

JOEL OSTEEN: Packing God's House in Houston

Note: This article appeared in the June 2004 issue of Charisma magazine.

The biggest megachurch in the nation is poised to become even bigger—much bigger.

“I don’t want this to sound arrogant but I believe one day we’re going to have 100,000 a weekend,” says pastor Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston.

The way things have been going, there’s every reason to think that will happen. During December the church moved into the Compaq Center a 16,000-seat arena and the former home of the Houston Rockets. Despite having an 8,000-seat sanctuary, Lakewood Church—named last year by *Forbes* magazine as the nation’s largest megachurch—couldn’t accommodate the estimated 25,000 to 30,000 people who were coming through its doors each week.

In an unlikely scenario, church officials brokered a deal with the city of Houston to lease the center for \$12.3 million for the first 30 years, with an option to extend the lease another 30 years for \$22 million. The move was highly controversial and involved litigation, plenty of local headlines and a divided city-council vote. But in what Osteen rails a one-in-a-trillion chance, the measure passed.

“It was just the hand of the Lord,” he says. “People you would never dream of, who were not Christian people, got on board.”

But why would anyone want to come to such a gigantic church gathering? What is it about Lakewood that keeps pulling people in? To understand, it helps to go back to the church’s beginnings—in a feed store.

A Preacher Is Born

Before Joel Osteen was born, his dad, the late John Osteen, was a Southern Baptist pastor. But he left the denomination in 1959 to start a non-denominational, charismatic church. His first church building was an abandoned feed store.

Located then in a low-income neighborhood on the east side of Houston, Lakewood was racially integrated—a trait that continues today in a congregation that is more or less equal parts Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic.

“People came from all over the world and asked us how we integrated it,” Joel Osteen says. “Daddy never tried to do it. ... His whole ministry was about loving people, helping people, showing compassion.”

John Osteen, who died in 1999, “always embraced everyone,” Joel’s wife, Victoria, says of her father-in-law.

“A lot has been forged,” she adds “We’re just glad to be able to stand on the foundation that he laid and build on it.”

The elder Osteen went on to build a church in the same neighborhood in the late 1970s. As attendance grew, that building was torn down in 1987 and replaced with a parking lot for a new 8,000-seat, 120,000-square-foot sanctuary.

Meanwhile, son Joel, one of six children, was learning the business of television—that is, when not playing basketball or baseball or running track. He still has the lean, energetic look of an athlete.

“Growing up, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be involved in TV production,” he says. “That was just my passion.”

In 1981 he came home from Oral Roberts University (ORU) to start the Lakewood TV ministry. “I did that for 17 years, working behind the scenes,” Osteen says. “My dad, he always

wanted me to preach. It just wasn't in my heart."

The younger Osteen's television-marketing talents and his dad's preaching skills resulted eventually in the church's services being aired on stations nationwide and in more than 100 countries. In January 1999 John Osteen wound up in the hospital with kidney trouble and asked Joel to fill in for him. When Joel said no, John said he wanted Joel to know he was his first choice as a replacement preacher. Joel agreed to do it.

"I spoke for him that Sunday for the first time in my life," he says. "I just got up there and told stories. I was so glad when it was over. I said, 'I'll never do this again in my life.' Well, that was the last Sunday of my dad's life."

Things were touch-and-go for a while at Lakewood after John Osteen's death, as Joel's mother, Dodie, recalls: "When John went to heaven I didn't know what in the world would happen to the church."

Then Joel stepped up. Preaching had found a home in his heart at last.

Explosive Growth

After Joel promoted Jon Swearingen, his TV assistant, to director of media ministries he soon found himself on the opposite end of the camera lens.

"Little did I know when I was laying the groundwork for the TV ministry that it was for my own life," Osteen says, some incredulity still in his voice today. "You just see God's hand in everything."

Lakewood Church had about 6,000 members when Osteen took over the pastorate from his father. Within a year attendance more than doubled.

"We had a good television outreach with Joel's father, and

Joel laid an excellent foundation," says Swearingen, an ORU graduate. "Once he became pastor it was like an explosion, both with church growth and the television audience."

