

Giants in the Land

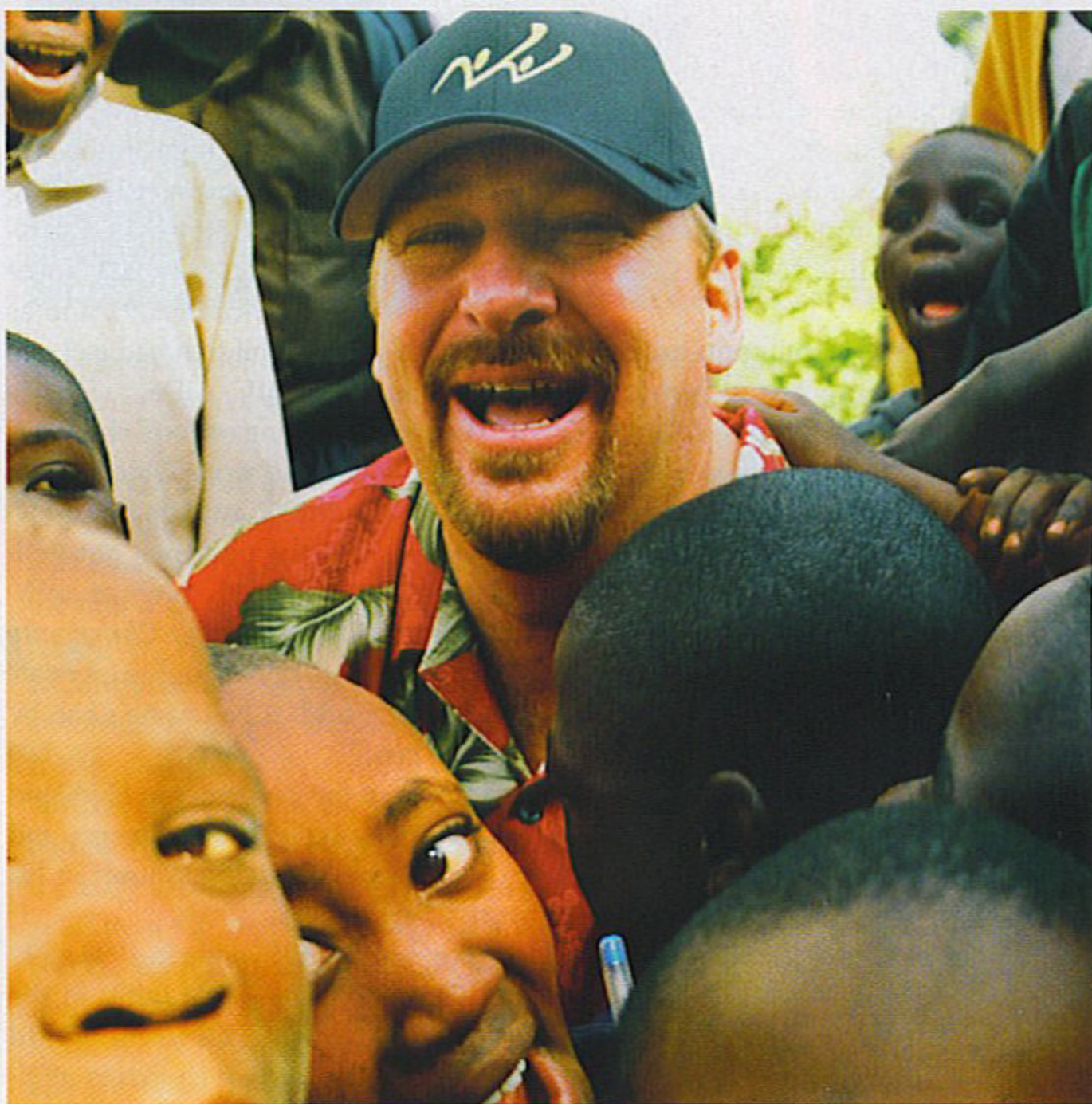
Megachurches are waking up to address huge global and social issues, and smaller churches are making a big difference.

