



## *Ten Lessons Learned While Killing a Church* By Joe Oakley

*Joe originally wrote this article for Rick Warren's website, pastors.com. It is reprinted here with permission. We thank Joe for his courage in sharing this article. We think the body of Christ would be healthier if everyone were so honest and transparent.*

I recently had the privilege of sitting down and talking "church" with Rick Warren for an hour. I found Rick easy to talk to, and was amazed that he wanted to know about me, the church I pastor, how we got started, how we're doing, etc. He truly is a pastor's pastor.

I told Rick that I'd previously started a church that died a long, slow, painful death. He asked me what I learned from that experience and then actually started taking notes as I spoke.

Surprisingly, Rick asked me, "Would you be willing to write an article for my web site? I think pastors need to hear this." I was eager to share what I learned with other pastors so that they might be spared some of what I went through.

First, a little background: My wife, Deborah, and I started The Love of Christ Community Church (TLC) about 10 years ago. We grew from a handful of people to about 100 within a couple years. Our growth stagnated, however, and, for a number of reasons, we began a slow decline. Ultimately, we closed the

church, vowing to never go through that pain again.

We were out of ministry for a few years, simply attending church and healing. Eventually we felt led to plant a church in a new growing area. We started Grace Fellowship Church with six people in a home about a year ago, and we're now up to about 150 people.

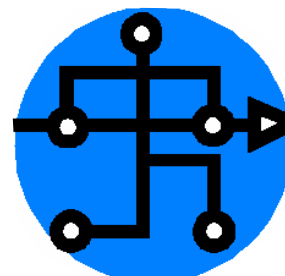
We determined to make the death of our previous church a learning experience. We do not want to repeat the same mistakes. So here are 10 lessons I learned from the death of a church.

### ***Lesson #1 - Get On Your Knees and Fight Like a Man***

When we finally submitted to the Lord's call to plant another church, our first priority was prayer. At TLC, we felt we could effectively plant a church. This time we know we can't. It's the Lord who builds His church. Our part is to pray, hear from Him, and do what He tells us. We bathed this new church in prayer long before our first service. We recruited everyone we know to pray for us.

We learned that the enemy attacks new works. When God sent Moses to deliver Israel, Pharaoh killed all

the babies. When God sent His Son to redeem the world, Herod killed the babies. Satan attacks new works because they are most vulnerable in their infancy. We were not prepared at TLC for the incredible amount of spiritual warfare that would take place. The enemy attacked us, our family and our church.



This time we learned to pray and do spiritual warfare before even starting. We learned prayer is a priority we can never let slide. It's the hardest thing to sustain

because it's the thing the enemy fears most.

### ***Lesson #2 You Can't Do It Alone***

When we started TLC, we did it alone. Since that time God gave us a greater revelation of His kingdom. We came to see that there is one church with many congregations. There is one body with many parts. We need each other!

As a result, this time we networked with other churches. We joined a group of churches for fellowship and support even before we decided to start a church. When we did start Grace, the other churches helped by

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providing prayer, people, training and resources.

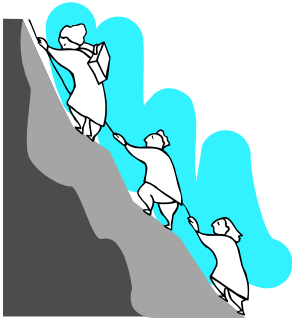
We learned we need the body of Christ. We need each other and we really do complete each other, not compete with each other.

### ***Lesson #3 - Teamwork Makes the Dream Work***

When we started TLC, the team was me, my wife and a close friend. Right before our first meeting, our friend informed us she was moving to another state. So we were all alone. We forged ahead, but ended up frustrated and burnt out.

We learned you cannot do ministry alone. We need a team of leaders around us. I learned my job is to raise up a team of leaders who will

raise up other leaders. This time, we did not start Grace until we had a committed team of leaders.



### ***Lesson #4 Location, location, location***

We started TLC in a home, then moved to a hotel on Sundays and a daycare on Wednesday nights. "Portable church" is very difficult, and we soon looked for a building. The only thing we could afford was far from our target area. We got a great deal on a great building, but it was in a declining area that was becoming more industrial.

The people who lived in the area had been there for years and were not interested in a new church. The people we had were not excited

about the area we were now in.