"Services are now broadcast nationally on the ABC Family Channel, Black Entertainment Television, the PAX-TV Network and Trinity Broadcasting, among others, as well as on overseas stations and live on the Internet. Four years ago, when Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff—former member of the Dove Award-winning Cruse Family gospel group—became Lakewood's minister of music, the church had only one Sunday morning service.

"Lakewood wasn't at all then, just four years ago, what it is now," she says. "It's like a whole new world now, a broader vision."

Soon after Cruse-Ratcliff arrived, Lakewood expanded when two Sunday morning services were added and, eight months later, a Saturday night worship service. Today a Spanish-language session is held Sunday afternoons, as well as services on Sunday nights and Wednesday nights.

"The growth was extremely rapid," says Cruse-Ratcliff, who still serves on the 200-member Lakewood staff. "We had thousands of people walk the aisle."

Why?

"I think because [Osteens'] message is so encouraging," she says. "He really does preach the good news."

Osteen's upbeat style is deliberate and authentic. "Make church relevant," he says. "Give them something to be able to take away. I find today people are not looking for theology. There's a place for it. [But] in your everyday life you need to know how to live."

He says music is a major part of the draw, noting that church musicians write many of the songs. Worship leader Israel

Houghton describes the growth as part of a divine process in which the mix of races is vital.

“It’s the cross-cultural approach to how church is done here. It’s the steadfast effort to overcome cultural and denominational barriers,” Houghton says. “You’ve got this incredible diversity in place.”

Houghton had been in large churches before, but none of his previous experience fully prepared him for the crowds he has encountered at Lakewood. “It really is mind-blowing in any scenario—30,000 people coming out on a weekend together,” he notes.

Down-to-Earth Appeal

Everyone agrees Osteen’s preaching is a key ingredient. Descriptors of his style include “simple,” “down-to-earth,” “practical,” “relatable,” “easy,” “folksy,” “humble.”

“It’s uncanny how God has given him a gift,” Victoria says. “It’s a gift to take such complexity ... and be able to break it down so simply.

“He doesn’t put on any airs; he doesn’t know how to. He’s a very even temperament. He’s very nonjudgmental ... People don’t feel threatened by him. He’s just got so much love.”

Victoria grew up in the Church of Christ, switching to a nondenominational church as a teen. She attended the University of Houston for two years before starting to work in her family’s jewelry business. It was there she met her husband.

Joel described their meeting in a sermon. He said he had been praying for a wife and that one day his watch battery died, so he stopped at the jewelry store on his way to a gym. “When I walked in there, out walked the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I thought, *Man, God, you have just answered my prayer.*

“She ended up selling me not only a new battery, she sold me a whole new watch—and she’s been taking my money ever since,” he adds, joking.

Osteen’s unpretentious preaching style was fully evident one Saturday night when he taught from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk.

“It’s five books back from the start of the New Testament,” he told the audience as he flipped through his Bible to find the text. “No, wait. I think it is,” he said, still turning pages as the audience laughed. “I can’t find it. Maybe it’s not. I’m going to have to look in the contents.

“Well, it is five books back.”

The audience applauded, and Joel said with a self-deprecating chuckle, “You’re clapping for me?”

When turning to Habakkuk during his sermon the next morning, Joel confessed to the crowd, “It took me to minutes to find it last night—and I’m the pastor.”

The appealing style of Osteen’s personality in the pulpit is unmistakable, it is part of the reason for Lakewood’s current level of success. An additional significant reason is the fact that Joel Osteen benefits greatly from his father’s legacy, says Scott L. Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

“His father certainly grew that church, and when [Joel] took over, he kind of came in with a whole new vision and a lot of energy,” says Thumma, who has studied megachurches. “He was able to stand on, essentially, the shoulders of his father.

“A lot of other megachurch pastors—because they’re basically building from the ground up—by the time they get that size they’re already pretty stretched. He was able to step into an already existing megachurch and bring it to the next level”

Thumma says Lakewood's far-reaching TV program has also worked in its favor but adds that Osteen is not as well-known among religious scholars and writers as he is among the general public. He says Osteen has fans in many churches around the country and that some of these people visit Lakewood, swelling the church's already substantial numbers.

