

# ONE: FROM MASS TO MEGACHURCH

Once upon a time, without any decent qualifications, and irrespective of my potential to damage the institution, I was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. My mother, from a Catholic ethnic heritage as longstanding as the family tree, initiated the initiation. My father, from a Protestant background, apparently offered no protest. I was born in the birthplace of aviation, Dayton, Ohio, to a pilot father and a nurse mother. My dad's side is a Scottish, Irish, German mix, some traceable to the Mayflower, whereas my mother's side has the exciting privilege of claiming that elevated category of persons in the Bible, aliens—my maternal grandfather's side became established here via the efforts of a Croatian stowaway.

My impact on the city of Dayton was minimal, but my arrival was a source of scandal to the family dog, Sammy. My parents are convinced that he ran away after I, a second child, signaled a human monopoly on parental attention and affection. Increasing the stray-dog population by one and being frightened of the

nearby field of cows is all I'm reported to have done in Dayton, and within a few years my family moved to the suburbs of Chicago, where my father worked out of O'Hare Airport.

Raised Catholic largely by my mother, my early years in the Catholic Church were a mixture of appreciation and boredom. Like many young kids, I often simply did not want to go to Mass. I vividly recall one Sunday morning when I feigned sickness by testing the thermometer-to-the-light-bulb hypothesis. It failed. Arriving at Mass, I would often wiggle among the pews and claim (multiple) bathroom emergencies. And yet I must say that years later, I somehow retained an interest in what I would call, for lack of a better term, the *militancy* of Catholic ritual—its cleanliness of form, its solemn action, the mindful readings and symbols, the slow and serious relishing in one bite of communion and one small sip from the cup. But back in elementary school, those moments were sporadic and were often marginalized in light of other, more pressing events of youth.

Mom taught CCD courses for us kids; CCD stands for Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. It's religious education for Catholics who don't go to Catholic school, but the name did not exactly fit my mother's teaching style. More artistically than doctrinally inclined, my mother would often play music or display art, asking us youth to interpret them. A lot is made today of the problem of mushy catechesis, but in truth, I remember it fondly, though my mom insists it was more akin to pulling teeth. In addition to getting us to CCD, my mom made sure we made it to Mass faithfully, long enough to have the creeds, incantations, and common songs seared into our memory.

One thing about Catholicism that I enjoyed—then and now—was the culture, which at its best is filled with festivals and parties. I recall, around age five, attending an exciting festival in our church's parking lot, held over a period of several days. Every time we visited my grandparents on my mother's side

in Cleveland, it seemed there was some occasion for a similar church festival—day- and night-long parties stocked with food and beer, piñatas, volleyball, water balloon (and egg!) tosses. And although no longer fashionable in our society, even among most Catholics, this side of my family tried hard to keep alive a few old folk traditions—for example, an Easter-time breakfast custom of tapping one's hard-boiled egg against the egg of another at the table. The person whose egg didn't completely crack up was the winner. We dueled until the dinner table had found a winner who had at least one side of their egg intact, abiding through the violence.

My Catholic childhood began to fade just before entering the stage at which most young Catholics prepare for Confirmation. Around this time, my mother heard that the local Protestant kids had some really vibrant youth groups. Our Catholic youth group was, to put it mildly, less than vibrant. Appealing to her CCD supervisor, my mother requested to investigate and perhaps import some practices of these other denominations. She was promptly rebuked and reminded of how such Protestant projects were anathema. With concern for her kids foremost, we began to consider a change of ecclesial scenery.

Church shopping because of dissatisfaction with the youth groups might seem a bit extreme, but anyone who has seriously tried to raise middle schoolers to embrace the Faith knows it is a real challenge. In addition, however much Catholicism was a staple in my mom's family tradition, the fact was that we had few deep friendships at the local Catholic church. We were a long way from Cleveland, my mom's Catholic gravitational field.

Around this time, our family caught wind of a very different kind of church. It was called Willow Creek Community Church, and many close friends were inviting us there. No stuffy dress clothes, we were told. No statues, no crosses, no stained glass, no priests, no altars, no rituals (or so we thought), and not

even a building that looked like what one might typically call a “church.” Gatherings were of an entirely different nature from Catholic liturgy. They supposedly played videos and even clips of popular movies at the services and sang along with songs performed by professional rock musicians. Concert lighting and smoke machines were often employed to enhance the experience. And with legions of staff and volunteers, Willow’s youth branch of the church, called “Student Impact,” could entertain teens, teach them, summer camp them, mentor them, and exhaust them until they fell over in giddy excitement. Their youth ministry was replete with its own separate services, “relevant” songs, speeches, topics, dramas, videos, games, retreats, and so on. On any given Sunday over one thousand students would pour in. So, we went. And then we kept going.

