

feature article

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What Makes a Church... Sticky?



Leadership Network interviews
Larry Osborne, pastor of North
Coast Church (Vista, CA) and
author of *Sticky Church*

Why did you write this book?

I wrote *Sticky Church* in response to feedback from pastors and church leaders I've trained or mentored over the years. It seemed like every time I'd talk about the principles of stickiness, they'd ask for more. It's as if nearly everyone had issues with people coming but not sticking--or attending at such an infrequent rate that it was hard to genuinely disciple them.

At [North Coast Church](#), we've never done any marketing or advertising. In fact, we've never even had a special outreach or bring-a-friend event. Yet we've grown to over 7,000 in weekend attendance. That means we've had to learn how to be *sticky* with those who come--especially with spiritual window shoppers and new Christians who often don't know Job from job.

What does it mean to be a sticky church?

It seems to me that many of our churches (especially our larger churches) are far better at opening the front door than closing the back door. In fact, many pay scant attention to the back door because as long as we have more people coming in the front than going out the back, it *looks* like we are healthy and growing. But that's not necessarily so.

Most everything in *Sticky Church* was hammered out on the anvil of real-life ministry experiences. Some of it was birthed out of negative experiences in my early days as a Christian; some out of the failures and struggles I experienced as a young pastor of a small church plant. And much of it flows out of the things I've learned in my 28 years at North Coast Church.

What are one or two things that you've learned about stickiness?

The first is that stickiness starts and ends with significant long-term relationships. It's not about providing better programs. It's not about developing a slick assimilation process. It's about finding practical ways to velcro people to one another for long-term (even lifetime) relationships.

A second would be that we can never forget that the purpose of being missional is not just to reach people--it's to reach them *and* grow them up to maturity. At North Coast, one of our plumb lines has long been: *Disciples, not just decisions*. I find that as leaders we can sometimes become so focused on evangelism that we forget that the people . . .

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Research, discusses these findings and what



Religious People More Likely to Help Others

Gallup polls conducted in more than 140 countries worldwide between 2006 and 2008 show that those who identified themselves as highly religious are more likely than less religious respondents to report that they have engaged in three "helping behaviors" in the past month. The three "helping behaviors" included donating money to a charity, volunteering, and helping a stranger or someone they didn't know.

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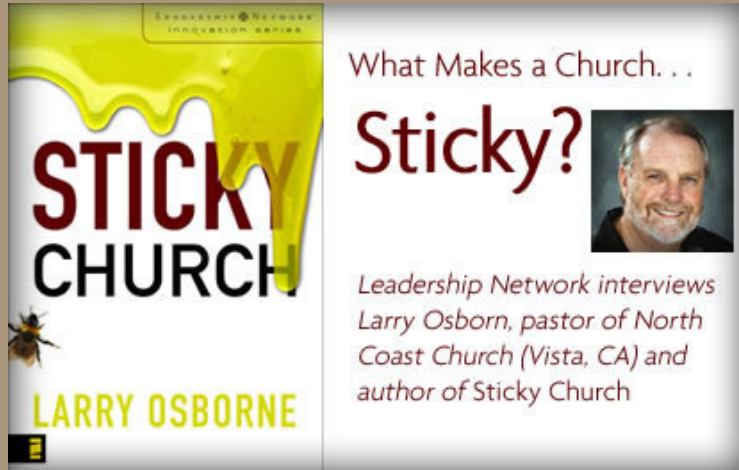
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What is unique about what you have to say in *Sticky Church*?

I show what stickiness looks like, and explain why so many of the things we currently do to "reach" and "assimilate" people actually hinders the process. I explore on the edges where conventional wisdom and the way that life and ministry really works don't match up. It's like a look at ministry through a different lens.

For instance, let's take the assimilation side of stickiness. Assimilating new people and new Christians most often focuses on connecting them to the programs and ministries of the church. Once they attend on a regular basis, we assume they're "assimilated." But truth be told, programs and ministries are not very sticky. They're sort of like Post-its; they do connect people to the ministry; but the connection is easily removed.

Or how about small groups? If we're honest, we have to admit that most of the models we're using today are broken. They work far better in theory than in real life. How else can we explain the fact that most churches retool and re-engineer their small group ministry every three to seven years? In contrast, the model of sermon-based small groups has helped North Coast maintain a participation rate of 80% of weekend attendance for over 23 years (scaling from a small church of 180 to the so-called megachurch it is today). It's an organic, simple model. Much of it runs counter to conventional wisdom. But it works.

