

Celebrate Recovery is one of the fastest growing addiction recovery mutual aid fellowships in the world, but very little has been written about its history and only a few preliminary scientific studies have been conducted on its effectiveness. The testimony below from Pastor John Baker provides historical background on Celebrate Recovery. Those wishing more information on celebrate recovery are encouraged to explore the Celebrate Recovery website (<http://www.celebraterecovery.com/>) or contact a local Celebrate Recovery group.

I'm John Baker, I have the honor of serving at Saddleback Church as the Pastor of Celebrate Recovery. I would like to share with you a brief history of how Celebrate Recovery got started.

I joined Saddleback staff 17 years ago as the Director of Recovery and Small Groups. I have served as the Pastor of Membership and the Pastor of Ministry. Now, that's what I do, and that's good stuff, but, you know, God is really more concerned with who I am, rather than what I do.



He's concerned about my character and my values; who I really am when there's no one else around.

So, allow me to reintroduce myself as who I really am, instead of what I do. I should have started my introduction by saying, Hi! I'm John, I'm a believer who struggles with alcoholism.

Notice I introduced myself as a believer who struggles with alcoholism. You see, my identity is in my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ - The One and Only true Higher Power. I'm not going to allow my sin-addiction to alcohol identify me.

I was raised in a Christian home in the small, midwestern town of Collinsville, Illinois, population of 10,000. I had a normal childhood, whatever that is. My parents were members of a small Baptist church, and I asked Christ into my heart at age 13.

In High School I was the Class President, I lettered in basketball, baseball and track. I felt compelled into ministry at age 16 so I applied to several Christian Universities. Up to this point, everything sounds fine. In fact, it almost sounds boring.

But you see, there was this problem. I had to be the best in everything I did.

Because deep down inside I never felt good enough for my parents, my teammates, my girlfriends or anyone. So if I wasn't good enough for them, how could I ever be good enough to serve God? I must have missed the Sunday sermons on Jesus' unconditional love and freely given grace. I was a walking and talking paradox: A combination of the lowest possible self-esteem, which I tried to cover up with the world's largest ego.

Believe me, that's not a very comfortable feeling inside. The best way I can describe the feeling is a pain, a burning emptiness, a hole, right in my soul. I wrestled with God's call and judged myself "unworthy" to enter the ministry.

After High School I went to the University of Missouri. When I packed for my Freshman year I took my non-existent self-esteem with me. I joined a fraternity and soon discovered the solution, or at least, what I believed to be the solution for my life's hurts – alcohol. From the first drink it worked. I fit in! For the first time in my life I felt like I belonged. It wasn't long and I was majoring in Business Administration and minoring in Partying.

I met my wife Cheryl at a fraternity-sorority football game, and despite lots of warning signs she agreed to marry me in my Senior year. We didn't want to wait because the Viet Nam war was in full swing and we knew after college that I'd be called into the service. Little did Cheryl know what the next 19 years would have in store for her. After graduation I joined the Air Force and was chosen to be a pilot.

I attended Officers Training School and in 90 days I learned to act like an Officer and drink like a gentleman. I continued to abuse alcohol and considered it as a cure for my pain – certainly not a sin. In the service I quickly found the use for 100% oxygen – to cure my morning hangovers!

The war ended and I was assigned to a reserve unit. After the service I joined Scott Paper Company, got my MBA degree at night school and God gave us our first child, a daughter, Laura. Two years later we were blessed with our son, Johnny. I'm going to brag here, on June 18, 2004 our son Johnny and his wife Jeni had our granddaughter Maggie! It gets even better, on March 26, 2006 Chloe our second granddaughter was born.

I was promoted 8 times in the first 11 years of my business career. I was the Vice President of Sales and Marketing for two very large consumer food manufacturers. I had reached all my life's career goals by the time I was 30! I remember here the words of a song, "Is that all there is?"

With all of the business success came several relocations. Attending church became less and less important to me as my drinking increased. I was also becoming uncomfortable with my lifestyle, business practices and priorities. I was making unhealthy choices that were hurting the people I loved.

I had to face a major decision, you know, conviction is really uncomfortable!