Upon driving into Willow Creek’s zip-code-sized campus for the first time, we viewed a gargantuan complex, a mall-sized, modern sprawl. The parking lot’s size necessitated memory markers; volunteers suited with reflective vests directed traffic. I walked through the doors and into the auditorium, awestruck at its thousands of seats, mezzanine levels, enormous stage, and humungous, concert-like speakers. (Their updated building, a \$73 million or so project, is one of the world’s largest theaters.) The jumbotrons near the stage, listing the song lyrics and showing soothing Christian imagery, would occasionally post announcements mid-service like, “Parents of child #354, please come to the nursery.”

I was enthralled. The sheer volume of people worshipping there spoke to me of its inherent goodness. It was successful, doubtlessly. Its sense of joyful volunteer collaboration was perhaps the most inspiring attribute, from the traffic-controllers to the greeters, from the video technicians to the “hospitality team.” Everybody was contributing to a mission. In fact, other

than sharing the word “Jesus” in common, the experience of Willow Creek made me think I had stepped into an entirely different religion.

Willow had already become so successful that it wasn’t hard to catch rumblings around town from suspicious skeptics—“It’s a cult,” some would say. That accusation only served to intrigue me, prompting even closer investigation. Of course, fourteen-year-olds don’t *really* investigate—not all that analytically, anyway. But if by “cult,” one meant weird, insane, wild-eyed people looking to capture and brainwash me, this group appeared exempt. I could tell that most people there weren’t weird at all. They seemed quite normal by middle-class American standards, in fact, and while they appeared excited about their spiritual lives, they did not seem crazed, pushy, or overly intense.

I should make it clear that while I was undoubtedly impressed, I did not immediately “fall” for Willow Creek. At the beginning, I hung lightly on the fringes. I had jumped from the Catholic to the Protestant world at just the time in life when we develop significant habits, styles, and cliques, according to our own religion or upbringing. I was in between worlds. The pious Protestant pop music, music which virtually all tweens at these churches know and love, was impressive in its professionalism, but it did not do much for me. Too often it seemed to simply ape the music of the secular mainstream—Justin-Bieber-style-but-for-Jesus kind of music. I was not dazzled by the “youth-groupy” culture either, where cultural seclusion or restriction seemed to have socially hamstrung some of the youth there; something about having your own special types of t-shirts, music, and bracelets felt “off.”

My real passion at this time was playing in a punk rock band—hence my initial resistance to the Willow Creek music scene. “Shows” and parties where our band could play were my thing. (The band hit it big when we made it in the local

newspaper!) I had enough respect and love for my parents that I didn't pursue that whole world of drugs and drinking that people might associate with teenagers into punk rock, though I had a few good friends who did embrace that scene. And that is where I came to a crossroad of sorts. A friend of mine committed suicide.

I had been with her and many friends the night before at an exciting high school football game with our crosstown rivals. At the end of an excruciating game, our school's team, the Central Tigers, squeezed out a tremendous win, and uproarious celebration ensued. We all made our way across the field to the high school dance and enjoyed a long, cool autumn evening of youthful festivity and improvised break dancing.

The next morning I was awakened by a phone call. A friend had shot herself through the head with a shotgun in her basement room. I immediately went over to visit with my friends, talk, and share the shock of the news. She had left a note that I never got to read. Apparently it shared cries of frustration about our social scene and its overwrought drama, abetted by its drinking and drugs.

Any funeral following this type of tragedy is bound to feel wrong, but the ensuing rituals were awkward, to say the least. The oddness of the funeral was punctuated with a playing of the latest fad of pop-dance music amid the mourning service. It was supposed to be a form of tribute, but it felt more like a clown had walked into the wrong gathering. Even taking that into consideration, something simply didn't feel addressed. Somehow it didn't seem that her death disarmed or decentered the affected group of friends. My friend Mitch and I took our acoustic instruments to her burial at the nearby graveyard where we played, for all attendees, an instrumental piece in her honor. Apart from the tears and sorrow, it was subtly yet chillingly obvious that, once the funeral was over, things were going to carry on as before.