I learned that when you start, where you start is important. This time we started in a booming area where thousands of people will be moving in the next few years. God is bringing the mission field to us.

### ***Lesson #5 The Sick Need A Physician; The Well Want Out of the Hospital***

We had a target audience at TLC of people from the recovery movement (support groups, etc.) and what I call "dechurched" Christians. They had been in church at one time, but left because of hurt, burn-out or other reasons.

We did a great job attracting these people and they came. However, hardly anyone wanted to do anything other than sit, be fed and get healed. That's okay, but we needed others to help minister to those in need.

I felt the Lord asked me this question much later, "What do people want when they are in the hospital?" It came to me that when you are in the hospital, not only do you want to get better, but you want to get out of there as soon as possible.

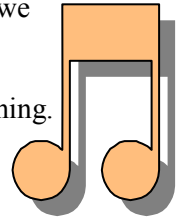
That was our experience at TLC. People did get better, but when they did, they left! They wanted to be in a more "healthy" environment rather than hang around all the other sick people. We learned you must focus on health, not sickness and you need enough doctors, nurses and attendants to care for the sick.

### ***Lesson #6 - Leader of the Band***

In reading The Purpose Driven Church, I learned that Rick regrets

underestimating the power of an excellent music ministry at the beginning of Saddleback. Likewise, our worship at TLC mainly consisted of me on an acoustic guitar.

As we started Grace, we determined to have a good band with good sound from the beginning. We spent the money



to get nice equipment, and we recruited musicians from a sister church who had an overabundance. They started with us in our first service outside of a home. The wonderful thing is that experienced musicians attract other experienced musicians. We learned that great worship and praise, good musicians and sound are important.

### ***Lesson #7 A Little Child Shall Lead Them***

At TLC, we rotated parents to take care of the children. The children's ministry was more like babysitting than teaching. A main reason for our decline was that when our rented building sold, we went from abundant space for children and youth to a hotel with no room for either. People with children began to leave. They loved us, but we had nothing to offer their children.

When we started our new church, God graciously sent a mature, seasoned couple with an incredible heart for children. Many unchurched families have come, not because of me or our great worship, but because the kids beg them to come back every week.

### ***Lesson #8 - If You Build It, They May Not Come***

Looking back at TLC, I'm amazed we drew anyone. We did nothing to

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## Recent Research

New people attending worship services come from four different faith backgrounds:

**First-timers:** Worshipers who have never regularly attended anywhere make up **7%** of new worshipers.

**Returners:** Worshipers who at some time in their lives participated in a community of faith and are now returning to worship attendance make up **18%** of new worshipers.

**Switchers:** Worshipers who move or change from one denomination or faith group to another make up **18%** of the new worshipers.

**Transfers:** Worshipers who move their membership participation from one congregation to another within the same denomination make up **57%** of the new worshipers.

Small U.S. congregations (defined as having less than 90 in attendance) are not attracting as many worshipers as large congregations. While large congregations make up only 10% of the 300,000 houses of worship in the United States, they account for half of all worshipers. An additional 40 percent of houses of worship (defined as having 90-380 worshipers in attendance) had 39 % of worshipers. The

last half of the total, about 150,000 churches, are congregations with less than 90 in attendance. These churches make up only 11 % of the total number of worshipers in a given week

*(Statistics taken from Congregational Life Survey [www.uscongregations.org](http://www.uscongregations.org))*

George Barna states, “Surprisingly there has been no discernible growth among non-denominational Christian churches. A decade ago they drew about 4% of the nation’s population. Today that number is statistically identical (5%).

*Barna Research Online Feb. 24, 2003*

The year’s research by the Barna Group underscored that half of the people who attend Christian churches on any given weekend are not Christians; that is, they do not trust in Christ alone for their eternal salvation. The vast majority of those people have been attending Christian churches for more than a decade. *Barna Research Online Dec. 17, 2002)*

### Why Do You Attend This Church?

Thom Rainer asked people who were unchurched and recently joined a Christian Congregation, “What factors are extremely important to you in selecting a Church?” Their answers were:

- Doctrine and Theology—58%
- People Caring for Each Other - 53%
- Preaching—52%
- Friendliness—45%
- Children’s Programs—45%
- Helping the Poor—43%
- Denomination- 36%
- Like the Pastor—35%
- Sunday School—36%

*(Surprising Insights From the Unchurched Thom Rainer; p. 72)*



Over the past decade, membership in Protestant churches dropped 9.5%, while the U.S. population grew 11 percent.

