell under conviction of sin that night, even though I did not know what it was all about."

Within a week he was at church with his friend, kneeling at the altar; within a month he was preaching his first sermon.

Osteen went to and graduated from John Brown University in Arkansas, then he attended and received a degree from Northern Baptist Seminary. Soon he was pastoring churches in San Diego, California, and Texas – most notably he led tremendous growth at Baytown's Central Baptist and was a member of the Southern Baptist executive board for Texas. Dodie remembers that his sermons began with brimstone, ignited with fire and always

ended at the altar. But he was honest enough even back then to know when he was in trouble theologically.

Once, from the pulpit, he delved into the gifts of the Spirit and healing. Osteen chuckles as he recalls, "I related the word of wisdom and word of knowledge as being found in Baptist institutions of learning, the gifts of healing and miracles in our hospitals and the gift of discernment of spirits in our psychiatrists. When I got to the gift of tongues, utter confusion came into my mind.

"I stopped, closed my Bible and told the people I didn't know what I was talking about."

Gradually Osteen became disillusioned with pastoring. He says while his faith was strong, too many Christians around him didn't live Christian lives. In 1957 he resigned as pastor in Baytown and began selling insurance.

During this year off he served as a "supply pastor" to Baptist churches with vacant pulpits, never going one Sunday without an assignment. One stop was Hibbard Memorial Baptist in Houston, where he was first named interim pastor, then full-time pastor in 1958.

Still hungry to find the power to reach and teach these people, he put aside his theology and study books to concentrate fully on understanding what the Bible says. Healing and the supernatural gifts started to take on new meaning as he read the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and First and Second Corinthians. He slowly found himself believing.

He sought out Pentecostal pastors and read the book *Healing the Sick* by T.L. Osborn. Several times he felt the Holy Spirit trying to give him words in another language. At Hibbard he began to teach what he had learned.

In July of 1958 the Osteens' first daughter, Lisa, was born.

She had cerebral palsy. Doctors said she would not be normal. Osteen now had to test what he had learned.

Though it smacked in the face of everything he had been taught as a Southern Baptist pastor and what he had preached for 19 years, he and Dodie anointed their precious baby girl with oil, prayed for a healing and waited.

They began "speaking words of faith." Osteen is careful to explain that he was believing for a miracle for Lisa, not trying to manipulate God. "The power of life and death is in the tongue," he still teaches and believes. "We limit Jesus and His power when we fail to confess and stand on His Word."

Osteen's search reached new depths when, in the fall of 1958, he was baptized in the Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. He continued praying for Lisa.

Then, nearly seven months after her birth, Lisa sat up for the first time. Doctor checkups proved what the Osteens had believed: she was whole.

Today Lisa is totally normal; no one would suspect she once suffered from cerebral palsy. In fact, she has graduated from Oral Roberts University and now serves as the executive director of John Osteen Ministries and director of the Healing Center for Marriages at Lakewood.

Following the healing of his daughter, Osteen started preaching more about the gifts and faith. Many members at Hibbard believed along with the Osteens, for they too had seen Lisa healed. But not everyone was overjoyed by this spiritual adventure.

State Southern Baptist officers put Osteen on trial for heresy; he was one of the first charismatic Southern Baptists to go through such an ordeal because he was baptized in the Holy Spirit. But the majority of the Hibbard church voted to keep him as their pastor. Even with the vote of confidence,

Osteen chose to start his own church rather than enter into a showdown with diehard traditionalists who were against the gifts.

About 100 persons, mostly from Hibbard, met in the old feed barn. Rachel Burchfield remembers the first meeting she attended there: "I saw this little preacher (Osteen is 5' 7") standing on an overturned crate of some type. He was so energetic and full of life. Never had I heard anything like it before. The words touched me deeply."

Burchfield now works on the Lakewood staff overseeing the youth with her husband, Tommy.

The name became simply Lakewood Church after the word "Baptist" fell off the sign during a storm. No one ever put it back up. It was appropriate timing as Osteen and Lakewood were identifying more with the T.L. Osborns and Oral Robertses of the world rather than the Southern Baptists with whom they had formerly associated.

Osteen was a vanguard of what would later be called the charismatic renewal. As he successfully led his "Spirit-filled" congregation, other Southern Baptist preachers such as Charles Simpson and Ken Sumrall had similar experiences in places such as Mobile, Alabama, and Pensacola, Florida. In fact, Sumrall learned about the baptism of the Holy Spirit from Osteen.

Although Lakewood was growing, after three years Osteen was called overseas. In 1960 he visited Mexico with T.L. and Daisy Osborn. He now says this trip was a turning point, forever shaping his view of the role of the local church and paving the way to his own missions work.

As a Baptist pastor, he had supported the denomination's missions program. But in Juarez, Mexico, he saw firsthand the need for Christians in America and in foreign nations to be bridged.

