

An Analysis of Rick Warren's 40-Days of Purpose Movement

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Introduction

What would Jesus do? *The Left Behind* series. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* movie. *The Prayer of Jabez*. American evangelicals, at any given moment, have minds and hearts captured by one Christian fad or another. It is not unusual to see carefully crafted evangelical-authored books on the secular best-sellers list. Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* deserves its place at the top of the list of resources captivating an evangelical audience.

Warren's book, however, goes far beyond the above-mentioned fads. Yes, the book has captivated great numbers of evangelicals and even cornered its share of an expanding secular market for spirituality. Yet it has also spawned the "40 Days of Purpose" campaign, a program that has been used by churches across denominational cleavages. This paper will briefly discuss Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, the "40 days of Purpose" campaign, and provide preliminary analysis of a phenomena that has managed to introduce an evangelical perspectives into churches of all types. Thus far, there has been no academic research on Warren or his Forty Days of Purpose (FDP) movement.

Rick Warren: Ecclesiastical Change Agent

Warren pastors the 20,000 member Saddleback Community Church, an innovative Southern Baptist congregation that sits on 120 acres in Lake Forest, California (Saddleback, 2005). He is the best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Driven Life*, the mastermind behind the popular "40 days of Purpose" campaign, and is now spearheading P.E.A.C.E., a worldwide Christian-based effort to end hunger and poverty (Abanes, 2005: 22-26; Morgan, 2005). In 2002, Warren was nominated as

“America’s most influential pastor” (Abanes, 2005: 66). Most recently, Warren has been called “America’s Pastor,” and compared with Billy Graham in influence, actually ranking second (26%) only to Graham (34%) in a recent poll of pastors to identify those having “the greatest influence on American churches and church leaders” (“Pastors,” 2005).

Rick Warren’s beginnings are fairly simple. Coming from a long line of ministers, including one ancestor who trained under Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), Warren was the son of an influential Southern Baptist minister who spent his life evangelizing and planting churches (Abanes, 2005: 35-38; Mair, 2005: 27-45; Parks & Stafford, 2003). The Warren household was one that took their faith seriously, and prioritized their lives accordingly. This is important, as it provides insight into Warren’s passion to see Christians live out their faith in day-to-day life. By all accounts, his father represented an example of such a faith throughout young Warren’s life. Both of Warren’s parents literally died in Christian service: his father passed away while repeating “One more for Jesus” over and over, while his mother had a heart attack in the kitchen practicing the hospitality she was so known for (Mair, 2005: 43)

Even as a teenager, Warren was practicing evangelism in a way that was culturally relevant, which in the 1960s meant growing his hair long and strumming a guitar (Mair, 2005: 34). While attending a Bible college in California, several Christian leaders influenced Warren significantly. None of these affected him more than W.A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, at the time one of the largest churches in existence (Abanes, 2005: 40; Mair, 2005: 53). In fact, Warren met Criswell during those days after hearing him preach:

The pastor didn't just shake Rick's hand – he looked at Rick and proclaimed, "I feel I need to lay hands on you and pray!" Criswell then said, "Father, I ask you to give this young preacher double the portion of Your Spirit. May the church he pastors grow twice the size of the Dallas church. Bless him greatly, O Lord" (Mair, 2005: 54).

It is this moment that Warren identifies as his moment of calling, an intense clarification of his life's mission, "inspired by God" (Stafford, 2002). While Saddleback Church received intense criticism from traditional pastors in the early days, Criswell offered his unwavering support for the remainder of his life (Abanes, 2005: 53).

After graduating from a Bible college, Warren attended Southwestern Southern Baptist Seminary (Abanes, 2005: 41; Mair, 2005: 54-56). While there, he was self-engaged in research on church growth (Mair, 2005: 56, 65-68). Warren's philosophy of ministry was already coming together during those early days; he was discovering principles such as the fact that growth requires change and that only a permanent pastor can be truly effective in a local church (Abanes, 2005: 17, 43-45; Mair, 2005: 60-61, 69).