*(Reid, Alvin L. Radically Unchurched, p.24)*



Muslims now equal Jews in population in the U. S. Five-six million Muslims live in America. The number of mosques has doubled in the past twenty years from 600 to 1200. About 135,000 Americans become

## Notes and Quotes

“If I were starting a new church today, I would begin by recruiting 5 volunteers for 5 unpaid staff positions:

- \* A Music/Magnification director to help prepare the worship services for the crowd;
- \* A Membership Director to teach Class 101 and oversee the care of members in the Congregation
- \* A Maturity director to teach Class 201 and oversee the Bible study programs for the Committed.
- \* A Ministry director to teach Class 301, interview people for ministry placement, and supervise the lay ministries of the Core; and
- \* A Mission director to teach Class 401 and oversee our evangelism and missions programs in the Community.

As the church grew I would move these people to part-time paid staff and eventually full-time. You can be purpose-driven regardless of the size of your church.”

— Rick Warren

Research, from page 3

Muslims each year, including about 35,000 annually from the prison population alone. What does this say to the church?

*Snapshots of Islam in America, “Church Planting and Evangelism Today”, spring-summer 2001, 5.*

### INEFFECTIVE LEADERS

John Maxwell’s list of characteristics that insecure leaders have in common and make them ineffective:

1. They want control
2. They fear public failure
3. They avoid risk
4. They are closed in their relationships
5. They do not hire 10’s (They surround themselves with mediocrity.)
6. They resist change
7. They fail to affirm and empower others
8. They stay in their comfort zone
9. They view people and situations through their insecurities
10. They create an environment of insecurity

### Effective Congregations

An Effective Congregation (those in the top 15-20 percent of all congregations) have the following seven characteristics:

1. A proactive congregation that takes the initiative to meet the real needs of real people in real time. It understands that passion must revolve around others and not itself.
2. It focuses more on the relational characteristics of vision casting and fulfillment, and disciple making than it does on the functional characteristics of program and management.
3. Has identified the geographic community or target group of people that its ministry substance, strategy, and style are best suited to attract to a Christ-centric, faith-based journey. They seek to remain relevant to the spiritual needs of these people.
4. Has a great process for assimilation of new people into life and ministry of the congregation.
5. Encourages the individual giftedness of people connected with the congregation. It empowers with a permission-giving bias the mission and ministry involvement of its members.
6. Is successfully fulfilling their understanding of their God-given vision and full kingdom potential. The characteristics of a deepening faith and work, and a broadening practice of ministry, are more important to them than simple church growth or health formulas.
7. Has figured out ways to contain the *paying the rent* activities or congregational maintenance to be able to focus on effective service and ministry.

(Bullard E-zine Dec. 4, 2002)

*Voices From the Field:**“What I’d Like to Share...”*

by Karen Kogler

Hearing someone else’s story – that’s one of the best ways we learn. The experiences of someone else in our field, and the lessons they learned from their experiences, often contain something that applies to our situation. So, in addition to the insights of our lead article author, this issue includes here the thoughts of three other mission planters.

This past July, fourteen mission planters were trained at Mission Planters Institute XI, the eleventh such institute to be held since 1996 by the Center for U.S. Missions. A month after they returned home, the Center asked three of the planters to share some lessons they’ve learned while in the field.

**Dan Flynn, Michigan**

Dan mission field is in Whitmore Lake/South Lyon, Michigan, an area about 30 miles northwest of Detroit. Dan is not planting a new mission congregation, but is planting an extension of the mother church, St. Luke in Ann Arbor, 15 miles south of his location. The congregation has planned this extension to reach the unchurched, and not to provide convenience for some of its members. Here’s what Dan wished to share:

“It’s helpful to find people in the same boat.” Finding others who are doing what you’re doing is a great support and resource. If those people are not local, it may take more effort and time, but Dan would say it’s worth it for the benefit received. “They’ve been there!”

“Base your mission on your core values.” Your own core values are

bound to come through in the mission you plant, so take the time to think through and write down your own core values. Dan says he’s a do-er, not a thinker and a writer, but having forced himself through the process of developing a mission plan, he now finds these written pieces useful for keeping himself on track and for sharing with people as he makes calls and tells people about the new missions.

