

“Joel Osteen won’t open his church that holds 16,000 to hurricane victims because it only provides shelter from taxes,” [wrote one person on Twitter](#). That tweet got more than 100,000 likes. Lakewood was shamed into opening its doors. It took in several hundred people until the biblical-scale flood receded. But it left an impression that Lakewood was more of a corporation than a church.



A pamphlet advertising a History Channel TV production about Jesus Christ that Joel Osteen is executive producing, left on a seat in the church © Brandon Thibodeaux

What did they think of that, I asked. My question triggered a mini-debate about Osteen’s wealth. With a fortune estimated at \$60m and a mansion [listed on Zillow](#) at \$10.7m, Osteen is hardly living like a friar. His suburban Houston home has three elevators, a swimming pool and parking for 20 cars. “My dad says, ‘How can you follow the sixth-richest pastor in the world?’” one of the men said. “You know what I tell him? ‘We don’t want to follow a loser. Osteen should be number one on that list.’”

Everyone laughed. One or two shouted, “Hell, yeah” in affirmation — the only time I was to hear the word “hell”. Another said: “He didn’t become rich because of our tithes [the practice of giving a 10th of your income to the church]. He became rich because he makes good investments.”

Everyone knows stories about profiteering televangelists. In the 1980s, when the prosperity gospel was starting to become big business, [Jim and Tammy Bakker](#) were jailed for embezzling millions of dollars. An early giant of the modern prosperity gospel, Oral Roberts, who died in 2009, famously said: “I tried poverty and I didn’t like it”. Osteen briefly attended Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he studied broadcasting. He has put that skill to good use. The church boasts of its “visual literacy”.

Kenneth Copeland, Osteen’s fellow preacher, says: “Financial prosperity is God’s will for you.” Paula White, whose Florida megachurch is almost as popular as Lakewood, says: “Anyone who tells you to deny yourself is Satan.” White was chosen to say the invocation on [Donald Trump’s inauguration](#) day. That makes Trump the prosperity gospel’s most powerful fan — the first time it has netted a presidential soul.

About the only book that Trump is known to have read from cover to cover is *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale, the grandfather of the prosperity gospel. It has sold five million copies since it was published in 1952. His message is that the more you give to God, the more he will give back in return. Oral Roberts talked of God returning your investment “sevenfold”. The prosperity gospel is all about harvesting the seed. The more money you plant in God’s church, the greater your heavenly bounty. Wealth is a mark of God’s benevolence. Poverty is a sign of godlessness.



Donald and Ivana Trump with Norman Vincent Peale and his wife Ruth, New York, May 1988

Peale, who was known as “[God’s salesman](#)”, and who died in 1993, used to preach from the Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan. Every Sunday from the late 1940s onwards, Fred Trump would take the family, including the young Donald, to hear his sermons. Peale officiated at Trump’s first marriage (to Ivana) at Marble Collegiate in 1977. It was where Trump’s parents’ funerals were held, and where his siblings also married.

“You could listen to him [Peale] all day long,” Trump told the 2015 Family Leadership Summit after he launched his presidential campaign. “And when you left the church, you were disappointed it was over. He was the greatest guy.”

Osteen is very much Peale’s heir. After one of his Madison Square Garden shows, Osteen and his wife Victoria were invited by Trump for a private meeting at Trump Tower. “Trump took out a box of gold watches and said to Victoria: ‘Pick out any one you like,’” related a person who was present at that meeting, who asked to remain nameless. “Then he offered Joel any Trump tie he liked. He could not have been more charming.” This was before Trump became president. Even then, however, Trump knew that any public association could damage Osteen.

Though Osteen is politically conservative, he does not wear it on his sleeve. In contrast to most southern preachers, he keeps his thoughts to himself on abortion and homosexuality. His congregation is racially diverse. Among those spotted at his Nights of Hope is Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives. When Barack Obama was president, he pulled Osteen aside after a White House prayer breakfast to be photographed together. “Politicians

like to associate with fame,” says the University of Akron’s John Green. “At the end of the day, they are all in the popularity business.”

Wealthy people crave selfies with Osteen. Presidents may covet his blessing. But his business model is targeted at the struggling middle class. “Lakewood is like a hospital,” says Dustin Rollo. “You have nothing but hurting people.” Many are seeking to replace the community life they have lost. The America of neighbourhood churches and intimate congregations is as faded as the small towns of the 1950s.