Warren had chances after seminary to pastor a large church the easy way. Yet he was compelled to build a church from scratch (Stafford, 2002; Abanes, 2005: 43-44). After careful demographic research to determine where he would find an abundance of unchurched people, Warren and his wife secured permission to begin a new church in Orange County, California in 1979 (Abanes, 2005: 45; Mair, 2005: 68-70). After arriving, he conducted a door-to-door survey to determine what type of church would appeal to his local market (Abanes, 2005: 47-48).

Saddleback Church began in Warren's mind and heart as a very specific vision. It was fifteen years and seventy-nine different locations before what people know today as "Saddleback Church" existed (Mair, 2005: 39, 77). After holding several small meetings in his home while promoting a kind of "grand opening," over 200 people showed up for the Easter service in 1980 (Mair, 2005: 75-76). Warren announced right away that he intended to grow this church to twenty thousand members occupying fifty acres of land (Mair, 2005: 76). From the very beginning, the church was "purpose-driven," Warren's goal being "to create a religious community that would extend beyond the established limits of the Christian population to reach 'the unchurched'" (Mair, 2005: 137).

Twenty-five years after that first Easter service, Saddleback Church indeed has twenty thousand members, but sits on 120 rather than 50 acres. Warren preaches simple to understand, intensely practical messages that meet people where they are, a method he perfected early in his pastorate (Mair, 2005: 75). His sermons are typically around 45 minutes in length, broken up into 15 minute segments punctuated with contemporary music – this is done both to appeal to people attending, and to enable Warren to rest a physical condition that causes him pain when he preaches (Abanes, 2005: 48-49; Mair, 2005: 78). Saddleback also features an intricate small group system with groups for every conceivable interest and/or issue that meet at various times throughout the week.

Integrity has characterized Warren's ministry. He has shunned publicity, especially television ministry (Mair, 2005: 180). He and his wife give abundantly to charity and even refuse to take a salary from Saddleback (Mair, 2005: 80). In fact, the Warrens are "reverse tithers," giving away 90% of their income while living on only 10% (Abanes, 2005: 19-20).

It has been estimated that Warren has impacted over 180,000 pastors with his methodology (Mair, 2005: 208). Warren's church growth principles are also disseminated over the internet through a website designed specifically for that purpose: *Pastors.com*. Much of this has been done through Purpose Driven Church conferences:

People from all fifty states and thirty foreign countries have attended the Purpose-Driven Ministries conference held at Saddleback, including 3,800 for the May 2002 conference. Many of these churches report an increase in church enrollment of at least 30 percent, while others report significantly higher increases (Mair, 2005: 208-209).

Despite his focus on church-growth, Warren strives to downplay the “mega-church pastor” image as much as possible (Parks & Stafford, 2003):

I dedicated The Purpose-Driven Church to bivocational pastors – the guy who's working a 40-hour job and then trying to pastor a small church on the weekend. Those are the guys I care about – not the big megachurch pastors. Those are the kinds of churches I grew up in – little churches (Abanes, 2005: 18).

The Purpose-Driven Life—The Curriculum and Methods of the Movement

Warren's first major book as pastor of Saddleback Church was entitled *The Purpose Driven Church*, and explained in detail the methodology that was responsible for the growth and success of Saddleback. It was an instant best-seller and has influenced pastors all over the world. His second book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, has influenced far more people and has sold multi-millions of copies in twelve languages (Mair, 2005: 8, 140). In fact, it spent 99 weeks on the *New York Times* best-sellers list (Caldwell, 2005).

