

STICKY CHURCH

by Larry Osborne (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008)

a book review by Jack De Vries



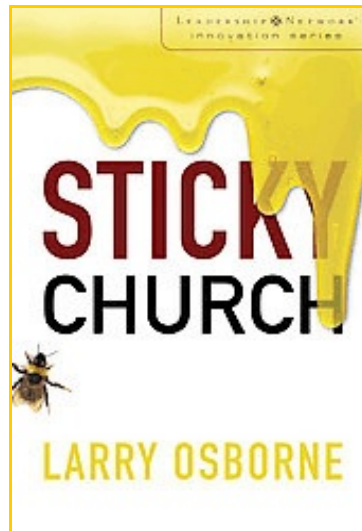
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About the author:

LARRY OSBORNE is lead pastor of North Coast Church in northern San Diego County, widely recognized as one of the most influential and innovative churches in America. Larry speaks extensively on the subject of leadership and developing healthy ministry teams and is the author of *The Unity Factor* and *A Contrarian's Guide to Knowing God*. He holds MDiv and DMin degrees from Talbot Theological Seminary. Larry and his wife, Nancy, live in Oceanside, California.



If your book allowance only allows you to buy one book this year – this is the book! Not only is this an easy read, but it will help you keep your church healthy and growing. It is all about helping our churches become stickier. And don't let the fly on the book cover fool you. Being sticky is not about honey. It is about doing whatever it takes to keep the front door of your church as open as possible, but closing the back door. But don't only buy one copy of this book – buy several and pass it along to your key church leaders.

Many books written on church health and growth provide glowing testimonies from successful churches. Now Larry Osborne has had amazing success in growing a large church. But Osborne is quick to point out the humble beginnings of North Coast church and is painfully honest about their struggles. For example, he writes: "...to be brutally honest, I was using the people I already had to reach the people I wanted to reach. They

weren't sheep to be cared for; they were tools to be utilized. And while I doted on every new person who came through the front door, more and more were walking out the back door." (26)

As churches in Australia we too need to be brutally honest. We need to take to heart one of Bill Hybels' axioms: "Facts are your friends." In our denomination, the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCA), we have seen many people come through our front door, but more and more walking out the back door.

How then can we keep the front door of our churches wide open, but close the back door shut tight? According to Osborne, it requires three major changes:

1. Building a healthy leadership team where everyone shares the same vision and pulls in the same direction.¹
2. Teaching and leading the congregation which helped people grow in their faith at their own pace.²
3. Launching a small group ministry (28-9)

Now it might appear the Osborne is simply making a case to read his other books. Rather, Osborne's books describe the journey North Coast church went through to close their church's back door.

¹See Larry Osborne, *The Unity Factor: Developing a Healthy Leadership Team*, 4th ed. (Vista, CA: Owl's Nest, 2006)

²See Larry Osborne, *A Contrarian's Guide to Knowing God: Spirituality for the Rest of Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2007)

This most recent book describes the third change required: launching small groups.

Sticky Church is not just another offering in the plethora of books on small groups.

Osborne is a big fan of **sermon based small groups**. He makes no apologies:

“the simplest and best tool I’ve ever seen for connecting people to one

another and engaging them with the Bible for the long haul is a

sermon-based small group. It offers a format that fits the way

we spiritually grow, while providing a framework for a

healthy and sticky church. Nothing compares.”(46)

Osborne supports this huge claim in a series of short, to the

point chapters. He describes how small groups in general

change everything for a church. Osborne’s argument is qualified,

however. He stresses the importance of at having at least 40-60 percent of the

average weekend adult attendance involved in small group. This is the critical

mass necessary to see change happen in a local congregation. (48-49) At North

Coast, the church where Osborne is the lead pastor, they have at least 80 percent

of their average weekend attendance in small groups. (21)

One of the changes, for example, is bringing about a marked increase in the practice of spiritual disciplines. Here is a case in point: I spoke at a recent church leadership retreat where people were bemoaning the fact that so few people came out to prayer meetings. This was a congregation with a growing number of small groups meeting regularly. What if we would add up all those attending small groups where they are sharing intimate

personal prayer requests, praying for one another, and asking God to impact our churches and our land with the gospel?

