

The Osteen Legacy

What has happened at Lakewood Church in Houston is nothing short of incredible. With 30,000 members, it is now the nation's largest church. Recently the congregation moved into the former Compaq Center, where the Houston Rockets won two NBA championships.

What was once a secular landmark on one of our country's busiest freeways has become a house of worship.

I had the privilege of attending the opening service at the new Lakewood Church in mid-July. It was wonderful to see the beautiful facility after it had been remodeled.

But for me the most meaningful part was reflecting on what God has done. That's because I've seen Lakewood up close and personal for more than 20 years.

When I first visited in the early 1980s the pastor, John Osteen, was already a recognized leader in the charismatic movement and Lakewood was a leading charismatic church. In fact I visited it because I had heard they were considering building an 8,000-seat auditorium—the one they just left.

Osteen told me his story—how he started his church in an old feed store with just a handful of people in 1959. He had recently received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and as word got out about how much love there was at this new church, it began to grow.

By the time we wrote a cover story on John and Dodie Osteen in 1988, their church was known as “the oasis of love.” (To read the article, go to) A couple of years later I had the opportunity to minister there. I remember the experience well because of the love exhibited in the services and expressed toward me.

I loved John Osteen and considered him a spiritual father. I met with him periodically and often talked to him by phone. When he died in 1999, I grieved.

I had known his son Joel during this time and watched him serve faithfully in the church’s television ministry. When I heard he was his father’s hand-picked successor, I wasn’t surprised. Joel had lots of people rooting for him, and I was one of them. We wanted him to succeed.

On opening day at the new Lakewood, Joel said that when he first stepped up as pastor, his goal was simply to hold the church together. Every Sunday he’d wear a pair of shoes his dad had worn—symbolically trying to fill them.

Around the beginning of 2000, Joel put his dad’s shoes away. He had confidence God would use him as He had his father. A few months later, in Charisma’s 25th anniversary issue, we published an article about him titled “He’s Doing His Father’s Business.” (You can read it online at)

Joel has been off and running since then. The church has boomed. The TV ministry, already successful, has expanded to reach an estimated 7 million people in more than 140 countries.

In his opening-day address, Joel gave credit to his dad for the success of the church. He talked about the seeds his dad had sown and how he is following in his footsteps. He promised to be an encourager and to try to help people realize their dreams. He also promised to walk in integrity.

After years of obscurity, Joel is now one of the most recognized preachers in America. He's able to reach millions of people at a time when our nation is in dire need of strong spiritual leadership.

Joel represents the best of what has come out of the charismatic community. I've noticed that even people who don't like other charismatic preachers they see on TV respond to Joel—partly because he is carrying on his father's legacy of loving people. He has a big responsibility, and we need to pray that he will remain humble as he and his ministry continue to grow.

At one point during his address, Joel was overcome with emotion. It took him a few moments to regain his composure. I jotted down what he said next:

"This is my commitment: We'll build you up, not tear you down. We'll walk in integrity; we'll make you proud; we'll live a godly life."

Then he gave glory to God and credit to his team for all that has happened and declared it is a privilege for him to serve in his current capacity.

That's why Joel has succeeded, I believe, and what makes Lakewood great. God, give us more leaders and churches like

this!