ABRAM BOOK

The pastors who gave us “purpose-driven” ministry and “seeker-oriented” services are leading their churches to take up new causes, campaigns that do not promise growth, at least not traditional church growth.

Rick Warren is championing the eradication of AIDS, illiteracy, and poverty in Africa, and Bill Hybels has named racial reconciliation as his next summit worth climbing. The question is, will their churches and the thousands of churches that take their cues from Saddleback and Willow Creek join the campaigns?

A skeptical observer of these developments suggested this article be titled “Boomer Pastors Get a Social Conscience,” noting that concern for social issues was characteristic of his own



HANDS ON: Rick Warren's concern for AIDS and poverty in Rwanda may drive many churches to renewed mission work.

generation since before they were named “busters.” It is true that the prominent churches of the boomer-led era are known more for excellence in leadership, weekend services, and evangelism than for tackling social justice issues, but to attribute their leaders' recent elevation of social causes to the midlife need for significance and

legacy seems a harsh judgment.

The megachurch pastors who have set trends in worship style and evangelism for three decades have done so out of concern for the lost people of their (and the subsequent) generation.

Their emphasis was in leading Christians to reach unchurched people in their surrounding communities

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effectively. Now, with their paradigm-shifting strategies ingrained on their local congregations and espoused by pastors in churches worldwide, these prominent leaders are turning their focus further outward.

They're shifting their efforts to people and issues that cannot be changed within the walls of their large auditoriums, or by cell group meetings in their church members' suburban living rooms, or through pilgrimages to summits at satellite host sites across North America.

The apostles of the contemporary church are moving out of Jerusalem and Judea, through despised Samaria, to address even larger issues worldwide. And they're inviting their purpose-driven and seeker-oriented disciples to follow.

PEACE in our time

Warren's ambitious plan is to defeat what he calls the five "global giants," problems that affect billions of people worldwide. Warren labeled these five giants as spiritual emptiness, egocentric leadership, poverty, disease, and illiteracy, goals which he named to form the acrostic PEACE:

Plant (or partner with) churches

Equip leaders

Assist the poor

Care for the sick

Educate the next generation.

Warren kicked off the PEACE plan in

the East African country of Rwanda in 2004. Decimated by AIDS, poverty, political upheaval, and genocide, Rwanda welcomed Warren's efforts.

President Paul Kagame invited Warren to visit the capital, Kigali. Their March 2005 meeting launched the effort to make Rwanda the "world's first purpose-driven nation."

The challenge is staggering. More than 40.3 million Africans are living with HIV, according to figures from UNAIDS.com; 4.9 million new HIV cases were reported in Africa in 2005, and as of 2003, 15 million children had lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS.

Warren is counting on local churches, both in Rwanda and worldwide. "Every revival and spiritual awakening in history starts with the peasants, not with the kings. It starts with average, ordinary people," Warren told *Christianity Today*. "There are not enough superstars to win the world. It has to be done by average people."

Church of the Redeemer in Highland Park, Illinois, joined the campaign, and its pastor even preceded Warren in his work with Rwanda.

"I first went to Rwanda in 1998 seeking help for the 'crisis of faith' in the western Anglican Church," said William Beasley, whose church is affiliated with the Anglican Mission in America headed by the bishop of Rwanda. "Rwanda responded to our plea for help," he said. "I think largely due to what they learned about physical genocide in their own country, they became responsive to the spiritual genocide in the West."

Beasley has returned to the African nation five times since his initial visit. Moved by the great need of the people and an appeal from Bishop John Rucyahana, Church of the Redeemer

has raised funds to help build Sunrise orphanage and boarding school in Ruhengeri, Rwanda, a complex that cost \$300,000 to build, and \$150,000 each year to operate.

