

Rick Warren's Saddleback Church Hits Huge Milestone with 50,000 Baptisms

Celebrating 38 years of changed lives, Saddleback Church, pastored by Rick Warren, marked another historic milestone as it baptized its 50,000th person on Sunday.

In an email to the congregation previewing the weekend's events, Pastor Warren said that reaching the milestone "brought tears to my eyes." He continued:

"Growing up in small towns, every church that my family attended was small. It baptized maybe one person a month. Half of all churches in America today have less than 75 people in attendance. That's the normal size for a church, so I didn't even know that large churches (like 200 people) existed.

"But as a high school student I sincerely wanted to live for Jesus, and one day, I read an article in a Christian magazine that listed every church in America that had baptized at least 100 new believers that year. There were 68 churches. I could not imagine that! But that article included photos of the pastors of those 68 churches. I thought, *Wow! I'd sure love to be a member of an exciting church like that someday!* Of course, I had no idea I'd become a pastor. That article so inspired me to share my faith that I taped it to my bedroom wall, right next to my Beatles poster!

"A while later, I was even more astounded when I read this about the growth of the first Christian church (in Jerusalem): 'Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). Think about that. Daily! That means, at the very least, the first church baptized at least 365 new members annually.

“Not many churches have ever matched that kind of growth. But your church has.

“This phrase ‘Every day the Lord added to their number’ has been true of Saddleback for 38 years. Since beginning at Easter, 1980, we’ve baptized three to four changed lives every single day (precisely 3.6 people every day). You’re part of a miracle.

“Glory to God! By His mighty power at work within us, He is able to do far more than we could ever dare to ask or even dream of—infinity beyond our highest prayer.”

The “celebration of 50,000 changed lives” occurred 38 years after Rick and Kay Warren welcomed a handful of curious visitors—the first ever Saddleback Church service in Lake Forest, California. Standing within the main baptismal pool at Saddleback Church, a visibly moved “Pastor Rick”—as he’s known by his congregation—reflected on that first service in 1980: “That first Sunday six people gave their lives to Christ, and six weeks later, I baptized the first nine people.”

That first small gathering eventually grew to welcome 10,000 weekend worshippers before the church even owned its own building, using a total of 79 different locations.

Saddleback Church continued from there as a trendsetter in training church leaders and strengthening church health. The church was one of the first in America to marry its large weekend gatherings with small-group meetings in homes on a large scale. Eventually more people were meeting in weekly home Bible studies than in the weekly church services (nearly 40,000). In 1993, it became the first church to embrace the internet as a tool for evangelism. Saddleback was later praised as the first individual congregation in 2,000 years of Christian history to literally obey the Great Commission of Jesus Christ as more than 25,000 members of the congregation boarded airplanes to take the gospel to every one of the

world's officially recognized nations (nearly 200 countries).

Saddleback Church is also the founder of "Celebrate Recovery," which has trained over 100,000 leaders in their innovative approach to helping those struggling with addiction or other "hurts, habits, and hang-ups." Since then, millions of people across the world, including many in prison, have completed one of Celebrate Recovery's step studies. As a church which calls every member to ministry, Saddleback once decided to feed every homeless person in Orange County for 30 days. Nearly 10,000 members of the congregation participated in the initiative, preparing over 125,000 meals for those in need.

This weekend's services also included an acknowledgment of all of those in attendance who had themselves been baptized at Saddleback and a photo montage was displayed with images gathered from throughout the decades at Saddleback.

"Why is baptism such a big deal?" Rick Warren asked while standing in the baptism pool. "There are two reasons. First, Jesus commanded it. Second, He modeled it ... this is the way I say to the world, 'I'm in! I'm a part of the family of God ... there is no reason to wait.'"

They didn't wait. The congregation responded in worship while hundreds made their way out to the baptismal pools at each of Saddleback Church's 19 campuses, in order join the 50,000 others who had expressed their love for Jesus by being baptized. The church is looking forward as it continues to reach its community with the message of Jesus' love, forgiveness and hope.