The Purpose Driven Life is organized around five purposes: worship (“You Were Planned for God’s Pleasure”), fellowship (“You Were Formed for God’s Family”), spiritual growth (“You Were Created to Become Like Christ”), service (“You Were Shaped for Serving God”), and mission (“You Were Made for a Mission”). Brief chapters (from 5-8 pages each), one for each of the forty days, amplify the topic of each section. The daily chapters include teachings concerning prayer, the local church, coping with suffering, dealing with temptation, and discovering spiritual gifts. Clearly, Warren designed the book for reflection and group discussion (Warren, 2002). Warren has basically repackaged conservative, evangelical doctrine in a way that is accessible to the ordinary Christian, and is attractive even beyond evangelicals (more on this below).

Beyond the theological factors, and the book’s interdenominational appeal, an additional note is in order on the growth vs. spirituality debate. Given the amount of criticism Warren (as well as others) has received for his ideas on “church growth,” such ideas are conspicuous by their absence in *The Purpose-Driven Life* (unlike *The Purpose-Driven Church*). Warren has claimed to care more about church “health” than growth, with most of the churches he reaches having between 100 and 200 members (Abanes, 2005: 26-27).

The book is not without its critics, secular and Christian. Secular critics, mainly journalists, have hinted that Warren is selling a lucrative product in his brand of spirituality (Mair, 2005: 179-180). Christian critics have been much more numerous and can be found especially among Reformed Christians and even among Warren’s own Southern Baptist denomination. It is most interesting that virtually all of them are

evangelicals, given that Warren has successfully managed to get many in mainline and liturgical churches to embrace evangelical concepts.

In general, Warren's book contains basic evangelical theology and principles for life. It is simplified greatly, and some critics complain it waters down conservative theology. More agree that it is a systematic, if not a bit formulaic, presentation of conservative evangelical Christianity. Yet, Warren stresses preaching the biblical gospel entails "life application" as well (Abanes, 2005: 55). Most of the criticisms coming from his fellow evangelicals concern what Warren chose *not* to put into the book, or what are considered to be poor methods of presentation for the material (Abanes, 2005: 69-85) (such as his use of multiple Biblical translations when quoting from scripture—such as The Amplified Bible, Contemporary English Version, God's Word Translation, King James, Living Bible, New American Bible, New American Standard Bible, New Century Version, New International Version, New Jerusalem Bible, New Revised Standard Version, etc.).

If you live in a fairly well-populated area, you have probably seen the big blue banners hanging outside of churches: "40 Days of Purpose" in large lettering, with a smaller question underneath, "What on Earth am I here for?" This banner indicates that the church in question is participating in a "40 Days of Purpose" campaign based on Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Local churches may participate individually at any time, or as a part of a geographically-organized campaign involving several churches across denominational lines.

The "40 Days" materials are designed to lead an entire church through a processing of *The Purpose Driven Life*. Workbooks are available, in either "small group"

or “Sunday school” versions, that are designed to go along with a video curriculum in which Warren himself offers brief 15 minute talks before each session (Purpose Driven, 2003, *Small Group*: 2). The overarching goals of the curriculum are to create a hunger for Scripture, build community, and get people focused on God’s purpose (Purpose Driven, 2003, *Small Group*: 3). Warren attributes the power of the campaign to “five transforming principles”: “Unified Prayer,” “Concentrated Focus,” “Multiple Reinforcements,” “Behavioral Teaching,” and “Exponential Thinking” (Warren, 2005, “Principles”).

Each session includes the five elements of fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship (Purpose Driven, 2003, *Small Group*: 4-5). There is also a memory verse of Scripture for each week (Purpose Driven, 2003, *Small Group*: 4). Each section is designed to process the main ideas from a week’s worth of reading in *The Purpose Driven Life*. There are fill-in-the-blank sections that go along with Warren’s video teaching, followed by a handful of discussion questions for the small group/Sunday school class. Each workbook includes a directory to list group members and their contact information, a “Health Assessment” test, a “Health Plan” to carry the person beyond the forty days, and a section to log prayers requests and answers to prayer. The “small group” and “Sunday school” versions are different colors, but are only slightly different as to content.

