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**SECTION:** News

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**HEADLINE:** Pastor a man on a mission // Rick Warren of Saddleback Church is ready to take on serving the world's dispossessed.

**BYLINE:** By JIM HINCH, The Orange County Register

**BODY:**

After delivering a sermon in a sanctuary the size of an airplane hangar, Rick Warren, pastor of America's second-largest church, retreated to a back room with the thermostat set at 62 degrees.

Warren, who leads the 70,000 members of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest and recently lectured thousands of African pastors on church growth via satellite uplink, lay down on a bed. A rare nonfatal brain disorder knocks him out when adrenaline floods his body, so he dreads public speaking and rests in a cold room after every appearance.

Soon, however, he emerged, barefoot, and found a visitor waiting in the hall. He flopped his 6-foot-2-inch frame on a red leather sofa, propped his feet up, plucked some peanuts from a small glass bowl and bellowed: "What's up?"

For 23 years, Warren's engaging mix of undisguised vulnerability, laid-back charm and fierce devotion to spreading the gospel have turned a church he started in his Laguna Hills condominium into a flagship for the megachurch movement in American Christianity.

It's been a heady ride for a self-described country boy from Northern California who dreamed of founding a church where he could "see kids and their kids grow up and do funerals and hospital visits and all that kind of stuff."

At a recent church-growth seminar at Saddleback, Warren stood before a banquet room of pastors from Virginia, Malaysia and El Salvador who had told him, often through tears, how his strategy transformed their congregations. Warren was moved, but he looked tired.

"This has been a really hard year for me," he said. "What are you supposed to do when God gives you influence?"

a new mission

Warren arrived in Orange County from a Texas seminary in 1980 with his wife, a U-Haul truck and a thin wallet. His first parishioner was the real estate agent who found him a place to live that didn't require a deposit.

On the way to look at the place, Warren turned to Don Dale, who still attends Saddleback, and said: "Don, do you go to church anywhere?" Dale said no. "I said: 'You're my first member!' " Warren said. "Don said: 'Good!' "

Today, worshippers, seekers, drug addicts, the rich, the lost and the found flock to services and a dizzying array of social programs at Saddleback's \$42 million campus.

From a 74-acre church the size of a small city -- Saddleback's annual budget at \$19 million is \$2 million

more than the general fund budget of Seal Beach -- Warren churns out books, Web sites, CDs, DVDs, sermons and church-growth seminars to hundreds of thousands of pastors around the world.

President George W. Bush recently sent Warren a letter telling him how much he and his wife, Laura, enjoyed Warren's best-selling book "The Purpose Driven Life." In October, Warren will lead 7,000 churches around the nation, via satellite, on a 40-day program of church renewal based on the book.

On a recent trip to South Africa, he marveled to find a small village pastor who treks to a local post office to get Saddleback sermons off the Internet. Late last year, a prominent Christian magazine called Warren America's most influential pastor.

Standing at the banquet podium, Warren read a passage from Psalm 72, on a ruler's duties: "He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor."

Warren looked up, slightly shaken. "God does not put you in a position of influence for your own ego's sake, but to help those who have no influence," he said.

All his life, Warren has followed Jesus' commandment: Seek out and baptize unbelievers. Now, he said, God is giving him a mission commensurate with his rising fame: Serve the world's dispossessed.

It is a frightening call, especially since, as he conceded to the pastors in the conference room, he has no idea how to respond to it.

His wife, Kay, has begun ministering to AIDS victims in Africa. And Warren said he plans to ask each of his church's 1,400 small Bible study groups to plant a church overseas. But for the most part, he is at a loss.

"I'm not confident, but I'm courageous," he told the pastors. "I do stuff that scares me to death. When you live that kind of life, it's amazing to see the fruit."

stealth strategy

Warren has put off this moment as long as he could. For years, he said, he has maintained what he calls a "stealth strategy" -- no TV broadcasts, no public-relations crews. "God uses normal people, not celebrities," he said.

Though his face made the cover of Christianity Today, he said he hates having his picture taken. "Am I really that fat?" he joked, recalling the photo.

Newcomers arriving at Saddleback see no steeples, only wide black parking lots, deep green lawns, tan warehouse- sized buildings and a fake river designed by Disney Imagineers to part like the Red Sea at the press of a button.

Inside, they hear Warren preach on easy topics like managing money and relating to God as a friend. He tells funny stories about his own failures, rattles off numbered lists of spiritual rules and asks worshippers to circle words and fill in blanks on handouts. Those who accept Christ are invited to tick a box on a card declaring their new faith and drop it in the collection bin -- the church avoids altar calls, which pastors said can alienate nonbelievers.

When worshippers greet Warren outside the hall after each service, they see a big, grinning man who swings his body awkwardly and gives the impression of loafing around the pulpit in Hawaiian shirts and deck shoes.

In the church's 50,000- square-foot office complex, Warren practices what he calls "management by walking around," roaming the halls to check on 14 senior pastors who shepherd Saddleback's day-to-day operations.

He spends at most half the day in his own office, where framed pages from 17th-century Bibles hang near his prized hot-sauce collection, including one jar labeled Satan's Slow Burn.

He rarely attends baptisms and funerals, pays little attention to budgets and knows a small portion of his congregation by name.