Planting a “new site” rather than a new congregation has both pluses and minuses, Dan has found. The knowledge and skills of the home church staff, and their willingness to help, is a great resource. However, the mother church is so strong that it’s hard to find a few people willing to be the core group in the new location. “I understand,” Dan says. “I don’t want to leave either! But God calls us, all of us, to step out.” No matter our location, God calls each of us to step out of our comfort for the sake of those who don’t yet know Jesus and His love. That “stepping out” is key for Dan not only for his ministry, but also for the ministry of those working with him.

**Mark Eisold, Arkansas**

Mark Eisold is also at the beginnings of his ministry, a new congregation planted this summer in Cabot, Arkansas. Mark says that despite his short time here, he’s learned many lessons.

“Don’t be so quick to change.” Change is inevitable, and often helpful, but Mark says he just had a lesson in the importance of not

throwing out the good with the bad. His congregation began worshipping in the facilities of a Presbyterian church at 3:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoons. As soon as he could, Mark began checking out other locations where they could worship on Sunday morning. Despite much higher costs, Mark was ready to encourage the move. But, says Mark, “I was running when I should have been listening.” He suddenly realized that people in community were already associating their new congregation with that location, even without a sign in front. He decided to talk once more to the

board at the Presbyterian church.

Unlike earlier conversations, this time they worked out a way for both groups to have morning wor-

ship, plus they approved a sign in front. If he had rented somewhere else, he would have lost the many benefits of that location and would have incurred higher costs. “Shut up and listen!” Mark felt God was saying through this experience.

“Most new church plants are made up of two different groups.” This realization was very helpful to Mark. “People with a Lutheran background are going to have different needs than people with no church background, or from other denominations.” Meeting these differing needs may involve different strategies. What is helpful for one group might not be helpful for the other, but the needs of both need to be kept in mind. This per-

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spective has helped Mark in handling people's concerns.

"It's not about me." Mark admits his nature is to want to see results, and to want to see them now! He tends to think, "I only have three years to do this..." At the Mission Planters Institute, however, Pastor Victor Belton of Peace, Decatur, Georgia, reminded the planters continually of Zechariah 4:6, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." This reminder has been a blessing – and a relief! – to Mark.

### Edgar Arroyo, California

Edgar is currently an urban missionary for the Nehemiah Project in Los Angeles. He has seven years experience in various missions in the L.A. and neighboring Orange County area. First certified as a deacon through the Lay Leadership Training program of the Pacific Southwest District, he is now a student in the Ethnic Pastor Certification Program at Concordia University, Irvine. He has worked with the Hispanic ministry of Trinity Lutheran, Santa Ana, as well as Trinity Central and Grace Lutheran in L.A.

"Get to know the people," is a main lesson Edgar says he has learned through his varied experiences in the different locations. The Santa Ana church began a food distribution program in the community. As Edgar arranged visitations with some of the people who had received food, he noted that many owned their own homes and had two cars in the driveway. They were happy to receive the food, but it was not filling a real need. Talking to them, he realized that there

was more need of counseling for alcohol abuse, marriage problems and parenting skills. These needs provided a much better door through which to introduce the love of Jesus Christ.

A few years later he began mission work around Grace Lutheran, located in an area of Los Angeles known for violence and poverty. As Edgar knocked on doors around the church, he learned much:

- In that same area, there were about 10 small churches, all of whom were witnessing and passing out tracts door to door. People were not interested in talking to him because "they'd heard that before."



- People in that culture were also distrustful of someone coming to the door. He was often mistaken for a police officer or a social worker. Edgar found people more receptive to conversation when he was introduced by a friend or relative, or when people came to him referred by someone else, than when he went to their door

- People had urgent needs for food, housing and employment. A community center that offered assistance in these areas would be an open door for the gospel.
- Another strong need was for programs for children. The area was full of children, few of

whom lived with two parents. Parents and children both were very welcoming of programs for the kids. And these children have been the main connection to get to know people in the area.

Edgar says these discoveries greatly impacted his ministry. He summarizes the lesson, simply and succinctly, this way: "Talk to people. Listen to people. Make your plans accordingly."

