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'Pastor Joel' to pack Cell; local churches split on him

'Pastor Joel' to fill The Cell; local churches disagree on him

By **Jamie Sotonoff**

A wildly popular and sometimes controversial preacher, Joel Osteen will undoubtedly fill U.S. Cellular Field with his faithful followers this summer when his "A Night of Hope" tour comes to Chicago.

Osteen's uplifting messages of hope through faith in God are watched by 200 million people in 100 countries each week, making him the most popular TV preacher in America.

Yet, Osteen sometimes draws criticism from other Christians, who say he misinterprets the Bible and turns scripture into Dr. Phil-like sound bites.

"People say, 'Oh, you only preach prosperity. You don't address sin,'" Osteen said Tuesday, during a quick stop in Chicago to iron out plans for his Aug. 6 event. "But I feel like I do it at every service. I just do it in a positive way. We all have made mistakes, but today's a new day."

A sellout crowd is expected in the Chicago ballpark that night, similar to the faithful crowds "Pastor Joel" drew at Yankees and Dodgers stadiums in New York and Los Angeles.

"This all grew out of an invitation from the Yankees. I thought that was very intriguing. A minister from Texas, being invited by the Yankees," Osteen said. "We went and did it, and it was sold out. It was amazing. There's something about having 50,000 people there. It was an incredible feeling."

His Chicago event will certainly draw thousands of suburban fans, including members of Lakewood Church in Arlington Heights, where Osteen's services are simulcast on a big screen three times a week.

The church plans to charter a bus to "A Night of Hope," Pastor John Elleson said.

Elleson jokingly refers to Osteen as his assistant, and even got permission to name his small Evangelical Christian church of roughly 100 people after Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas -- the largest church in America.

"For a big church like that to do this, and they don't even know me, that says something ... and I don't give them any money," Elleson said. "They give me more than I give them."

A pastor for 27 years, Elleson was always skeptical of televangelists. One night several years ago, while battling the flu, he found Osteen while flipping TV channels and was instantly hooked. He has since met Osteen -- whom he describes as "just a regular guy" -- visited his Texas church, and regularly corresponds with Osteen's mother.

"He's a positive person with a positive message," added Nathan Elleson, John's 19-year-old son who is also an Osteen fan. "You can always relate to (his message), and there's always something you can chew on and reflect on for the rest of the week. It gives you a fresh start on things."

Polarizing pastor

Osteen is undeniably popular, but he is also polarizing in the Christian faith. A preacher friend of Elleson's was outraged by the big Joel Osteen banner hanging on the church building along Palatine Road and angrily asked, "What are you thinking?"

Matt Henry, an Evangelical Christian from Geneva, said many born-again Christians consider Osteen "a false prophet" who takes biblical scripture out of context and uses faulty theology.

"What's the substance and the Christian message he's trying to say?" Henry said. "There's a movement that he's started, and it's not a Christian movement. It's a hope movement and a new age movement wrapped inside a Christian method."

Osteen -- who admits he's "not a theologian" and considers himself a life coach as well as a preacher -- says he can't understand why people would be critical of his message of hope. He says religion tends to beat people down and focus on what they did wrong rather than recognizing that faith in God and the future can have a positive impact on their lives.

"I try to help people in their everyday life. So every week, we're dealing with people that are having to deal with sicknesses, or people that are going through relationship issues, or trying to keep a good attitude in this economy," he said. "I'd rather take a portion of the scripture and have them understand it, rather than read them a bunch of scriptures that they may not understand."

Osteen, 48, grew up in Texas as a preacher's son and worked behind the scenes in his father's televised ministry. A week before his father's death in 1999, Joel was asked to pastor the church and ended up taking over. The church grew exponentially, and Osteen's services are now the most watched religious programs in America.

Osteen said he doesn't like to label himself as an Evangelical Christian, because that label sometimes comes with political connotations. He prefers to classify himself as "someone who believes in Jesus and believes in sharing my faith."

"I believe I can make the scripture relative to today," he said. "When you hear God's on your side, there's a lot of power in that."

Megachurch competition?

With so many megachurches around the country, does Osteen's church compete against places like 24,000-member Willow Creek Church in South Barrington?

Willow Creek spokeswoman Susan DeLay says no, because there's a spirit of cooperation, not competition, among churches. Willow Creek, like many others, created an association of churches that support each other. The Willow Creek Association has roughly 11,000 other churches, some big and some small, she said.

"We're all in this to support the message of Christ," DeLay said. "We may sometimes wear different jerseys, but we don't necessarily disagree on major points of doctrine."

Osteen has met Willow Creek senior pastor Bill Hybels several times and described him as "a good friend and a great man who's so talented."

"We may have 50,000 people come out to our services, but there are still millions left. There are so many people, we're not competing with each other," Osteen said.

Osteen attributes his popularity to the fact that he's genuine in his beliefs and his message. He doesn't claim to know everything about God, or have answers to all of life's questions.

"I can say, without bragging, that I am who I am. I'm not out to get their money," he said. "I want to do everything I can to get people not to turn us off. I want to stay on the highest road that I possibly can ... because I never dreamed I'd be doing this. It lets me know that God has a plan for me, and for everyone."

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