A PURPOSE DRIVEN PREACHER


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LAKE FOREST—The Rev. Rick Warren wrote his best-selling “The Purpose Driven Life” to save souls, but even he was surprised when the man suspected of shooting his way out of an Atlanta courthouse heard God in his words and surrendered.

The role of Warren’s book in the Georgia hostage drama earlier this month illustrates just how effectively the charismatic preacher has helped bring Christian evangelism to mainstream America.

21 MILLION COPIES

After 22 years spent building one of the nation’s largest megachurches in suburban Orange County, Warren rocketed to fame in 2002 with his no-frills primer on what it takes to be a Christian in the 21st century.

His book has sold 21 million copies and made Warren an instant celebrity, a standard-bearer for a new generation of evangelists who has caught the attention of President Bush and other national policy-makers.

With his well-trimmed goatee and spiked hair, Warren seems more like a polished CEO than a cheerleader for Jesus. He speaks emphatically, peppering his conversation with precise statistics and one-liners.

Yet Warren, who wears Hawaiian shirts and sandals when he preaches, also tries to keep things simple for his audience. He says he’s just telling timeless stories in a contemporary voice.

“When David said, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,’ why did he say that? Well, because David was a shepherd,” Warren says in an interview at Saddleback Church, a sprawling campus of manicured lawns, airy buildings and vast parking lots.

“Today, I don’t think it’s any less appropriate for the businessman to say, ‘The Lord is my CEO’ or ‘The Lord is my manager.’ You can’t just assume terminology today is understandable. I work very hard at being a translator.”

He is quick to defend his ministry from traditionalists who say he commercializes faith and makes salvation too easy with simplified biblical passages and one-line exhortations.

POSTMODERN WORLD

“I’m never going to deny what I believe, but I’ve got to say it in a way that makes sense to the MTV generation in a postmodern world,” Warren says. “Traditional churches think I’m changing the message, but all I’m doing is changing the method.”
Brian Nichols goes to court after being captured at Ashley Smith's house.

as a seminary student in the late 1970s with the dynamics of church growth. He earned his bachelor of arts degree from California Baptist College in Riverside.

The fourth-generation pastor wrote letters to colleagues at the 100 biggest U.S. churches and sifted through demographic data for the perfect city in which to launch his own megachurch.

He settled on Orange County’s Saddleback Valley because, at the time his analysis showed it was the fastest growing region in the nation’s fastest growing county. Along with San Francisco, San Diego and Seattle, it also had one of the largest “unchurched” populations in the country, he says.

Warren says he sent out

That method apparently paid off for Ashley Smith, the young mother taken hostage by suspected courthouse shooter Brian Nichols. During her seven-hour captivity, Smith read aloud from the chapter on serving others in “The Purpose Driven Life” and later credited the passage with softening her captor’s heart.

Raised a Southern Baptist in tiny Redwood Valley, population 500, Warren was fascinated

The Rev. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Orange County, attended California Baptist College in Riverside.
Nearly 22,000 people regularly attend The Rev. Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church.

WARREN

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15,000 hand-addressed invitations, but only 205 people showed up at his first Easter service at a local high school. Only five were regular churchgoers.

TARGETING THEUNCHURCHED

“It was like speaking at a Kiwanis Club. I said, ‘Open your Bible’ and nobody had a Bible. I said, ‘Let’s sing a hymn’ and nobody knew the song,” says Warren, now 50. “It was exactly who I was going after — the unchurched Southern Californian. We really hit our target.”

In the 25 years since, Warren has hit his target again and again — and widened the mark far beyond Southern California. Nearly 22,000 people attend Saddleback regularly and the church has baptized 14,000 people in the past 10 years — including 2,029 in 2004. The Web site for Warren’s book says that it’s been named the fastest growing Baptist church in history.

GOING NATIONAL

Starting in the 1990s, what he calls his “national decade,” Warren began expanding his influence beyond Orange County.

In an ever-widening circle, Warren and his staff trained more than 300,000 pastors in his church-growth philosophy and sent a weekly e-newsletter, The Ministry ToolBox, to 138,000 pastors worldwide. His first book, “The Purpose Driven Church,” published in 1995, sold a half-million copies — most to other preachers.

Today, Warren isn’t shy about using his newfound clout to launch what he calls his ministry’s “global decade.”

APPROACHABLE CHRISTIANITY

“He’s a person of extraordinary ability and could be the CEO of a major organization. He reinterprets the tradition and he does so brilliantly,” says Edmund Gibbs, professor of church growth at the Fuller Seminary in Pasadena.

Warren’s emphasis on approachable Christianity is reflected at Saddleback, where worshippers can choose from nearly two dozen services that feature different styles of live music, from heavy metal to reggae to hula. Pastors preach in T-shirts and hand out fill-in-the-blank flashcards that dovetail with the day’s sermon.

‘POINTS TO PONDER’

“The Purpose Driven Life” has the same feel, with each of its 40 lessons divided into chapters on the “five eternal purposes.” Each lesson consists of a few simple pages of large type liberally sprinkled with drawings, quote boxes and summaries of key points.

Each lesson ends with a “point to ponder,” a “verse to remember” and a “question to consider.”

Donna Petit, a former Roman Catholic who joined Saddleback Church 11 years ago with her husband, says the church and the book have helped her fully understand the biblical message behind the Catholic liturgy for the first time.

“Religion before didn’t give me the reality of who God can be — that he can be sleeping, eating, breathing,” says Petit, a 37-year-old stay-at-home mom.

“Pastor Rick takes these huge concepts and squishes them down. And because of that, it’s doable, you know, I can trust God for today.”

More on the Internet: www.saddleback.com and www.purposedrivenlife.com