### Training Trainers

The Center for U.S. Missions, in addition to providing training in many areas, now also trains trainers to lead important mission training seminars.

In May, seven people were trained to lead Daughter Church Planting trainings. Ten people were trained in August to lead Turnaround Church seminars. And we now also have 11 NCD trainers from a seminar just completed in St. Louis.

Our website, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org), lists the wide variety of seminars we offer to help churches focus on mission. We encourage churches and individuals to contact us about specific training seminars.

Call us at 949-854-8002 or visit our website, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org).

## *Upcoming Seminars*

### *NCD*

On Sept. 18-20, eleven LCMS district executives were trained by Bob Logan of CoachNet, Inc., to be trainers in Natural Church Development (NCD). NCD uses an assessment tool to help churches rate themselves on eight qualities that research has shown to be important for church health. These eight quality characteristics are also evident in the description of the early church in the book of Acts. But why is a past training event under the topic “upcoming seminars”? Plans are being made for these 11 trainers to hold regional trainings in early 2004 to train as many as 60 new NCD coaches. The churches participating in the NCD process have found it helps them learn how to be more intentional and effective in carrying out their purpose. As additional coaches are trained, watch for NCD to be available to more congregations.

### *Mobilizing Members for Missions*

Wed. Oct. 22, 2003, Concordia University, Irvine, California

A church is its members. For a church to be effective in mission outreach, it must, through the power of the Holy Spirit, be effective not only in teaching its members about their call to mission and ministry but must also intentionally train and equip them to do so. Yet sometimes the church turns away or turns off people who wish to use their God-given gifts in His service, even as they suffer from the difficulties of recruiting volunteers. This one-day seminar offers a change in perspective, from recruiting to equipping, that can mobilize members for mission — getting them off the bench and on to the playing field! Practical tools will be shared, along with a plan for action. The cost is \$90 for the first person from a congregation, and \$60 for each additional person from the same congregation, which includes materials and lunch. Registration can be done through the website, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org), or by calling 949-854-8002 x1780.



### *Healthy Church Consultant Training*



Those who are privileged to consult with various congregations know that it brings many challenges: building relationships, listening well, conflict resolution, dealing with varying personalities, and the consultation process itself. “Healthy Church Consultant Training,” offered Nov. 7-10 in St. Louis, Missouri, covers these topics and gives participants many tools, surveys, materials and resources. It will be led by Mike Ruhl, Mission Executive of the Michigan District LCMS and a professional church consultant, and Kathy Pennell, a trained and practicing consultant in the business world. A \$500 registration fee includes materials and 2 lunches. Transportation, lodging and other meals are the responsibility of participants. Registration deadline is October 17th. Our website, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org), provides more information, along with the ability to register and to pay for the event.

tell people what we had to offer. We just started meeting and prayed people would show up. Tommy Barnett said: *Without vision, people perish. Without people, the vision perishes.*

Vision is one thing. Communicating it is something else. We learned we can't adopt the "field of dreams" mentality and just sit around waiting for people to show up. After all, the Great Commission is to go - not to stay, wait and grumble when they don't show up. "Come and see" must be balanced by "Go and tell."

**Lesson #9**  
***You Get What You Expect***

At TLC, we did not require much from our people. After all, they were recovering, burnt out people. They lived down to our expectations.

We learned to raise the bar on expectations. In the book High Expectations, author Thorn Rainer presents

research proving that growing churches have high expectations of their members.

This was confirmed by Rick in The Purpose Driven Church. Saddleback required covenantal commitment at every level — a membership covenant, a maturity covenant, a ministry covenant and a mission covenant. The expectations were high and clear to everyone.

At Grace, we have taken this covenantal approach. We were committed at TLC, but now the commitment goes both ways.

**Lesson #10 -**  
***Failing Is Not Final***

I learned from John Maxwell to fail forward



by learning from my mistakes. Failing is not failure unless you keep repeating the same mistakes or give up.

I have taken much comfort from the fact that we ministered to many people at TLC and had a major impact in their lives. To this day, many come up to me and say, "I wouldn't have made it if TLC was not there for me at that time. Thank you." Though that congregation no longer exists, many lives were touched, changed, or restored, and they are now productive members of other churches.

Or should I say, our church, the one church. Developing a kingdom mentality will drive out competition with other churches when we realize we are all in this together and it takes us all to reach our world!

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