

Saddleback Church names successor to Rick Warren

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—After more than four decades, the pastor of one of the nation's largest and most influential churches is ready to step down. And he has named a young couple to take his place.

"This afternoon, at our all-staff meeting held at the Lake Forest campus, I was finally able to publicly announce that we have found God's couple to lead our congregation, and that they have agreed to come!" Saddleback Church pastor Rick Warren told his Orange County, Calif., congregation in a June 2 email.

The email included a link to a video featuring Warren and his wife, Kay, along with Andy and Stacie Wood of Echo Church in San Jose, Calif. Andy Wood, 40, is currently Echo's lead pastor, while Stacie Wood is a teaching pastor. They will have the same roles at Saddleback.

'Take up the baton'

Founded in 2008 as South Bay Church, Echo now has four campuses and draws about 3,000 people to weekly services. Like Saddleback, Echo has ties to the Southern Baptist Convention, though neither church uses the word Baptist in its name. A graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Andy Wood has also worked with church planters through the SBC's North American Mission Board.

"Kay and I believe so much in this couple," Warren said in a statement announcing the transition. "We love them so much, and we are confident that God has prepared and chosen them to take up the baton and run the

next leg of the Saddleback marathon.”

The search for a new pastor began last summer, in part because of ongoing health problems for Warren. He told the church last year that he has spinal myoclonus, which causes tremors and blurred vision, and that it has worsened in recent years.

Saddleback leaders spoke with about 100 potential candidates before settling on Wood, who preached at the church earlier this year.

Wood plans to step down as pastor of Echo Church at the end of June and will move to Orange County to begin the transition. The first step will be a conversation between the Warrens and the Woods during services over Father’s Day weekend. In August, the couple will begin attending Saddleback.

The church will celebrate Warren’s ministry during the first few weekends in September. Wood’s first official day as pastor will be Sept. 12.

“For decades, we have admired and respected Pastor Rick and Kay Warren, and their work through the Purpose Driven Church model has been critical,” Wood said in a statement. “We’ve been so blessed by their friendship, and after months of prayer and seeking counsel from others, we believe that God has called us together to step into serving at Saddleback Church.”

‘Time to pass the torch’

In the email to the Saddleback congregation, Warren said he and Kay were filled with love and gratitude for the church and quoted a New Testament verse about fighting the good fight and finishing the race.

“Now it is time for us to pass the torch on to a new generation who will love, lead, and pastor our church family in the decades ahead,” he wrote.



Saddleback Church, a Southern Baptist megachurch in Southern California, ordained three women.
(Screen capture image)

In May 2021, Saddleback made headlines after ordaining three female staffers as pastors—a controversial step for Southern Baptists. The SBC’s statement of faith limits the office of pastor “to men as qualified by Scripture.” But Southern Baptists disagree over whether that applies only to the church’s senior pastor or whether it bars any women from having the title of pastor. They also disagree over whether women can preach in a Sunday service.

At the SBC’s annual meeting, Saddleback was reported to the Credentials Committee, which is charged with deciding whether or not a church is in “friendly cooperation” with the denomination. Though some churches have left the SBC after naming women as pastor, the denomination has never officially removed any church for having a woman pastor.

Decades of influence on evangelical Christianity

Filling Warren’s shoes will be a challenging task, as the current Saddleback pastor has long been one of the most influential Christian leaders in the

country, shaping everything from how pastors dress to how they organize and start new churches.

Scott Thumma, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford International University, said megachurch transitions are often a challenge. The higher a megachurch pastor's profile, the more difficult it is to replace that person.

While megachurches can continue after a founding pastor leaves, it's not an easy transition.

"It will not be the same place without Warren," Thumma said.

Wood's success, Thumma said, will depend in part on whether Warren can let go of the church and allow a new pastor to take over and chart his own course. But Thumma observed that Warren has taken steps in the past to allow others to lead at Saddleback. He does not preach every Sunday and has been what Thumma called "a thoughtful leader."

Thumma said the Warrens have been a positive model of what pastors can be during what is a difficult time for church leaders. They've avoided scandal and have been honest about their struggles. For the most part, they've avoided the culture wars and partisan feuds that have caused many to lose faith in religious leaders.

End of a remarkable career in ministry

Warren's retirement will mark the end of a remarkable career in ministry.

After graduating from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in December 1979, Warren and his wife, along with a 4-month-old baby, packed up their belongings and moved to the Saddleback Valley in Orange County, California, then one of the fastest-growing communities in the United States.



Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and best-selling author of "The Purpose Driven Life."

In his 1995 book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren described poring over demographic and census data in the summer of 1979, searching out the right place to start a new church—stopping only to call his wife a few times a day to see if she had gone into labor.

One day, Warren said, he had a revelation after seeing the data on Saddleback Valley, saying God spoke to him and told him to plant a church there.

"It didn't matter that I had no money, no members, and had never even seen the place," he wrote. "From that moment on, our destination was a settled issue. God had shown me where he was going to make some waves, and I was going to have the ride of a lifetime."

The church launched on Easter Sunday 1980, with a crowd of about 200 people in a rented space at the Laguna Hills High School in Orange County, and never looked back.

By 1992, the church had grown to 6,000 and bought a 74-acre site the church still calls home. The church is now one of the largest congregations

in the country, drawing more than 23,000 worshippers, meeting in more than a dozen locations.

The church, though Southern Baptist, downplayed culture war battles and eschewed traditional church culture for a more casual, come-as-you-are approach to worship, one newcomers could easily embrace. In the early days, Warren was known for preaching in a Hawaiian shirt—prompting a new fashion trend among pastors.

Saddleback also was the birthplace of Celebrate Recovery, a Christian 12-step inspired program to help people deal with their “hurts, hang-ups and habits.” The program has been adopted by tens of thousands of churches around the country.

Warren became a household name in 2002 with the publication of *The Purpose Driven Life*, a runaway bestseller. The success of the book allowed him to “reverse tithe” by giving away most of his income.

Responded to AIDS, poverty and war

In the mid-2000s, prompted in large part by Kay, Warren and the church became active in responding to the global AIDS pandemic and to addressing poverty overseas, in particular in war-torn Rwanda. He later also wrote a popular diet book called *The Daniel Plan*, prompted by his own weight loss.

Though conservative, Warren has avoided some of the partisanship associated with evangelical pastors. In 2008, he hosted a presidential candidate forum with Barack Obama and John McCain, then rivals for the presidency, and later gave the invocation at Obama’s first inauguration.

In 2013, Warren’s youngest son, Matthew, died at 27 after years of struggle with mental illness. The family shared openly about their loss and, in the

years after Matthew's death, have become advocates for addressing mental health and ministering to those affected by suicide.

From his early days of starting Saddleback, Warren hoped to spend his entire ministry at the church. One of his heroes as a young pastor was W.A. Criswell, who spent five decades as pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, and Warren hoped to emulate Criswell's tenure.

"It was my promise to God and to you, God's people," Warren said last summer. "It was my way of saying: 'You don't need to worry about me leaving when times get tough for you. I'm here for the duration. I'm going to give my life to this church. I'm going to stick with you,' and I kept the promise."