The Economist

December 24, 2005
U.S. Edition

Jesus, CEO;
Churches as businesses

SECTION: XMAS EDITION

LENGTH: 2727 words

DATELINE: SOUTH BARRINGTON, ILLINOIS, HOUSTON, TEXAS AND WASHINGTON, DC

America's most successful churches are modelling themselves on businesses

VISIT Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, an upscale exurb of Chicago, and you are confronted with a puzzle. Where in God's name is the church? Willow Creek has every amenity you can imagine, from food courts to basketball courts, from cafes to video screens, not to mention enough parking spaces for around 4,000 cars. But look for steeples and stained glass, let alone crosses and altars, and you look in vain. Surely this is a slice of corporate America rather than religious America?

The corporate theme is not just a matter of appearances. Willow Creek has a mission statement ("to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ") and a management team, a seven-step strategy and a set of ten core values. The church employs two MBAs—one from Harvard and one from Stanford—and boasts a consulting arm. It has even been given the ultimate business accolade: it is the subject of a Harvard Business School case-study.

Willow Creek is just one of a growing number of Evangelical churches that borrow techniques from the corporate world. Forget those local worthies who help with the vicar's coffee mornings and arrange flowers. American churches have started dubbing their senior functionaries CEOs and COOs. (North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia, even has a director of service programming. Can Chief Theological Officers be far behind?) And forget about parish meetings in which people bat about random ideas on how to keep the church going. America is spawning an industry of faith-based consultancies. John Jackson, the senior pastor of Carson Valley Christian Centre, a "high-impact" church in Minden, Nevada, has taken to describing himself as a "PastorPreneur" and has published a book with that title.

Willow Creek is based on the same principle as all successful businesses: putting the customer first. Back in 1975 the church's founder, Bill Hybels, conducted an informal survey of suburban Chicagoans, asking them why they did not go to church, and then crafted his services accordingly. He removed overtly religious images such as the cross and stained glass. He jazzed up services with videos, drama and contemporary music. And he tried to address people's practical problems in his sermons.

An emphasis on user-friendliness continues to pervade the church. Mr Hybels's staff try to view their church through the eyes of newcomers (or "seekers" as they are dubbed). This means dedicating themselves to "total service excellence". The grounds— "the path of first impressions"—are kept impeccably, with the lawns mown and the car park perfectly organised. It means being welcoming without being over-the-top ("evangophobia" is a big worry). And it means having lots of "hooks" that help to attach seekers to the church.

Willow Creek has dozens of affinity groups for everyone from motor-cycle enthusiasts to weight-watchers. The church provides social services, from counselling for drunks and sex-addicts to providing help with transport. It has a "cars ministry" which repairs donated vehicles and gives them to needy people. "Cars", of course, stands for "Christian auto-repairmen serving". The church also lays on entertainment, from sports to video-areas.

Willow Creek is particularly careful to ensure that everything is suitably tailored for different age-groups. The church provides child-care for thousands of children every weekend: this started out as a necessity

(parents will not come if their children are not taken care of) but has become a hook in its own right (parents can relax at the service while children are royally entertained). The church also has a youth auditorium. Willow Creek's adolescent members have taken over a hall, tearing up the carpet to expose the concrete floors, painting the whole thing black and littering video-screens all over the place.

Mr Hybels's emphasis on user-friendliness is now commonplace in the Evangelical world. Rick Warren is a fifth-generation Southern Baptist who was raised in a faith that is both austere and emotional. But when he moved to Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Southern California, he realised that Baptist staples like altar calls—in which worshippers come to the front of the church and accept Jesus—would not go down well with his prosperous and laid-back congregation. So he packaged himself as a relaxed Californian: bearded and open-shirted, he served up a diet of contemporary music and self-help tips.

In their pursuit of "total service excellence" America's pastorpreneurs do not just preach on Sundays and deal with the traditional "hatch, match and dispatch" rites of passage. They keep their buildings open seven days a week, from dawn to dusk, and deliver a truly catholic array of services. Some mega-church complexes house banks, pharmacies and schools. Counselling and guidance groups are routine. So are children's ministries.

The Second Baptist Church, in Houston, Texas, has a huge football pitch. The Phoenix First Assembly of God has a medical-equipment lending closet. The World Changers Ministry in Georgia offers help preparing for tests, filling out tax forms and buying houses (it even has a network of mortgage brokers and real-estate agents). Lakewood Church, also in Houston, puts on one of its Sunday services *en español*. Carson Valley Christian Centre (motto: "friends helping friends follow Christ") offered sermons on how to slay the "Goliaths" of procrastination, resentment, anxiety, temptation and loneliness. It also offers classes in martial arts: "the Christian warrior way".

