

Megachurch reflects on presidential event

David Finnigan Religion News Service | Aug. 19, 2008

LAKE FOREST, Calif. -- A day after hosting presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain, megachurch pastor Rick Warren said Sunday (Aug. 17) that a politician's soul is as important as his solutions.

"Don't just look at issues, look at character," Warren sermonized here at his Saddleback Church. "Issues are important but you also have to look at character."

The megachurch pastor made only a passing reference to his "buddies named Barack and John," but he made clear what he looks for in a leader.

"Our leaders used to be known for the integrity ... 'Honest Abe' or George Washington," Warren said. "Does the private life of a leader matter? Absolutely it matters. Because what you do affects everybody else, even in your private life."

On Saturday night Warren and Saddleback hosted a "civil forum" with Republican presumptive nominee McCain and Obama, the presumed Democratic nominee. It was this presidential campaign's third faith-focused forum -- the first two included only Democratic nominees -- highlighting the importance religion has assumed in recent elections.

Warren, founder of the 20,000-member Saddleback Church and author of the best-selling "The Purpose Driven Life," calls himself a friend of both candidates.

That didn't stop Warren from grilling Obama and McCain on hot-button issues such as abortion and gay marriage, though.

Asked about abortion, McCain said human rights start at the moment of conception.

Obama emphasized his abortion-rights position but also discussed the complexity of the debate and said his party is committed to reducing abortion through anti-poverty initiatives.

Saddleback congregant Robert MacHale, a 39-year-old software engineer, said he was supporting Obama, but that neither candidate may be able to resolve such difficult issues.

"I guess the better question to ask is will either John McCain or Obama do anything about abortion," he said.

Evangelical pastor Rev. Jim Gilbreth of Riverside, Calif., said the Saddleback forum was unlikely to dampen his McCain support. "On several key issues I am in complete disagreement with Sen. Obama," Gilbreth said. "But I am very interested in what he has to say."

Both candidates discussed their personal religious views, with Obama saying, "I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins and that I am redeemed through him."

McCain said his faith "means I'm saved and forgiven." He also told a story about celebrating Christmas with a prison guard when he was held as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

When Warren asked Obama if evil existed, the Illinois senator said it did, adding that people should have "some humility in how we approach the issue of confronting evil ... you know a lot of evil has been perpetrated based on the claim that we were trying to confront evil."

In response to a question about wealth, McCain said, "Some of the richest people I've ever known are the most unhappy ... I think that rich is defined by, should be defined by a home, a good job and education and the ability to hand our children a more prosperous and safer world than the one that we inherited."

Hundreds of audience members waited in lines Saturday snaking up Saddleback's hilly suburban compound. On a nearby boulevard about 1,000 demonstrators from anti-immigration, anti-war, anti-abortion movements protested both candidates.

Warren did not endorse either candidate but he did mention the kind of presidential candidate he won't support.

"I could not vote for an atheist ... because an atheist says, 'I don't need God.' And nobody is self-sufficient (enough) to be a president by themselves."

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