Warren advertises that he is bringing conservative evangelical theology into mainline and liturgical churches (Caldwell, 2005; Parks & Stafford, 2003; Nelson, 2005). The official Purpose Driven website features directory pages for “Purpose Driven Methodists,” “Purpose Driven Presbyterians,” and even “Purpose Driven Catholics”

(“Purpose Driven Churches,” 2005). Apparently, significant numbers of Seventh-Day Adventist pastors are also attending Warren’s seminars and using his strategies, though not without inter-denominational controversy (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Some of these groups, encouraged by Warren himself, make slight changes to fit their own denominational context (Nelson, 2005). However, we found in our research that while about 15% of participating churches were not either Baptist or non-denominational, the vast majority of responding clergy identify their congregations as either conservative or evangelical.

Warren’s Purpose Driven curriculum is also being used in other venues. For instance, “Saddleback Church donates materials to any prison that agrees to incorporate the plan into its rehabilitation regime” (Mair, 2005: 155). Likewise, Warren is now working with the President of Rwanda to make the country “the first purpose-driven nation” (Morgan, 2005).

Research Methods

Starting with Saddleback Church’s websites that includes listings of churches who have participated in the 40 Days of Purpose (FDP) curriculum (see: www.saddleback.org, www.saddlebackfamily.com, www.purposedrivenlife.com, www.purposedriven.com, and www.pastors.com), we compiled a list of Texas churches who reported having participated in the FDP program between 2002 and 2006. We mailed out our questionnaire to 403 Texas churches in April 2006 to be filled out by the pastor/minister/priest, then sent a reminder email to those churches with email addresses. Finally, in August 2006, we sent out a new paper copy questionnaire to those who still

had not responded. In total, 142 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 35.2%.

Results

While this research is only preliminary, several interesting patterns have thus far emerged in our analysis. We found that most churches surveyed conducted the FDP program in 2004, just two years after Warren published his book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Table 1 gives a summary of the motivations for the church's leadership to implement the PDL curriculum.

Table 1. Motivation for a local clergy to have a FDP campaign in their church (check all that apply).

| Motivations for Using PDL | Percentage Respondents |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Local minister read Warren | 63% |
| Contact with other local ministers | |
| Who used PDL | 36% |
| Organized campaign in area | 19% |
| Encouragement of | |
| Denominational Leaders | 8% |
| Denominational literature | 6% |

As can be seen in Table 1, by far the most influential reason for using the FDP curriculum was an individual minister's contact with Rick Warren's book (reported by almost 2/3 of respondents), and then contact with other local clergy who read *The Purpose Driven Life* (another 1/3 of respondents).

Table 2 gives a summary of data that indicate the ways in which the local minister advertised the FDP program to the church congregation.

Table 2. Ways local minister advertised the FDP program to congregation (check all that apply).

| Advertisement Methods | Percentage Respondents |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Weekly church bulletin | 97% |
| Word of mouth | 88% |
| Posted flyers | 85% |
| Weekly sermon | 85% |
| Church newsletter | 84% |
| Mailout to church families | 61% |
| Other advertisements | 30% |

As can be seen in Table 2, clergy made ample use of multiple advertisement methods to let parishioners know about the FDP campaign.

Of the churches who responded to our survey, overwhelmingly most were theologically conservative. Table 3 indicates that only 19% of responding ministers said their church was theologically moderate, and just over 2% were either “somewhat liberal” or “very liberal.”

Table 3. Theological Outlook of Congregation as reported by clergy.

| Theology Reported by clergy | Percentage Respondents |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Very Conservative | 26% |
| Somewhat Conservative | 53% |
| Moderate | 19% |
| Somewhat or Very Liberal | 2% |

Table 4 reports the number of respondents who self-identify using the following theological/social labels. By far the most often reported label to describe the congregation was “Evangelical” at 70%.