The police had wanted to shut down the meeting the first night. But Osborn wisely delivered a 45-minute sermon-prayer including a call for healing. It seemed that Roman Catholic officials, because of their tradition, would not advance while a prayer was in progress.

During the meeting Osteen witnessed instantaneous healings and heard testimonies from people who had been touched by the power of the Holy Spirit.

“He saw the power of the Word of God,” says Osborn. “He saw people healed without anyone touching them or laying hands on them. He was deeply moved, overwhelmed.”

For eight years (1961–1969) the Osteens worked as missionaries in Mexico, the Philippines and India. This frontline exposure further affected their approach to pastoring.

“Whatever God is doing I want to be right in the middle of it,” says Osteen. “God is moving with the charismatics today, but if He moves in another direction that’s where I want to go. God called me to go up and down the valleys of religions and prophesy until there is a rattling of the bones, until religious people stand up like a mighty army and enter into the power of God in this last day.”

The Osteens returned to Lakewood in 1969 to find less than 100 people in attendance. But Houston was to be rattled. The Osteens started prophesying and preaching and loving. While they moved alongside people who became known as faith teachers – Hagin, Copeland and Roberts – they kept one foot in the mission field.

Making several trips overseas each year, Osteen held crusades and taught native pastors. He quickly developed an outlook that made missions part of the ongoing life of Lakewood. Instead of bringing in missionaries to renew interest once a year, he attempts to have testimonies and reports every service.

He also testifies of his own overseas work. During a crusade in India several years ago, a young man came to Osteen's meetings intent on breaking them up. He had instructions from his Communist Party boss who didn't like the Christian message being spread, but he waited too long to make his move. Osteen, in India to hold the crusade, started praying for people to be healed.

"If God doesn't heal those who are deaf, then I will leave and not preach anymore," Osteen challenged. "If He does heal, then you need to accept Him as Lord and Savior."

Osteen had no idea the would-be disrupter was in the audience nor did he know that the man was deaf in one ear.

Following Osteen's instructions – and sure that he would not be healed – the man stuck one finger in his deaf ear. Osteen prayed, pouring out his faith toward God. When Osteen finished, the man removed his finger from his deaf ear and stuck a finger in his hearing ear.

He could hear! His deaf ear was healed!

The next day the Communist Party leader who had dispatched the young man to disrupt the meeting sent another envoy. This time, instead of a confrontation, he wanted prayer for his child.

"Healing is the greatest dinner bell for sharing the gospel," Osteen says. "People are so hungry, they want to know if there is a God and they believe when they see."

Osteen is not the only one from Lakewood to travel overseas. Over the years, more than 1,000 people have gone out, many trained at the Lakewood Bible Institute. Some have gone on short-term jaunts; others for longer periods. Many have reported dramatic results.

One lady went to Guatemala, where she got the government to

change laws so she could better minister to the children of prisoners; another lady is working in India; and a couple is in the Amazon region in South America helping to build houses for natives.

This missions call is brought home every service as the congregation prays, extending their hands toward maps and photos strategically placed around the sanctuary. Continued on page 50

When talking about Lakewood, the Osteens and their staff often say, "We can tell you about the missions work and the television ministry and the people. But you have to come here to really understand what is happening."

What's happening at Lakewood is hard to describe, easier to see.

On the Sunday I attended they started with worship – a black person and a white person led. The songs were a mix of contemporary choruses and traditional hymns; people raised their hands as well as their voices. Emotion was not withheld as it was an intimate time with God.

Dodie followed. Every service she prays for every person she possibly can. Quietly for one, with a shout of joy for the next, she knows every prayer is being answered. There is no going through the motions for this woman.

Recently a man asked for prayer. He had wronged his family and had left his home. He wanted forgiveness and reconciliation. Dodie asked him to come forward for prayer. Before he could get down to the front, in an aisle on the other side of the church a woman with a small girl rushed forward – yes, his wife and child. They were reunited as they wept and praised God. None of the three had ever attended Lakewood before, but God had attracted them there that day.

During the service I attended Dodie prayed for at least two

dozen people while others experienced in praying for the sick ministered to perhaps 100 people who came forward. Among those praying for the sick was Toronto Blue Jays star outfielder Jesse Barfield, who is a regular at Lakewood during the off-season.

Following Dodie, John Osteen preached. As energetic and fiery as Rachel Burchfield described him being in the old feed barn, he tends to focus on basics. But he insists he never repeats a sermon. "I preach out of the overflow of my personal devotions and relationship with God," he says. "If that ever faltered the people would know right away because I would have nothing to preach."

Before his sermon he had the congregation hold up their Bibles and, as in every service, they repeated after him: "This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today I will be taught the Word of God. My mind is alert. My heart is receptive. I will never be the same, in Jesus' name."

