

Obama reached out to rising church star in Rick Warren

January 23, 2009

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Rick Warren, the California Baptist pastor chosen by Barack Obama to pray at his presidential inauguration ceremony, is so influential a Christian leader and author that he has dramatically affected thousands of churches without ever stepping inside them.

“I normally baptize 12 people a year, give or take,” said Jim Miller, pastor of First Baptist Church in Metuchen, N.J., whose congregation participated in one of Warren’s 40 Days of Purpose workshops. “We have up and down years. Following that 40 Days of Purpose, I had about 25.”

Obama’s selection of Warren—a social conservative who opposes same-sex marriage and abortion, but also has led initiatives to fight AIDS and poverty—was widely viewed as an effort to reach out to conservatives who opposed Obama in the election.

But it outraged gay-rights advocates who complained Warren’s opposition to same-sex marriage made him an inappropriate choice. President-elect Barack Obama appeared with with Pastor Rick Warren at a forum hosted by Warren’s Saddleback Church during the presidential campaign. (PHOTO/RNS/Ann Johansson)

Days later, Obama tempered some of that outrage from the left when he picked Gene Robinson, the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, to open a star-studded concert at the Lincoln Memorial two days before the inauguration.

But Warren’s slot at the inaugural was more prominent, and so is he. With the runaway successes of his *Purpose Driven Life* books and as founder of

[Saddleback Church](#) in Lake Forest, Calif., Warren is probably the most popular American Christian leader—“certainly the best-known exponent of evangelical Christianity of the megachurch variety,” said William Martin, senior fellow for religious studies and public policy at the James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University.

Warren shares some traits with the man known as the “pastor to presidents,” Billy Graham. Like Graham, the most famous American evangelist of the 20th century, Warren has reached across political lines.

“Warren takes some fairly firm positions that might work against universal cooperation, but he shares with Graham that he’s not mean-spirited,” Martin said, noting Warren’s support for programs to help people with AIDS.

“He is a person of broad spirit and is capable of adjusting. (He has) said, ‘We’re going to be concerned less with how people got this disease than with ministering to them as Jesus would.’”

Warren, like Graham, has drawn criticism over the years from fundamentalists for not being conservative enough. Sixteen years ago, a group of evangelical leaders complained about Graham’s decision to accept Clinton’s invitation to pray at his inauguration.

After Obama selected Robinson for the inaugural kickoff, Warren issued a public statement saying Obama “has demonstrated his genuine commitment to bringing all Americans of good will together in search of common ground. I applaud his desire to be the president of every citizen.”