Because of his involvement with the Rwandan church and national leaders, Beasley was asked to help connect Warren to the proper people and channels to promote the PEACE plan.

"In a sense, I was in Rwanda beforehand, but I helped the PEACE plan get a foothold in Rwanda," says Beasley.

Warren hopes for more such partnerships. His websites for Saddleback Church, his Purpose Driven materials, and Pastors.com all solicit participation by local congregations.

Finding purpose in Liberia

First Baptist Church in Galt, California, is an agent for PEACE in Liberia, a war-torn country in West Africa that also has been hit hard by AIDS.

It started when pastor Rob Patterson received an unsolicited letter in the mail from a man claiming to be a pastor in Liberia. Although skeptical at first, "something about the letter rang true," Patterson recalls.

The man was looking for a Baptist pastor from America who was willing to speak at a pastor's conference in Liberia. A Google search on an old laptop at an Internet café in the midst of heavy machine gun and mortar fire in downtown Monrovia somehow produced FBC Galt's web site.

"That was before we knew about the PEACE plan, but we wanted to help however we could," said Patterson.

After inviting Liberian Pastor Wesley to the United States for three weeks in 2003, the California church raised money to build a sanctuary for



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Wesley's congregation, which had been meeting in his apartment.

The next year Patterson visited Liberia himself to speak at the conference that Wesley had organized and to check on the status of the building. Shortly after he returned to California, Patterson came in contact with the PEACE plan.

"I thought it would be an excellent framework for us to use to continue our work in Liberia," he said.

Patterson says his American congregation has a new zeal for missions. Patterson's son Joe, a college student, visited Liberia last year and helped with the construction of a hospital and a school. Another couple in Patterson's church embarks on their own month-long trip to Liberia later this year.

"The PEACE plan helped get my little church excited that we were on a parallel track with what Rick Warren is doing," said Patterson.

International involvement spurred by the PEACE plan may be an antidote for American churches that have lost direction, Patterson said. "I think there will be a lot of lukewarm churches that will come alive with a spark for mission."

Beasley agrees, adding that key to the PEACE plan's success will be how well churches come together to face Warren's five global giants. To many, there seems to be an emphasis on inclusiveness, integration, and cooperation that has not been a priority with other social justice initiatives.

"There is a connecting of networks of churches that hasn't happened in the past. The PEACE plan has done an excellent job of connecting churches to churches," Beasley explains.

Warren also recently joined forces with Hybels to help Willow Creek Community Church promote its campaign against AIDS worldwide. More than 100 Willow Creek Association churches have joined the effort.

"Rick Warren is a serious man who plans everything very thoroughly, and I'm glad he has identified these issues as important," said Dr. Alan Wolfe, a polit-



Integrated Mission: Leaders from mostly black and mostly white Chicago churches teamed up for the Justice Journey to civil rights sites in the South.

ical science professor at Boston College. "However, there are a number of issues that I wonder to what extent he's fully thought through."

Those factors—including lengthy tribal battles, governmental entropy, and Muslim strongholds—contributed to the failure of Bruce Wilkinson's African initiative and *The Prayer of Jabez* author's withdrawal from an ambitious ministry project in Swaziland last year.

"These are very powerful historical forces, and I worry about someone who is very well-intentioned but finds himself involved in conflicts that really pre-date our involvement there," said Wolfe.

"The PEACE plan is different (from other initiatives) because it has an integrated strategy," said Tim Morgan, deputy managing editor of *Christianity Today* who accompanied Warren and Beasley to Rwanda last year. "The PEACE plan folks are approaching their work in a much more holistic fashion than we have seen realized in the past. It integrates not only across the spectrum of human needs, but also across the spectrum of resources."

Hybels's tearful journey

One of Warren's partners in the African work is also advancing social justice on the home front. Bill Hybels is targeting racial reconciliation, and he is employing the considerable Willow Creek Association in the deployment.