Who is the book for and why should they read it?

I wrote *Sticky Church* as the book I wished I had years ago. It's aimed primarily at pastors and church leaders. It's the sort of book that a pastor or leader can work through together with their staff or lay-leadership team. That's why we put a study guide and reflection questions in the back.

Share one idea from the book that's been helpful for pastors.

I think the most common, "Thanks I needed that!" response has come from people who appreciate the fact that I'm challenging some of the most widely held and seemingly unquestioned bits of conventional wisdom about assimilation, special programs, and small groups. I've had lots of people tell me, "I always thought that, but I didn't know anyone else did."

For instance, in the chapter titled "Why Dividing Groups Is A Dumb Idea," I point out the bait-and-switch strategy that takes place when we recruit people to get into a small group because of the relational deficiency most of us have in our highly mobile, fast-paced lives; and then we immediately turn around and tell the people in the groups that if they love Jesus, they'll help us grow the church by leaving all their new friends behind.

There's something disingenuous about getting people into a program to meet their personal and spiritual needs and then turning around and using that program to grow the church rather than grow the people.

What do you hope the reader takes away from the book?

The sticky church paradigm is not primarily about church growth. It's about church health. It's not about hoarding people or refusing to release them to ministry and mission. It's simply about keeping them connected to the church long enough to fulfill the second half of the Great Commission: "Teaching them to obey all things I have commanded you."

Retention matters--in everything. If we're not sticky, it's hard to be healthy.

[▶ Buy the Book](#)

What can we look for next?

I just finished the manuscript for *Ten Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe*. It will be released this coming April. In the meantime, we'll continue to roll out some more [STICKY CHURCH Coast2Coast Conferences](#) to provide a kick start for those who want to see their churches become stickier.

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Soul Repair: Recovery Ministry Webinar

Leadership Network is hosting a free one-hour online session with Dr. Dale Ryan, author of the new spiritual recovery book, *Soul Repair*. Dr. Ryan will talk about many of the issues of recovery that many people in churches struggle with, and will address how ministry leaders can better have an impact on people who are searching for spiritual, mental, and physical healing.



Dr. Ryan is a cofounder of the National Association for Christian Recovery and has been actively involved in its development since 1989. He is the co-author, with his wife Juanita, of numerous books and Bible study guides published by InterVarsity Press. He is an adjunct member of the faculty in the School of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, where he teaches a course entitled "Recovery Ministry in the Local Church."

Date: Tuesday, November 18, 2008

Time: 3:00 p.m. CST

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Top 10 Innovation Trends Webinar

Join Warren Bird, director of research for Leadership Network, as he counts down the top 10 trends in innovation from the largest churches in the United States.

Date: Thursday, December 11, 2008 Time: 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. (CST)

▶ Information or Registration



Executive Pastors Wanted

Whether it's called the executive pastor, executive ministries or the executive director, Leadership Network is gearing up to launch a survey to find out more about the dynamics of this important church role. If you currently carry one of these titles, and would like to be included in our survey (launching early January 2009), [visit our website](#) to update your profile, and choose "Executive Pastor" from the drop down menu for your position.



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in brief

Religious People More Likely to Help Others

Gallup polls conducted in more than 140 countries worldwide between 2006 and 2008 show that those who identified themselves as highly religious are more likely than less religious respondents to report that they have engaged in three "helping behaviors" in the past month. The three "helping behaviors" included donating money to a charity, volunteering, and helping a stranger or someone they didn't know.



The "religion effects" portrayed in this study are consistent not only across the major global regions, but also consistent across the world's largest faith traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism.

Among respondents who identified with each of these major religions, those who fall into the highly religious category are more likely than those who are less religious to say they've engaged in all three helping behaviors, with differences for helping a stranger ranging from 7 percentage points among Buddhists to 15 points among Jews.

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Among networked workers:

- 93% own a cell phone, compared with 78% of all American adults.
- 85% own a desktop computer, compared with 65% of all adults.
- 61% own a laptop computer, compared with 39% of all adults.
- 27% own a Blackberry, Palm or other personal digital assistant, compared with 13% of all adults.

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