

[The Opinion Pages](#)

# Opinionator

*Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times*

---

November 10, 2011, 7:30 pm

## At a Big Church, a Small Group Health Solution

By [TINA ROSENBERG](#)



[Fixes](#) looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

About a year ago, Rev. Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church in southern California, was conducting a baptism when he noticed something. As with everything at this megachurch, with some 30,000 members, baptisms are large events — this time, 858 people were being baptized. “Along about 500 I thought — this is my honest truth, it wasn’t a very spiritual thought — we’re all fat,” Warren told his congregation later. “I know pastors aren’t supposed to be thinking that when they’re baptizing, but that was what I thought: we’re all fat. But I’m fat, and I’m a terrible model of this.”

The following week at Sunday services he tossed off a challenge. “O.K. guys, I’ve only gained like 3 pounds a year,” Warren said. “But I’ve been your pastor for 30 years. So I’ve got a lot of weight to lose. Does anybody want to join me?”

The girth of Saddleback’s members is not remarkable; it is a reflection of an increasingly obese America. But Saddleback had an asset — one that nearly every church shares.

Shortly after that baptism, Warren was in Lenox, Mass., for a personal medical visit with Dr. Mark Hyman, a prominent metabolism expert and author of several best-selling books on avoiding chronic disease through healthier living. They went out for dinner afterwards at an organic restaurant.

Over beet borscht, Warren asked if Hyman would participate in a program to help Saddleback’s members be healthier, perhaps by appearing in health videos. As he talked about Saddleback, he mentioned that the church had thousands of small groups of 6 to 10 people who meet every week to discuss the Bible and their own spiritual journeys.

“A light bulb went off,” said Hyman. “That’s the best delivery mechanism for a healthy-living curriculum.” Warren embraced the idea instantly. Later, Hyman outlined a program for Saddleback, which he called “lifestyle medicine delivered through the power of small groups.” “The most important ingredient in the cure is the healing power of the group,” he wrote.

The idea that we can adopt healthier habits better with social support is not a new one. Perhaps its most influential adherent is Jean Nidetch, who called herself a “fat housewife from Queens.” Nidetch had failed at

countless diets. In 1961, she was following a diet from a nutritionist — but she kept a package of Mallomars in the laundry hamper and would eat them at night. The skinny nutritionist had clearly never had a weight problem, so Nidetch didn't feel comfortable revealing her cookie habit. But she could talk about it with her heavy friends — in fact, they all had their own version of the story. Nidetch suggested they diet together, meeting every week to hold each other accountable. With the help of her friends, she lost 72 pounds. Two years later, she founded Weight Watchers.

Weight Watchers' eating plan is perfectly reasonable. But there are lots of good eating plans. The plan isn't the problem; getting ourselves to follow the plan is the problem. [Numerous studies](#) show one solution is belonging to a group. As with Alcoholics Anonymous, surrounding yourself with companions in the struggle, who support you and hold you accountable, helps to cement healthy practices so they become habit.

Hyman had worked as part of an emergency team of doctors in Haiti after the earthquake of 2010. He had been inspired by the work there of Paul Farmer's organization, [Partners in Health](#), which has succeeded in treating AIDS and other communicable diseases in settings of enormous poverty using *accompagnateurs*, community health workers who visit patients and help them take their medicines. "They showed that AIDS and tuberculosis are social problems," Hyman said. "The same thing is true with chronic disease in the United States. One in two Americans are going to be diabetic or pre-diabetic in 10 years — mostly undiagnosed and untreated. I believe the only solution is the decentralization of care." Hyman was looking for existing groups that could provide that support and accountability. When he talked to Warren, he realized that such a structure exists in churches around the world.



Saddleback Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church, and many others, celebrate their weight loss and improved health from being on The Daniel Plan. Nearly 15,000 people signed up for the plan and lost more than 250,000 pounds.

Just two months later — absurdly fast for a giant undertaking, but Warren is a notorious improviser — Saddleback launched the [Daniel Plan](#), named for the Biblical story of Daniel, who rejected the king of Persia's rich food and wine for a diet of vegetables and water.

Some 14,000 people signed up the first week, and 12,500 people are still involved,

both at Saddleback and, through an online version, all over the world. Warren brought in three medical celebrities — the brain expert and Saddleback member Daniel Amen; Hyman and Mehmet Oz, the heart surgeon, author and TV doctor. They attended Daniel Plan rallies and made videos. (Saddleback had to [assure its members](#) that Hyman, who is Jewish, and Oz, a Muslim, were providing health advice, not spiritual counsel.)

A survey of participants taken last month (which relied on members' own reports about their progress) found that 72 percent of participants had lost weight. Lesser percentages reported more energy, better sleep, improvements in their cholesterol levels or blood pressure and other advances. Dozens of people accomplished dramatic weight loss — 100 pounds in some cases. Among the successes is Warren, now 50 pounds lighter.

Point One of the Daniel Plan's six-point program is "Connect," which encourages people to find partners and to name one member of their small group as a "health champion." Saddleback created a Daniel Plan curriculum for its small groups. As expected, the groups proved to be important. "We know that there's a 50 percent better

chance of sustaining long-term lifestyle change if you do it in community,” said Dee Eastman, the director of the Daniel Plan. “But we saw marked improvement even in early results.” The October survey found that Daniel Plan members who had the support of a small group lost 6.8 pounds more than those who were trying to do the plan on their own. “You need a little posse to do it with,” she said.

Eastman said that there had been complaints from Saddleback members who thought that championing weight loss was perhaps an odd role for a church. But a health ministry is nothing new for Saddleback. The church has long been active in fighting AIDS, and is working with the government of Rwanda to improve health care in Western Rwanda, principally by encouraging churches to train members as volunteer community health workers.

**Related**

[More From Fixes](#)

Read previous contributions to this series.

The Daniel Plan is woven through with the church’s spiritual principles and beliefs. In its small-group curriculum, it quotes scripture to argue that God wants you to be healthy, and provides Bible verse and discussion themes around the spiritual aspects of long-term change: discipline, helping others, faith. For many church members, this is no doubt a key element of the program’s success, but what makes it an ideal base for a health initiative is its large membership and existing network of small groups of people who gather to help each other. This is replicable in other religious institutions, and perhaps elsewhere.

Saddleback envisions the Daniel Plan as a way to attack chronic disease — on a global scale. Warren is one of the world’s most influential religious leaders; his Purpose Driven Network of churches has member churches in 162 countries, and more than 150,000 church leaders subscribe to his weekly newsletter. Other programs that have started at Saddleback, such as Celebrate Recovery, its version of a 12-step program, have spread around the world. Warren would like the Daniel Plan to affect a billion people in the next decade, said Eastman. “He wants to transform health through faith-based communities,” she said. “Rick has crazy goals.”

“There will never be enough professionals — doctors, nurses and clinics — to care for all of the health needs in the world,” Warren wrote. “But there is a church in practically every village of the world, and volunteers ready and willing to be trained.”

On Wednesday I’ll look at other successful efforts to use the power of groups to help people live healthier lives — and what Saddleback’s Daniel Plan might learn from them.