"It's similar to Charles Stanley in previous decades," he notes. "If anybody was traveling to Atlanta, you already knew Charles Stanley because you've seen him on television forever. I think you get the same thing with the Osteen family."

Timing Is Everything

During his Saturday night sermon from Habakkuk 2:3—"For the revelation awaits an appointed time" (NIV)—Osteen said God's timing played a critical part in his father's decision to build the 8,000-seat church in the 1980s.

"For many years my dad tried to build this sanctuary," he said. "Things weren't coming together and we put it on hold. Two or three times he announced to the congregation, 'This fall we're going to break ground for a new sanctuary.' Fall would roll around and he would say, 'It's just not the right time.' Daddy had enough sense to wait for God's perfect timing."

Oddly, that timing came during the Christmas season when Houston was in a terrible recession. But John Osteen was convinced the time was right for construction to begin.

"In less than one year the congregation gave enough money. We built this sanctuary debt-free to the glory of God," Joel told the congregation. "God gives you the grace you need when you're in His timing."

Timing was equally critical for the Compaq Center deal. Lakewood's sanctuary and the two-lane residential streets surrounding it were teeming with people during service hours.

Traffic to and from services often was snarled for a half-hour or more.

Osteen found a large tract of land by the interstate and decided to buy. But it wasn't meant to be.

"It was weird. The people just decided overnight not to sell," he says. "It was just the hand of God. Of course, at the time we thought it was the devil."

Then he learned the Rockets were leaving the Compaq Center. He called the mayor and inquired about leasing the building and to his surprise got a positive response.

The 14-member city council was split, however. The church needed 10 votes but had nine. At the last minute, one of the council members had a change of heart.

Suddenly Lakewood had spacious new quarters-16,000 seats, 9,000 covered parking spaces, streets built for high-volume traffic—all on Interstate 59 at one of the busiest intersections in the country. "It's just God doing more than we could ask or think," Osteen says.

Making Room for Thousands

At 8:30 a.m. on a typical Sunday, some 6,000 people are already in their seats. Cruse-Ratcliff leads the 80-plus-member choir, backed by a 12-piece band, in a lively half-hour of song and worship.

The music quiets down as Osteen takes the stage, leading the congregation in a prayer, then inviting people with specific needs to come forward. A number of "prayer partners," as they are called—including Osteen and his wife and mother—listen to people's individual concerns, then pray for each personally. It doesn't matter how many people come forward—each is heard, touched, prayed for.

It's 10 a.m. when he begins his sermon. The theme is practical

as he gives example after example of the importance of following God's timing rather than one's own. He keeps the tone cheerful, optimistic.

"God doesn't want anybody walking out of here today heavy-hearted and downcast," Osteen says.

He concludes the 25-minute sermon with an altar call, and dozens of people stream down front. The church has water baptism every Sunday afternoon, as well as classes on baptism in the Holy Spirit.

The mood after worship is decidedly upbeat.

"We talk a lot about the goodness of God," he says "Each service we try to make a celebration. They leave knowing God is good, knowing they can make it through the week."

Church is about more than a worship service, of course, and Lakewood is heavily involved in outreach ministries. It has donated millions of dollars to overseas missionary work—a practice that stems from John Osteen's dedication to missions.

In the Houston area, Lakewood supports a long list of charitable organizations, from shelters for battered women to The Salvation Army. "Our philosophy has been to work with the people that feed the hungry or help the homeless rather than reinvent it," Osteen says.

The church has some 3,000 volunteers, who participate in a variety of outreaches. These workers are trained in specialties such as anger management or grief recovery, and ministries are tailored to specific ages and gender groups. The church has hundreds of small groups that meet in homes around the city for prayer and Bible study.

Lakewood's new International Center allows the church to expand its ministries even more. An ice rink and a basketball gym are available for use by families and city sports leagues.

The church hosts concerts, sporting events, family conferences, conventions, business workshops, receptions and seminars.