This emphasis on customer-service is producing a predictable result: growth. John Vaughan, a consultant who specialises in mega-churches, argues that 2005 has been a landmark year. This was the first time an American church passed the 30,000-a-week attendance mark (it was Lakewood, which earlier this year moved into its new home in Houston's Compaq Center). It was also the first time that 1,000 churches counted as mega-churches (broadly, you qualify if 2,000 or more people attend). Willow Creek has seating for 7,200 (comfortable chairs, not wooden pews). The fastest-growing church in the country, Without Walls in Tampa, Florida, added 4,330 new members in the past year alone.

This sort of rapid growth brings all sorts of advantages. The most obvious is that it lets churches put on extravaganzas. Willow Creek regularly invites celebrities such as Randy Travis, a country singer, or Lisa Beamer, the widow of Todd Beamer (a hero on one of the hijacked aircraft on September 11th). Lakewood has a 500-strong choir. Westlink Christian Church put on an outdoor display of extreme sports that includes skate-boarders jumping over a fire to illustrate salvation.

Growth also allows pastorpreneurs—empowered by a combination of large cash flows and economies of scale—to exploit every available channel to get their message across. Joel Osteen, the chief pastor of Lakewood, has a television-ministry, which reaches 7m people around the world, and a best-selling book, "Your Best Life Now". Rick Warren's "The Purpose-Driven Life" has sold more than 25m copies and spawned a follow-up industry of books, tapes, courses and CDs, including a selection of songs. Bishop T.D. Jakes, the chief pastor of The Potters House, reaches 260 prisons a week via satellite.

Most successful churches are humming with technology. Willow Creek sports four video-editing suites. World Changers Ministries has a music studio and a record label. The Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas, employs a chief technology officer (and spends 15% of its $30m annual budget on technology). Worshippers in such churches do not have to worry about finding their place in the hymn book or that they will catch cold. Computers project the words of the hymns onto huge screens, and the temperature is perfectly controlled.

But this rapid growth brings problems in its wake too—problems that usually end up forcing churches to become yet more business-like and management-obsessed. The most obvious challenge is managing size. You cannot just muddle through if you have an annual income of $55m (like Lakewood in 2004) or employ 450 full- and part-time staff (like Willow Creek). Such establishments need to set up a management structure with finance departments and even human-resources departments. They also need to start thinking—like Mr Hybels—about the relationship between the religious leadership and the management team.

Another problem is subtler: how do you speak directly to individual parishioners when you have a church the size of a stadium? Some mega-churches have begun to see members drift away in search of more intimate organisations. And many mega-preachers worry that they are producing a flock who regard religion as nothing more than spectacle. So they have begun to adopt techniques that allow churches to be both big and small at once.

One ruse is to break the congregation into small groups. Most big churches ask members of their congregation to join clutches of eight-to-ten people with something in common (age or marital status, for example). A second is to segment the religious market. Willow Creek has two very different services. The Sunday one for new "seekers" is designed to exhibit the Christian faith in a "relevant and non-threatening way". Willow Creek estimates that over half of the people who come to its Sunday services would otherwise be "unchurched". The Wednesday service for people who are committed to Christianity is designed to deepen their faith.

A third technique is to set up satellite churches—a form of religious franchising. Willow Creek has set up several satellite churches in the Chicago area so that nobody has to travel more than 50 miles. Life Church has franchised five campuses in Oklahoma, two in Arizona and one in Texas.

Growth in religious organisations is proving just as addictive as it is in corporate ones, and successful churches are reaching deep into business theory to feed their habit. They use strategic planning and strategic "visions" to make sure they know where they are headed.

These pastorpreneurs are committed not just to applying good management techniques to their own organisations but also to spreading them to others. This is, after all, the world of evangelism. Willow Creek has a consulting arm, the Willow Creek Association, that has more than 11,500 member churches. It puts on leadership events for more than 100,000 people a year (guest speakers have included Jim Collins, a business guru, and Bill Clinton) and earns almost $20m a year. Rick Warren likens his "purpose-driven formula" to an Intel operating chip that can be inserted into the motherboard of any church—and points out that there are more than 30,000 "purpose-driven" churches. Mr Warren has also set up a website, pastors.com, that gives 100,000 pastors access to e-mail forums, prayer sites and pre-cooked sermons, including over 20-years-worth of Mr Warren's own.