Hybels was about to leave on a family vacation when Willow Creek staff member Alvin Bibbs, an African American, placed a book called *Divided by Faith* in his hands.

Hybels read the book and says his heart was never the same: "It was one of those defining moments where maybe my heart was ready or God wanted to do a new work in me, but the book just creamed me. I was caught completely off guard by it." From that point, Hybels vowed to raise the values of multiculturalism and racial reconciliation at his 20,000 member church in suburban Chicago and beyond.

Hybels reached across town to Chicago's South Side, partnering with James Meeks and Salem Baptist Church, an African-American congregation, to cosponsor a pilgrimage. Each church

picked 25 key leaders to take part.

"If leaders are leading the way in living out particular values, over time, those values will spread throughout the entire church, so we wanted to have key influencers experience the Justice Journey," said Hybels.

Working from an idea modeled by the Evangelical Covenant denomination called *sankofa* (an African word meaning "going back in order to move forward"), the two churches launched a bus tour through the Southern U.S. to sites made famous in the civil rights marches of the 1960s. In Atlanta, the pilgrims visited the Martin Luther King center, as well as King's burial site and boyhood home. The trip also included meetings with local church leaders. "We balance looking at the history and trying to see how justice and racial issues are being manifested in the local church today," says Mae Cannon, director of Willow Creek's social justice ministries.

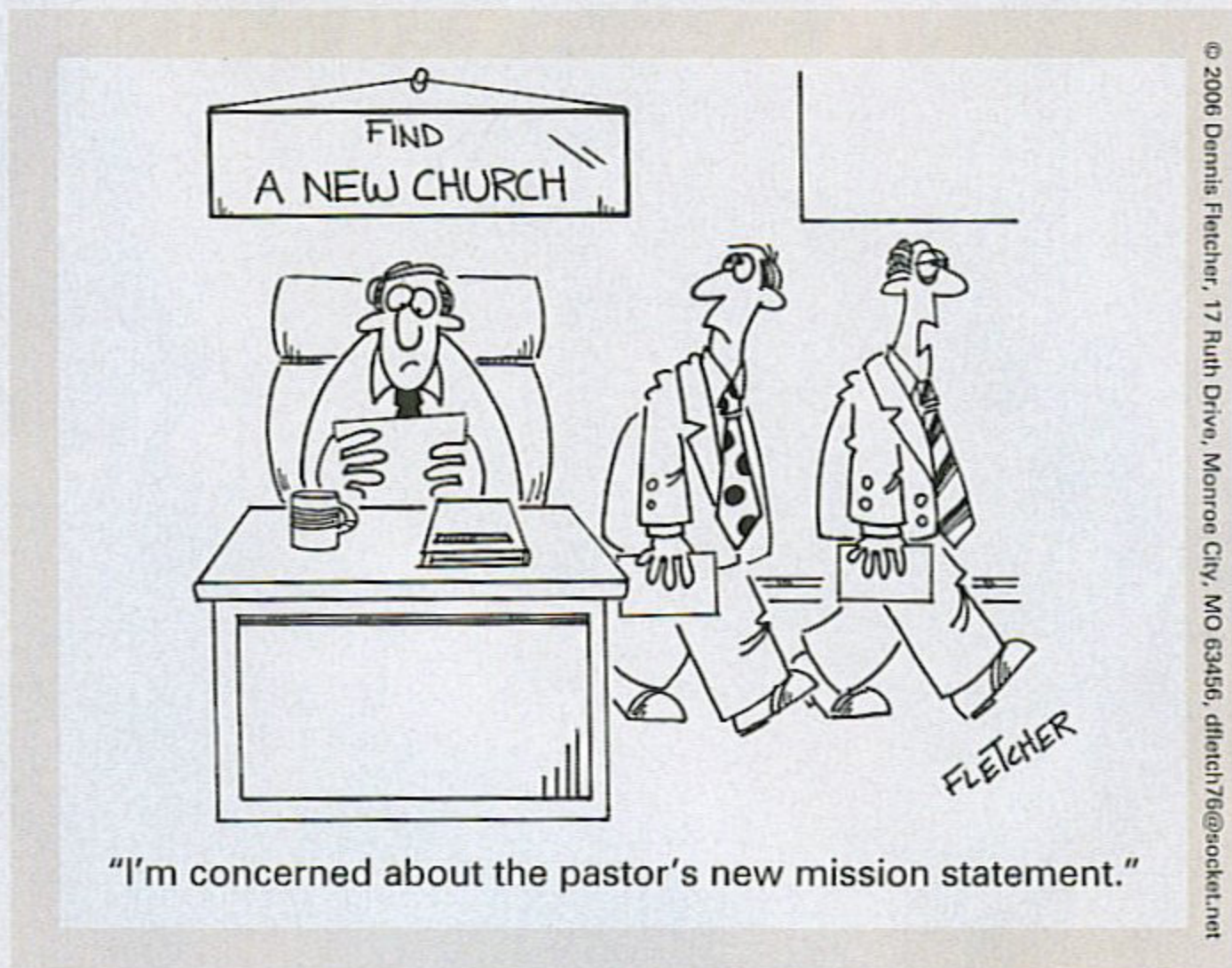
The bus trip included stops at the civil rights museum in Birmingham, Alabama, where police brutalized scores of demonstrators in 1963, and to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, site of King's first pastorate.