Table 4. Theological Label of Congregation as reported by clergy (check all that apply).

| Theological Label | Percentage Respondents |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| Evangelical | 70% |
| Mainline | 39% |
| Liturgical | 12% |
| Fundamentalist | 6% |

Table 5 reports the number of respondents who indicate various types of worship styles for those utilizing the FDP curriculum. As can be seen, there is an equal mix of contemporary and traditional styles in participating churches (sometimes both found in the same church).

Table 5. Types of worship style of Congregation as reported by clergy (check all that apply).

| Worship Style | Percentage Respondents |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Contemporary Worship Style | 58% |
| Traditional Worship Style | 57% |
| Other Worship Style | 29% |

Clergy reported that the median number of participants in FDP was 245, the median size of participating churches was 600, and the median proportion of each congregation’s members who actively participated in the FDP program was 60%. Table 6 gives a summary of some of the demographic characteristics of participating churches.

Table 6. Demographic characteristics of participating churches.

| Demographic Characteristic | Percentage Respondents |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Median weekly attendance | 325 |
| Median yearly church budget | \$500,000 |
| Mean percentage members white | 88% |
| Mean percentage members with college degree | 45% |
| Mean percentage who conduct services in language other than English | 9.9% |

When asked if their church’s participation in the FDP program encouraged additional activity in their church’s life, nearly 80% of responding clergy indicated it had. The comments overwhelmingly indicated that internal small group activity accelerated in the aftermath of FDP. Over 85% of the comments indicated that small groups were formed such as Bible studies, home study groups, Stephen Ministry programs, adult Sunday school classes, support groups (singles, divorced, etc.), visitation programs for shut-in church members, and other spiritually-oriented Christian courses, such as the Alpha Course. Several respondents noted that their congregation was planning to conduct Forty Days of Community, the follow-up program also developed by Rick Warren. Less than 5% of respondents indicated that FDP resulted in church growth or increased membership. Finally, less than 10% of responding clergy revealed that FDP led to an

outward orientation of the church community. Only a few indicated that greater evangelism activities intensified as a result of FDP, or that mission work or other service-oriented activity (such as hospital visits or food pantry assistance) strengthened.

Discussion and Conclusion

This preliminary analysis of data is the first study we know of that analyzes the impact of Rick Warren's 40-Days of Purpose curriculum on the life of congregations who participate. By and large, those churches which participate are medium-sized with members who are predominantly white, middle-class, and identify as evangelical Christians. In this sense, the curriculum of FDP fits well with an evangelical worldview, emphasizing personal spirituality and a congregation's inward-looking concerns. No responding clergy indicated that greater political activity resulted from FDP programs, reinforcing Warren's contention that his mission is spiritual development, not political activism.

Additional comments provided by responding ministers frequently used terms like "engaging and inspiring," "transformational" (for the individual), "rejuvenating," creating "vision and unity of purpose," "generating excitement and enthusiasm" and "deeper commitment" among participants, and was comparable to an "effective revival." Several ministers reiterated the impetus for the congregation to begin small group ministries which focus on the needs of parishioners. Other respondents said that the FDP program "gave our church a boost but the lasting effect is minimal," and that "the book was difficult to adapt because we are a liberal church." Finally, one minister said that "25 percent of the congregation said it was life-changing, 25 percent said it was a good experience but not life-changing, and 50 percent are just glad its over."

Data indicate that in many ways FDP had an impact on individual participants, but the activity generated by the campaign was inwardly-focused. This reaffirms what social scientists from Wuthnow (1988) to Putnam (2000) have said about the core of the small group movement: that it reinforces the individualism in much of American Christianity. In fact, Putman (2000) says that evangelical churches are effective at creating what he calls “bonding social capital” that reinforces ties to existing group members, but tends to not generate “bridging social capital” that forms links between church and the wider society. Given the characteristics of churches and their participants revealed in this study, and the fact that according to these data, very few churches actually grew as a result of FDP, it is not surprising that the effect of FDP in our sample was limited for the most part to internal (inwardly-focused) small group development in participating congregations, and had little or no effect on the outward looking mission of the church.

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