Gesturing to the church's glittering campus, he said: "When we built these buildings, I let staff do it. When they were done, I walked through them and said: 'Aren't these nice?'"

At a recent small Bible study in Foothill Ranch, Saddleback members said they prize this determined informality, but see it changing.

"Even new people, we bring them up to Rick and it takes them a back a few steps: 'We can approach this guy!'" said Dale Deaner, who has attended Saddleback with his wife, Cyndee, for 13 years.

But "now he's pretty busy, going various places. I wish we could see him more often," he said.

country boy

Warren, 49, was raised in the small town of Redwood Valley, an hour north of Santa Rosa off Highway 101, where he enjoyed what he called a "Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn" childhood.

In high school, Warren was a prankster, once filling a quad with tires he and friends pilfered from local junkyards.

Warren's father, Jimmy, pastored small Southern Baptist churches, and Warren, whose grandfather and great-grandfather also were pastors, grew up an obedient but not particularly reverent child. As a junior in high school, he met kids at a camp who talked not about religion but about a relationship with God.

Intrigued, Warren retreated to his cabin to pray: "God, if you're really real, I want to know you." Soon, he was preaching to youth groups and making plans for seminary.

At California Baptist University in Riverside, Warren -- then 160 pounds, longhaired and peering at the world through John Lennon glasses -- met Kay. The two disliked each other at first: Rick was brash, Kay introspective.

But they felt commanded by God to marry. They were engaged eight days after they met and married when both were 21.

The young couple, poor and largely unknown to each other, fought constantly about "money, in-laws, sex, communication," while Kay typed Warren's term papers at a Texas seminary and worked to pay the \$60-per-month rent, she said.

Determined not to divorce, they sought counseling. By the time they headed west to plant a church, they had worked things out.

Warren picked South Orange County as his mission field in 1979 after poring over Census data in search of America's fastest-growing community.

For 12 years, Saddleback Church met in the Warrens' condominium, then in a succession of local high schools, its congregation swelling as word spread about this pastor who spoke plain English, never strayed from the Bible and invited worshippers to help run the church.

Saddleback moved to its own property in 1992. It waited three more years to build a worship center, meeting meanwhile under a giant white tent.

like a business?

Critics have long maintained that seeker-sensitive megachurches like Saddleback are doomed to die. In pursuit of size and relevance, they say, such churches substitute the trendy for the eternal, depend on a magnetic founder and become devoted to raising money to maintain vast staffs and buildings.

"They denuded the church of symbolism. They don't call it a church; it's a campus, with food courts like a mall or entertainment center. ... They strip it of anything that might be offensive to make seekers comfortable with that environment," said Christian author John Seel, whose book "The Evangelical Forfeit" sharply criticized America's largest church, Willow Creek, in suburban Chicago.

Saddleback's appeal, however, lies in only appearing seeker-sensitive, members and pastors say. The church downplays its membership in the Southern Baptist denomination and goes out of its way to accommodate newcomers.

But members, once they join, are swept into a rigorous, comprehensive system designed to pair them with one of the church's 1,400 small Bible study groups and transform them into lay ministers. Warren said his goal has been to work himself out of a job, to create a system of church organization that would run itself, rendering a charismatic lead pastor irrelevant.

At Saddleback, Warren has almost achieved his goal. He preaches 27 weeks a year, stepping aside to elevate subordinates.

Saddleback kept growing even during the six-month sabbatical he took in early 2002 to write "The Purpose Driven Life."

Speaking in Warren's office, Kay, the poised, organized counterpart to Warren's impulsive, visionary nature, warned against dwelling on what she called her husband's goofball side. Warren, she said, seldom stops reading, has a knack for condensing complex ideas into simple prose and is "passionate for God."

Warren wrote "The Purpose Driven Life" as if he were a monk, she said, waking at 4:30 a.m. each day, praying and sitting at his desk until noon. He demands that his staff follow strict moral rules -- members of the opposite sex are not allowed to be in a room, a car or a restaurant alone together, unless they are married.

As Warren wrapped up the recent church conference, he told 3,200 pastors in Saddleback's worship hall that their churches will never grow, never be healthy, until they themselves are pure.

He asked the pastors to write on a small piece of paper all the sins that hinder their ministry. A pastor from Texas, who earlier said his church had grown complacent and stale, wrote: "I said no to prayer time. Laziness. Fear of failure. I said no to being a leader."

Warren then told the pastors to kneel and confess. With a rumble, thousands of men and women lumbered off their plastic chairs and got on their knees. The worship band began playing a soft song, "White as Snow."

Warren prayed, then told the pastors to fold their papers, take them to the front of the hall and nail them to one of four giant wooden crosses leaning against the stage.

The music swelled and the men and women surged forward, crying, hugging each other. The sound of nails driving into wood rang out. Warren sank to his knees and buried his face in his hands.

"Jesus, draw me close," he said in a broken voice. "Draw close to me, Jesus."

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**GRAPHIC:** The founder: Pastor Rick **Warren** began Saddleback Church in his condo in 1980 with seven members. Today, the Lake Forest church, the nation's second largest, has 70,000 members. Known around the world: Rick **Warren**, speaking during a recent conference at Saddleback, above, presents programs at the church or by global satellite. In demand: At right, **Warren** signs a Hawaiian shirt for Bob Hicks of a Madison, Ind., church during a conference held earlier this month at Saddleback.

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