Indeed, in a nice reversal businesses have also started to learn from the churches. The late Peter Drucker pointed out that these churches have several lessons to teach mainline businesses. They are excellent at motivating their employees and volunteers, and at transforming volunteers from well-meaning amateurs into disciplined professionals. The best churches (like some of the most notorious cults) have discovered the secret of low-cost and self-sustaining growth: transforming seekers into evangelicals who will then go out and recruit more seekers.

There is no shortage of criticisms of these fast-growing churches. One is that they represent the Disneyfication of religion. Forget about the agony and ecstasy of faith. Willow Creek and its sort are said to serve up nothing more challenging than Christianity Lite— a bland and sanitised creed that is about as dramatic as the average shopping mall.

Another criticism is that these churches are not really in the religion business but in the self-help trade. Mr Osteen and his equivalents preach reassuring sermons to "victors not victims", who can learn to be "rich, healthy and trouble free". God, after all, "wants you to achieve your personal best". The result is a wash: rather than making America more Christian, the mega-churches have simply succeeded in making Christianity more American.

Moreover, it is a wash that is extraordinary good for the pastorpreneurs themselves, who prosper by preaching the gospel of prosperity. The wonderfully named Creflo Dollar, chief pastor of World Changers Church International in Georgia, drives a Rolls-Royce and travels in a Gulfstream jet. Joyce Meyer, who promises that God rewards people with his blessings, counts among her own blessings a $2m home and a $10m jet.

Yet three things can be said in the mega-churches' defence. The first is that they are simply responding to demand. Their target audience consists of baby-boomers who left the church in adolescence, who do not feel comfortable with overt displays of religiosity, who dread turning into their parents, and who apply the same consumerist mentality to spiritual life as they do to everything else. The mega-churches are using the tools of American society to spread religion where it would not otherwise exist.

The second line of defence is that they are simply adding to a menu of choices. There is no shortage of

churches that offer more traditional fare—from Greek Orthodox to conservative Catholic. The third defence is more subtle: these churches are much less Disneyfied than they appear. They may be soft on the surface, but they are hard on the inside. The people at Lakewood believe that "the entire Bible is inspired by God, without error". Cuddly old Rick Warren believes that "heaven and hell are real places" and that "Jesus is coming again". You may start out in the figurative hell of a Disney theme-park, but you end up with the real thing.

The other common criticisms of the mega-churches—and the marriage of religion and business that they embody—are practical. One is that the mega-churches are a passing fad, doomed to be destroyed by a combination of elephantiasis and scandal. Another is that they are an idiosyncratic product of red-state America: amusing to look at, but irrelevant to the rest of the world. Again, neither argument is entirely convincing.

The marriage of religion and business has deep roots in American history. Itinerant Methodist preachers from Francis Asbury (1745-1816) onwards addressed camp meetings of thousands of people, and often borrowed marketing techniques from business. Aimee Semple McPherson, one of America's first radio Evangelists, built a church for 5,300 people in Los Angeles in 1923. (She had none of Mr Hybels's worries about religious symbolism: she topped her church with an illuminated rotating cross that could be seen 50 miles away.) And the gospel of self-help and prosperity is as American as apple pie. In his 1925 bestseller, "The Man Nobody Knows", Bruce Barton, an adman turned evangelist, pictured Jesus as a savvy executive who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organisation that conquered the world". His parables were "the most powerful advertisements of all time".

The mega-churches are also on the march well beyond red-state America. America has an impressive track record of exporting its religious innovations. Pentecostalism, which was invented in a Kansas bible college in 1901, currently has well over 100m adherents around the world. Even Mormonism, that most idiosyncratically American of religious faiths, has 6.7m followers outside the United States. There is no reason to think that the latest style of marriage between religion and business is an exception. Rick Warren has inserted his "purpose-driven operating chip" into churches in 120 countries around the world. He and his congregation have also set themselves the goal of eradicating poverty in Africa. The Willow Creek Association has 4,700 member churches abroad; a meeting in the staid English town of Cheltenham recently attracted almost 3,000 people. The merger between business and religion has been fabulously successful in America. Now it is starting to do battle with the "evangephobia" that marks so much of the rest of the world.

Churches as businesses

SUBJECT: RELIGION (92%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (90%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS (78%); CONSULTING SERVICES (73%); SPORTS & RECREATION FACILITIES & VENUES (72%); CASE STUDIES (67%); MUSIC (50%)

COMPANY: NORTH POINT PRESS (54%)

GEOGRAPHIC: CHICAGO, IL, USA (92%); HOUSTON, TX, USA (79%) ILLINOIS, USA (93%); NEVADA, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (79%); DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, USA (79%); GEORGIA, USA (79%) UNITED STATES (96%)

LOAD-DATE: December 20, 2005

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Let there be lighting

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Magazine