

Rick Warren Sued by Atheists

Michael Newdow—who tried to have the words “under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance—claims the Saddleback pastor’s participation in the inauguration violates church-state separation.



[] California megachurch pastor Rick Warren is being sued by a group of atheists seeking to block his prayer and other mentions of God during the upcoming inauguration of President-elect Barak Obama.

The lawsuit filed by Michael Newdow—a California physician who previously tried to have the words “under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance—names among several defendants Warren, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who is giving the benediction.

Newdow, who is joined by several individuals and 10 atheist and humanist organizations, filed similar lawsuits in 2001 and 2005, which both failed. He claims that by including the words “so help me God” in the oath of office, Justice Roberts would “infuse the inaugural ceremony with purely religious dogma,” the atheists contend. Supreme Court chief justices and presidents used that phrase since at least 1933, the *Orange County Register* reported.

Newdow and the other atheists also object to the place the Bible has in the ceremony, and the fact that there will be opening and closing prayers. Obama, who is not named in the lawsuit, has asked to use the Bible Abraham Lincoln used in 1861.

Attorney Colby M. May, director of the Washington, D.C., office of the American Center for Law and Justice, said the lawsuit is unlikely to progress because the plaintiffs must prove that they will be harmed if Warren gives the invocation. May said Newdow’s case is contrary to the Supreme Court’s

decision on *Marsh v Chambers*, where it ruled that Congressional clergy and prayers did not violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

“In other words, if it is OK for legislators and the public to hear Congressional prayers without harm, it should be OK in *Newdow’s* context as well,” May told *Charisma*.

Obama has been widely criticized for choosing Warren, pastor of the 22,000-member Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., to give the invocation during the Jan. 20 inauguration because of Warren’s opposition to gay marriage. Warren said he is a Christian pastor and plans to pray “the only kind of prayer I know how to pray,” the *Register* reported.