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## Rick Warren to retire as lead pastor of Saddleback Church



Rick Warren has announced his retirement as lead pastor after 42 years of leading Saddleback Church in Orange County. (Nick Ut / Associated Press)

BY CHRIS KUO

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Rick Warren, the founder of a sprawling megachurch, a bestselling author and one of the most influential figures in American evangelicalism, is retiring as lead pastor of Saddleback Church in Orange County.

In a video [service](#) streamed to thousands of congregants on Sunday, Warren explained that he will take the title of “founding pastor,” and that the church he has led for over 40 years will soon begin a search for a successor.

“This isn’t the end. It’s not even the beginning of the end. It’s the beginning of the beginning,” Warren, 67, said in the video. “But we’re going to start looking for the next-generation pastor who will replace me and lead our family into the future.”

Warren cited his declining health as a reason for his decision. He has a rare neurological disease called spinal myoclonus that causes spasms and blurs his vision when he gets a jolt of adrenaline. That makes preaching six services in one day a tough task, Warren said.

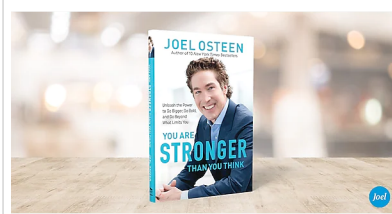
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“Serving as your pastor, it’s been the greatest privilege in the world,” he said. “And regardless of whatever new roles God has for me, I’m never gonna stop loving you. I’m never gonna stop praying for you. I’m never gonna stop serving you.”

He is also stepping down to fulfill a promise he made on an Easter Sunday in 1980, during the first service of Saddleback Church, when he told his fledgling congregation of around 200 people that he would commit to leading the church for the next 40 years.

Over the next few decades, Warren transformed his church into a behemoth of evangelical Christianity. What began as Rick and Kay Warren’s home Bible study exploded to over a dozen campuses in California — including the 120-acre main campus in Lake Forest — as well as churches in Argentina, Hong Kong, Germany and the Philippines. He gave the invocation at President Obama’s inauguration in 2009. Over 30,000 tune in each week to hear Warren speak.

While leading his church, Warren achieved influence in other ways: he became a bestselling author of “The Purpose Driven Life,” a book that sold more hard copies than any other in the U.S. except the Bible, according to Tanya Luhrmann, an anthropology professor at Stanford who has written about American evangelicals.



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He interviewed national leaders like George Bush and John McCain, spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and [hosted](#) Rwandan President Paul Kagame at the Lake Forest campus. Time magazine flashed his face across its cover.

Warren's megachurch model became a paradigm for other church leaders. In 1995, he published "The Purpose Driven Church," part of his effort to export Saddleback's megachurch pattern to other congregations. Over 200,000 church leaders studied the principles in that book, according to the Saddleback Church website.

Warren is both the proponent and product of the American evangelical megachurch movement— a movement characterized by multimillion-dollar buildings, enormous congregations and iconic leaders.

"Rick Warren is the pope of a version of American evangelicalism," said Amy Hall, associate professor of Christian ethics at Duke Divinity School.

In this "Warren-ified," celebrity evangelicalism, churches are often defined by a single face, Hall said.

Warren emerged as one of the key early figures in Orange County evangelicalism — a roster that included Paul and Jan Crouch, who founded Trinity Broadcasting Network, and Robert Schuller, founding pastor of Crystal Cathedral, said Fred Smoller, associate professor of political science at Chapman University in Orange County.

"These people are 'charismats,'" Smoller said. "People became more attracted to the individual rather than, say, the liturgy.... Everyone knows Rick Warren. How many priests in Orange County can you name?"

Smoller added that compared to previous megachurch pastors, Warren is less focused on wealth and more "transparent and authentic." He said this could be partly attributed to Warren's experience with tragedy.

In 2013, Warren's 27-year-old son, Matthew, [died](#) of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Matthew had battled "dark holes of depression" and mental illness, Warren [told](#) his congregation at the time, also posting his thoughts on his Twitter account, [which now has 2.2 million followers](#).

Warren's time as pastor wasn't without controversy. Obama's choice of Warren as his invocation speaker [drew the ire](#) of civil rights groups and gay rights activists, who criticized Warren for supporting Proposition 8, the state constitutional amendment that would have banned same-sex marriage.

He didn't always fit in with conservatives, either: he dedicated money to helping people with AIDS, opposed the use of torture and worked to combat global warming.



"It's something like Steve Jobs leaving Apple," Smoller said.

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Chris Kuo was a 2021 Metro intern for the Los Angeles Times. He is originally from Massachusetts and is a rising junior at Duke University, where he studies English, political science and journalism. He serves as the Chronicle's enterprise editor and has written for the 9th Street Journal and INDY Week.

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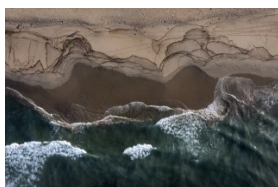
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