We would have far more people involved in the discipline of prayer than we would ever have come out to a prayer meeting!

What I really like about this book is how

practical it is. The book is chocked full of ideas,

ideas which served

Osborne well in growing a sticky church. There are

eights appendices which will assist church leaders

in developing sermon based small groups.

These helps range from writing great questions to

leader training topics. These appendices along

are worth the price of the book. There is also a

study guide which one can use when this book is read and discussed by a team.

The questions asked are very helpful in applying the principles found in *Sticky Church* to a local church setting.

Perhaps you will hesitate to read this book or implement some of the principles because you see sermon based small groups as just making preachers busier.

Not only do you have write a sermon, but now you also have to write great

questions for your small groups. Who has the time? Who has the creativity?

But there are different ways to develop great sermon based questions for small

groups. One of the church plants I was associated with in Canada utilized the

gifts of others in their church to create sermon based questions. The pastor

identified an individual who was studying at the local Bible college, and he created

If we cancelled our small groups and filled our facility once a week for a prayer meeting with standing-room-only crowds, we’d probably get some great write-ups in the Christian press. But in reality we’d have almost 70 percent fewer people praying than we already have in our weekly small groups. (56)

the questions each week. In churches I have served where we sermon based small groups, I used the *Serendipity Bible for Groups*.³ This resource has ready made questions for every passage found in the Bible and utilizes the question format suggested by Osborne: (1) Getting to Know Me Questions; (2) Into the Bible Questions; and (3) Application Questions. I have found that the *Serendipity Bible* makes the task of creating great questions not only a real breeze, but a helpful way to get to the heart of the Biblical message in sermon preparation.

A criticism I have of *Sticky Church* is the lack of a missional focus in Osborne's discussion of small groups. He devotes a whole chapter to tell us why Pastor David Yonggi Cho's model of small groups will not work in western churches.⁴ Cho used a small group, cell-based system as its primary tool for evangelism and church growth. Osborne does not discredit how God has used this small group model in Korea to reach thousands of people for the gospel. In fact, he calls it "an incredible model." He just does not think that this model will work in America and other western countries. (140-8)

I wonder if Osborne has thrown the

³Serendipity's best selling Bible over the years has over 30,000 discussion questions that cover every passage of Scripture. Along with lessons on every page of Bible text, 60 felt-need, small-group courses are provided, as well as 16 topical courses and 200 Bible stories with boxed questionnaires. With its strong indexing, this is an unlimited source of Bible studies for small-group leaders.

⁴See David Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1981)

proverbial "baby out with the bath water" in his preference of the sermon based model versus the cell-based Cho model. Among churches in the west it does not have to be an either-or scenario. It is important that our small groups foster a sticky character, that people truly build strong relationships in these sermon based small groups. But these small groups must never be seen as an end in themselves. Whatever small group model we use, the ultimate goal is to reach the lost for Christ. This will require not only the development of apprentice leaders (which Osborne promotes) but also the missional focus of our small groups. This might require that our groups multiply (which Osborne does not promote) and that we intentionally pray for the lost we are seeking to reach with the gospel. The small group rather than the Sunday gathering might be the entry point into the Christian community for those we are seeking to reach.

This book is highly recommended for all pastors and church leaders to read. If you desire to see your small groups grow into healthy and growing centres for maximizing the impact of the gospel, you might be disappointed. But if you desire to see the back door of your church closed, *Sticky Church* will give you heaps of ideas. For most of our churches, if we only could retain those who enter into through the front doors, our churches would be growing and making a greater impact in our world. For this reason alone, *Sticky Church* is an essential read. It is short and pointed enough to digest in one sitting; but the principles shared, if you stick with it, will keep you going for a long time. And the effects of a sticky church will last for eternity!