A surprise meeting with the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, a Christian who had been profoundly influenced by King, rounded out that portion of the trip.

"Before we left, we all gathered in a circle and held hands, white and black, with the chief Supreme Court justice of the state of Alabama and we prayed for that courtroom. It felt like the strongholds were coming down right there," says Cannon.

On their final stops, pastors Hybels and Meeks together led their church members across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, where King staged one of his most famous marches. When video of that crossing was shown Willow Creek's Leadership Summit a couple of months later, Hybels teared up. He urged the 69,000 pastors and church leaders viewing at satellite locations across North America to take up the cause.

Meeks agrees, encouraging mega-



churches to lead the way. "The only way to break down these barriers we face racially is through the body of Christ. The largest white church in every city and the largest black church in every city have a responsibility to bridge this racial divide."

In its mostly white suburban setting, Willow Creek is offering small groups that "bridge the racial divide."

Together Hybels and Meeks are taking the reconciliation message to the inner city, too. For the first time, the Leadership Summit will be broadcast in downtown Detroit in August.

"The inner-city pastors knew that Bill having a white face and trying to reach the inner city was going to be hard. We needed a black face, and I became the black face to go there and push the conference in the inner city," Meeks says.

In addition to his work with Hybels, Meeks has also partnered with James MacDonald, pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel in suburban Chicago to have five hundred Harvest families and five hundred Salem families visit one another's homes for dinner, encouraging them to just sit and talk and "ask questions we don't really know the answers to."

This "peace" plan, on a different front, is spreading too.

Same battle, different field

Although vastly different in scope and purpose, the PEACE plan and the Justice Journey have a number of the same goals. Both initiatives seek to bring reconciliation and healing to embattled people. The PEACE plan seeks to fight poverty, disease, and illiteracy half a world away, while the Justice Journey seeks to do it across town.

Additionally, both initiatives have been intentional about involving local churches and harnessing the local church's influence as a force and resource for change.

Perhaps most important, these efforts are evidence that megachurches, the driving force in redefining worship and evangelism in the late 20th century, are now reaching beyond unchurched Harry and Mary to redefine missions, urging churches of all sizes to get outside their walls and get involved in causes larger than themselves. Pastors of many churches may respond, "That's nothing new; we've been doing that for years."

But now, with the weight of Christendom's behemoth congregations behind the effort, it may find additional impetus.

—Eric Reed and Tim Morgan
contributed to this article.