Instead of listening to your preacher at his pulpit, you can download Osteen on to your iPad. Sociologists talk of an [increasingly lonely society](#). More Americans live in single-owner residences than ever before. More have to drive longer distances to reach their place of work.

Just a few miles from Hershey, where Osteen was preaching, the town of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, is suffering a crisis of loneliness. Last year a record number of people were [found dead](#) in their homes, having decomposed for days or longer. Neighbours had not thought to check on them. It caused a pang of conscience in the area. Just as Facebook “community pages” offer a simulacrum of togetherness, megachurches such as Lakewood fill a virtual hole. The online nation turns its lonely eyes to Osteen.

It was Dustin Rollo’s wife Krystal who pushed him to join Lakewood Church. When Rollo was 13, he lost interest in God. That was the year his father died. Much of his childhood had been a boyish dream. His father, a guitar player in an Elvis impersonation band, would tour the US and often bring the young Dustin along. They stopped in North Dakota, New York, Niagara Falls, Las Vegas (of course), Atlantic City (ditto) and other places. The way Rollo tells it, his dad’s itinerant life was an endless Simon & Garfunklesque stream of cigarettes and magazines.

One evening, Rollo’s father met a woman in a casino and cheated on his mother. Things were never the same. Rollo’s parents had violent rows. His dad became an alcoholic. Shortly afterwards, he moved out. “I stopped going to church,” says Rollo. Two years later, his father died.



Dustin Rollo, who runs Lakewood's Quest for Authentic Manhood night class: 'Here is a community that only offered love. Nobody told me that I was bad. The world already tells you that every day' © Brandon Thibodeaux

Rollo's life went rapidly to pieces after that. Although he is white, he fell in with the Houston chapter of the Bloods, an African-American gang that used to fight with the Crips, which was mostly Hispanic in his area. He began to smoke marijuana and take cocaine. He got in trouble with the law. Then he moved on to Xanax, the anti-anxiety prescription drug. Life was a blur. "I would do evil things," he says.

In a bid to save their relationship, Krystal, who was his high-school sweetheart, and who is African-American, gave him an ultimatum to attend Lakewood. He was 26. Her gambit worked. For Rollo, Lakewood was an epiphany. "Here is a community that only offered love," he says. "Nobody told me that I was bad. The world already tells you that every day. They taught me how to be a man."

Among the classes Lakewood offers are Anger Management, Maximised Manhood, Men's Discipleship and Quest for Authentic Manhood. Rollo signed up to them all. A real man must be head of the household, he was taught. He must be a king, a warrior, a lover and a friend.

One question on the form that Rollo hands out to his class asks which historical event explains "our present crisis of masculinity": a) the industrial revolution; b) the second world war; or c) feminism. The selection seems a tad rigged (they might as well add: d) the Reagan-Gorbachev Reykjavik summit). No prizes for guessing which box most men tick.



Church staff gather offering buckets – many congregants give a tenth of their income to Lakewood © Brandon Thibodeaux

Most of those in Rollo's class give at least one-tenth of their income to Lakewood. Many live in straitened circumstances. Given that Rollo has a family of six and a stay-at-home wife, his \$48,000 salary is hardly bounteous. But it is more than he has ever received. He happily donates \$4,800 a year to Osteen's ministry. When he started tithing, the returns were almost instant.

"Pretty soon after that, I got a promotion and a pay raise," says Rollo. "I could see God working for me." One of his night students donated \$50 to Lakewood. Within weeks, he had landed a job. "Just like that I had a job with a \$55,000 salary," he told me. "God works fast when you work for him."

According to a Houston Chronicle breakdown of Lakewood's financial records, the church's income was \$89m in the year ending March 2017. More than 90 per cent of that was raised [from church followers](#). Most of its money was spent on booking TV time, taking Nights of Hope on the road and weekly services. By contrast, Lakewood spent \$1.2m — barely 1 per cent of its budget — on charitable causes. Osteen's congregants may tithe. His church comes nowhere close.

The more you consider Lakewood's business model, the more it seems like a vehicle to redistribute money upwards — towards heaven, perhaps — rather than to those who most need it. Like all religious charities, Lakewood is exempt from taxes. All donations to it are tax deductible. It has never been audited by the Internal Revenue Service. In a bid to draw attention to religious tax