In addition to dealing with this tragedy, my own social world was going through changes; a close friend of mine had just moved out of town, leaving me feeling very alone. Coupled with my friend moving, the tragic suicide left me feeling like I had come to a fork in the road. As the ancient eerie phrase goes, “Her blood cries out from the ground.” I wanted to heed this warning. Thinking about what had happened, the drinking and drugs path became further sealed off, and a path of mourning and spiritual searching opened.

It just so happened that the week before this tragedy, I had attended Willow Creek’s “Student Impact” and met the newest intern youth pastor for our school: Darin, a friend of now sixteen years. I had barely talked to him upon our first meeting, but when he got word of the funeral he came to it, and I still thank him for that.

I didn’t quite know what to offer my friends so affected by this tragedy, but I thought inviting them to Willow Creek’s youth group was a start. A handful came, and some considerate staff took us aside to have a grief counselor offer solace. More striking was that a popular Christian singer named Nathan Clair came to sing an a cappella song of lament for our group. I don’t recall much of what my friends thought of this, but I wept bitterly, each lyric a touching of the wound. Whatever a “Christian” song had meant to me up until that point, it now meant facing reality, openly experiencing grief, letting it reshape me.

From that point on, I didn’t see much of my old friends. I gravitated more and more toward the youth group world. I started attending Willow Creek regularly, often brought along by older friends. I continued to play in my garage bands, but I also got excited to join Student Impact’s highly skilled worship band. I started to attend parties under the banner of the youth group, sometimes even trying to persuade my secular bandmates to join me. I made friends with more of the older interns, who, being

in their twenties, were a great expansion of my social world. We would often go on hiking and camping trips. I borrowed their books, like ones by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and we discussed them. This was especially helpful for me in that I found theologians like Bonhoeffer more satisfying than the literature directed toward the youth group. I was shifting into a new way of maintaining friendships—what Bonhoeffer called “friendships mediated by Jesus,” friendships where a mutual experience of forgiveness and worship of God is the primary connection.<sup>1</sup>

And so, with study and involvement in Willow, coupled with some key mentors who offered me the chance to get to know some theology, my evangelical piety began to build. I started gravitating toward evangelical worship. Throughout the church services, I would find reflections on faith mixed into long—sometimes forty-five minute—sessions of worship songs. I would help lead many of them, often scouring the Bible and other literature during the week, to offer up meaningful “worship experiences” to the attendees on Sundays, retreats, or alternative gatherings. And I got the inside scoop on what it takes to produce effective, inspirational, megachurch services.

Upon arriving at rehearsal, I would be handed the schedule for the service, which was planned down to the *second*. Each song was selected as part of a long flow of elements to make for an inviting and moving experience for the young people. As one song was completed, the lights would change, a light melody would play, and the pastor would walk up; at other times several backstage hands would quietly talk through their headsets and cue a video in a perfectly executed transition; a musician would sing an introspective ballad in dimmed lights; an energetic song would whip hundreds of kids into excitement. And it was all done with professional excellence, on par with skilled public concerts and performances. Periodically, using their stage for all it was worth, Willow put on full-fledged plays and musicals, meant

to be attended (and paid for) in the same way one might attend the opera or ballet. Bill Hybels, Willow's talented, long-faithful, and sincere pastor whose passion and leadership I am eternally grateful for, critiqued the oft-slovenly approach to mainstream church services, in which things are hastily slapped together, saying, "Well, it's just for God." Bill would have none of that and consistently aimed for the best.

It is an understatement to say that the services were mesmerizing—especially from the point of view of the stage. Sometimes a service, attended by a thousand teens all fixed on the musical performance, had the energy of a rock concert. Looking back, I see now that it is dangerous to the spirit of a sixteen-year-old to lead a concert-like worship event, to have several girls walk up afterward, saying things like, "You're like our own Dave Matthews up there!" Some of Willow's leaders, aware of the dangers of the crowd-drawing energy at these things, would remind us, "It's not about the numbers." They were careful to advise us against an almost too-effective evangelism, saying the focus should not be on the hype and excitement that an enthralling service can attract; instead, we must stay focused on the spiritual goals of Christianity. But over time, however much I constantly tried to remember, "it's not about the numbers," I also noted how the enormity of Willow's project *required* numbers to pay the bills and fill the seats. If only half the seats were filled in their enormous auditorium, it would somehow deflate the energy of the services, making things feel less compelling and successful.

There was little-to-no mention of "sacraments" at Willow Creek. However, it was customary for worship services at Student Impact to include at least one intense, emotional-breakthrough moment that one might call, at some level, "sacramental"; students who felt so moved during worship would often stand up apart from the rest of the crowd, raise their hands, close their