I had a choice here, do it my way – continue drinking and living by the world’s standards; or surrender and repent and do it God’s way. I wish I could say that I saw the light and chose God’s way, but the truth is, I chose my way. My drinking increased and I turned my back completely on God.

Proverbs 14:12 (TLB) says, “Before every man there lies a wide and pleasant road that seems right but ends in death.”

I was on that road. I was known as a functioning alcoholic. I knew I had a problem, but, I never lost a job, never got arrested for drunk driving. Up to this point, my secret was still safe. Cheryl was in denial, or so I thought. In fact, she later told me she just couldn’t think of me as an “alcoholic” until she noticed my new breakfast drink, beer. One evening, just because I refused to go out for pie with friends, in anger, Cheryl asked me to go to counseling with her or leave.

Much to her surprise, I left, and our 13 month separation began. What I had considered the solution for my life’s problems – alcohol, became the problem of my life! And finally my drinking cost me all purpose and reason for living. I was dying physically, emotionally, mentally, and most importantly, spiritually. My life was out of control. On my own I didn’t have the power to stop drinking.

It was an October morning, I was in Salt Lake City on a business trip. I woke up and I knew that I couldn’t take another drink, but I also knew that I couldn’t live without one! I had finally hit my bottom. I made it back to Orange County and went to my first AA meeting. I started going to AA meetings daily, I went to over 90 meetings in 90 days.

I didn’t know it at the time but I was at Principle One where I was able to:

***Realize I’m not God. I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable.***

Now, this is where it gets really interesting. Cheryl and the kids had begun attending a church that met in a gym, a church called Saddleback. One Saturday night I was visiting the kids and they asked me to go to church with them on Sunday morning. Much to their surprise I said yes. I hadn’t been to church in 5 years! That Sunday morning I heard the music and Pastor Rick Warren’s message and I knew I was home. That was when I knew I was ready for Principle Two.

***Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him, and that He has the power to help me recover.***

Cheryl and I began in earnest to work on our issues that had torn our marriage apart, and 5 months later God opened our hearts and we renewed our marriage vows. This past October we celebrated our 38th wedding anniversary. Praise God!! I was also able to complete the third Principle:

***Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ’s care and control.***

You see, as a teenager I committed my life to Christ but I had never given all my will to Christ’s care and control. At church, I joined a men’s small group, but in my small group I really couldn’t find anyone there that I could openly share my recovery from my sin-addiction to alcohol. When I started to share about my struggle with alcohol they just didn’t want to go that deep. They would say, “How about those Dodgers?” When I went to AA meetings I was mocked when I shared about my Higher Power, the one and only true Higher Power, Jesus Christ.

I couldn't find a safe place to share the victories and the freedom over my past sin that Christ was giving me. So in 1991, I wrote Pastor Rick Warren a short, concise 13 page single spaced letter outlining the vision God gave me. A vision for Celebrate Recovery. A recovery program that was Christ-centered and based on the Bible. I knew I couldn't be the only one in our church, a church the size of Saddleback, that was dealing with a hurt, a hang-up or an addictive habit. I knew there had to be other people out there.

Well, Pastor Rick read the letter and called me into his office. His response was, "Great John, you do it." I was amazed that God would use someone like me to start a ministry, and I am still amazed today.

Since Celebrate Recovery began at Saddleback 16 years ago:

The vision God gave me was to create a safe place that was not only alcoholics could go to for support. But a place for codependents, people with eating disorders, those struggling with sexual addictions, anger, those dealing with past or current physical or sexual abuse issues, those in need of financial recovery and many more groups. In short, anyone dealing with any kind of hurt, hang-up or habit.

It is my prayer that you'll find freedom from any of your life's hurts, hang-ups and habits. You don't have to do it on your own. In fact, trying to do it alone may only make it harder. Check out Celebrate Recovery. This website is a great tool to help you get started. If you haven't been to a Celebrate Recovery before, or, if you don't know of one in your area, click on the "Find a Group" tab. You'll be able to find all of the Celebrate Recovery groups that we know about, and that we know are safe places. If you can't find a group near you, make sure to send an email to your State Representative. We have a great group of people who would love to help you start your journey on the Road to Recovery.

In His Steps,

Pastor John Baker