

# Saddleback Church to begin seeking successor to Rick Warren

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Saddleback Church Pastor Rick Warren on June 6 announced his Southern California church will begin the official search for his successor, signaling he will retire after more than four decades in his pulpit.

“That’s a big deal,” Warren said, in a moment of characteristic understatement. Saddleback Church, which Warren founded in 1980, is the second-largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

“This is such a significant decision because I’m the only lead pastor our church family has ever had,” Warren said during Sunday’s online service.

“For 42 years, Kay and I have known that this time, this day would eventually arrive and we’ve been waiting on God’s perfect timing,” Warren added.

## Widely known beyond Baptist life

Warren is perhaps most widely known for his 2002 bestselling book, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?*, one of the top selling non-fiction books of all time, with more than 50 million copies sold. After the popularity of the book, Warren famously committed to a “reverse tithe,” giving away 90 percent of his income.

Among clergy of all stripes, Warren is looked to as a leading expert in methods of church growth and expansion. Once named by *Time Magazine* in the “100 Most Influential People in the World” and by *Newsweek* as one of the “15 People Who Make America Great,” Warren is one of the best known pastors in the country and often has been compared to the late Billy Graham for his evangelical spirit and sheer popularity.



But Warren shares little else with the staid North Carolina evangelist and friend to presidents. Once known for his habit of preaching in a Hawaiian shirt, Warren’s sermons reflect his laid-back California demeanor, and by and large he has avoided national politics.

The exception came in 2008, when newly elected President Barack Obama invited Warren to give the invocation at his inauguration. Just weeks before, Warren had vocally backed Proposition 8, a ballot measure in his home state that would have banned marriage between same-sex couples, giving rise to complaints the invitation to Warren would send the wrong message about LGBTQ equality.

Obama stuck with Warren and he largely won over his critics with an inclusive invocation.

## **Personal tragedy, recent controversy**

With his wife, Kay, Warren has spoken out frequently about the treatment of mental illness, especially after the couple’s son Matthew, who suffered from mental illness, died by suicide in 2013 at age 27, five days after

Easter.



Rick Warren at the 2014 Southern Baptist Convention Pastors' Conference spoke about how God helped him overcome the suicide of his son. (BP Photo by Bill Bangham)

Warren was embroiled in a brief controversy again earlier this year when Saddleback ordained three women as staff pastors, a move conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention say violates the denomination's statement of faith.

Calling them—or any woman—a pastor is “at best, unwise and confusing,” wrote Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

In his announcement, Warren said the timing of his departure reflected only a commitment made at Saddleback's first service where he promised congregants, at the age of 26, that he would devote his next 40 years to the church.

“That number, 40 years, that wasn't some promise that God gave me. It wasn't a word from God. It was simply my commitment. It was my promise to God, and to you God's people,” Warren said.

“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.'"

Warren fulfilled that promise last January 2020, but said he and Kay weren't in a hurry to leave just yet. "We both felt that God wanted us to stay in leadership past the 40-year commitment," he said.

Weeks later COVID-19 began spreading, shutting down schools, churches and businesses.

"Looking back in hindsight, I can see the wisdom of why God did not want me to step down three weeks before the pandemic happened," Warren said. "It would have been practically impossible for a new pastor to hold our church family together without even being able to hold public worship services for over a year."

## **Moving forward**

Warren said he doesn't have anyone specifically in mind to succeed him, but said congregational leaders will be looking both inside and outside the church for the next lead pastor.

He said church elders will select a task force of members of different ages, ethnicities and gender backgrounds to give feedback during the search. The final choice will be made by the elders, he said, adding that there is no timetable for this search.

Warren also disclosed more about an illness that has been plaguing him in recent years, a "rare version" of spinal myoclonus that he said he was born with and that, in recent years, has made it more difficult to preach.

He said it causes spasms, tremors and his vision to blur. Warren said his physical condition got worse during COVID-19, adding that it has become harder to do multiple services. It's taken a toll on his health, he said.

“I need your prayers, family,” Warren said. “I’ve prayed for you for 42 years. I need you to pray for me because I’m not going to be able to do multiple services.”

Warren said announcing the search now would allow him to transition into a less visible role as founding pastor.

“This isn’t the end, it’s not even the beginning of the end, it’s the beginning of the beginning,” Warren said. “We’re going to start looking for the next generation pastor who will replace me and lead our family into the future.”