Charismatic in doctrine and personality, Osteen is a televangelist – more or less. Maybe "telepastor" would be a better word. He videotapes each service and broadcasts it in Houston and on the Christian Broadcasting Network.

During the service I attended, he addressed the television audience specifically. Looking into the camera he said, "Now, if you are at home wondering who this preacher is and if God is real, don't change channels. Listen to these words from the apostle Paul..."

Excitedly he leafed through his King James Bible, sounding off verse after verse, turning back to the in-house congregation at some point. Finally he presented an altar call. For those watching on television a mailing address was given, but not a fund-raising pitch. There never is one.

The money received from those watching totals a couple

thousand dollars a year, according to Osteen. The rest of the \$750,000 yearly budget comes from the congregation as designated giving.

Osteen sees the television broadcasts as a ministry of the church and insists fund-raising should not be a part of the program. If funds from the church run low, they just cut back. If they increase, then they increase the number of programs aired.

Osteen has taught long and hard about finances. Where Oral Roberts has his seed-faith concept, Osteen has his top-of-barrel philosophy. What he believes is actually quite simple: "Fill up the barrel once, then raise money for projects over and above that. It's just as easy to raise money from the top of the barrel as from the bottom."

The church operates on a cash-only basis. "We can't even buy a legal pad on credit," smiles one secretary.

Explains Dodie, "We have always operated this way. If we have the money we buy it; if we don't then we go without. We have lived this way in our personal lives and as a church."

Such was the case when the congregation went to build in early 1987. Besides the Houston economic crunch, which was its worst since the Great Depression, the church had two more strikes against it.

Osteen underwent open-heart surgery last year. His future leadership role, while never doubted by himself, still had to be determined.

Then there was this scandal about Jim Bakker and PTL that affected most charismatic churches one way or another — especially cut back were contributions. Lakewood, with its obviously charismatic bent and its national television ministry, could have been adversely affected.

Barely back in the pulpit after his successful surgery – doctors said it was a miracle he had survived so long with such clogged circulation – Osteen announced that Lakewood would immediately begin construction on a much- and long-needed super-sanctuary. What's more, he said it would be paid for in full when the doors opened.

If Doubting Thomas is a member of Lakewood, he didn't rise in protest. This congregation rallied in unity behind their pastor. "They have learned to trust his judgment," offers Dodie. "And they have learned that we don't start projects just for the sake of having a project. We waited a long time to build this sanctuary – we really have needed it for years."

The economic slump turned out to be no more than a bump for Lakewood. As Osteen explains, "Everyone wanted work. The bids came in very low. We were able to build a \$12 million facility for just under \$6 million."

When the new sanctuary opened April 9 with Oral Roberts and Kenneth E. Hagin presiding as inaugural speakers, it was paid for in full. While simple, it was the finest structure the Osteens ever built – that included seats that are "sit-able." That's important because the story around Lakewood is that for years Osteen rebuffed suggestions that new pews be purchased. Finally, Kenneth Copeland solved the problem, delivering one of his famous sermons – full of content, but five times as long as any sermon Osteen had ever preached. Osteen was in the front row for that two-hour service – seated in one of the pews others had called unbearable. At the next staff meeting he meekly suggested, "I think it's time we get new pews!"

Oral Roberts, who has repeatedly praised the work of the Osteens, said the new sanctuary reminded him of his glorious tent crusades of two decades ago.

When it came to the new building, Osteen had applied his principles of faith and practicality, again proving the maxim

works in God's timing. Then, when the previous year's tithes and offerings were added up – in the year of PTL and Houston's great economic crunch – Lakewood's income had doubled. They had not cut back from missions to pay for their building; in fact, missions giving increased!

The Osteens prefer to operate on this positive level. But they aren't afraid to face facts. When daughter Lisa was divorced against her will, the congregation was there beside the Osteens; when Dodie was diagnosed as having cancer and told she only had a short time to live, the congregation was there to pray her through and then celebrate her healing; when a satellite television network stumbled, the other TV ministry went on and video outreach to internationals was increased to reach 80 nations.

In fact, in each of these hardships a new ministry has arisen; the Osteens again and again take the worst of times and make them the best.

A longtime friend of the Osteens, T.L. Osborn, puts it all into perspective: "John Osteen has taken the ministry and the world seriously. He is the finest pastoral example in America, perhaps in the world. He is a pastor who again and again goes among the people. He looks into their eyes, feels their pulse. John has a passion to share Christ and to teach others how to preach the gospel."

What does Osteen think about Lakewood's success? When asked, he replied, "Once a teenage runaway came to our service. We asked her where she heard about us. She said a prostitute had told her to come here, because this was a place where she would find love."

An Oasis of Love in a Troubled World – if ever a church has been that, it is Lakewood. Though an old feed barn is indeed an unusual place to start such a church, it is not at all unlike God choosing a humble stable for the birth of His Son.

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