

Rick Warren Announces Retirement From Saddleback Church and Names Successor

Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, has announced his retirement after more than 42 years as the senior pastor there. He will step down in September and will hand the reins of one of the largest churches in America to Andy Wood, who, with his wife, Stacie, will come to lead Saddleback after serving 14 years at Echo Church in San Jose, California.

Warren, 67, and his wife, Kay, founded Saddleback Church in 1980. It is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention and is said to be the largest church in California. Warren announced his retirement and successor this week on the church's website and Facebook page.

"This is the historic news that I've wanted to share with you for quite some time," Warren wrote to his congregants. "There are many details that I'm eager to share with you. You can watch this video for more information.

"As you might know, last June, a year ago, I publicly announced that I was starting a formal search for my successor. I've spent much of the past 12 months talking with, reading about and interviewing potential senior pastors for our church. Then, our elders and their wives spent days interviewing and fellowshiping with Andy and Stacie, learning about their lives and ministry. This afternoon (Thursday), at our all-staff meeting held at the Lake Forest campus, I was finally able to publicly announce that we have found God's couple to lead our congregation and that they have agreed to come.

"This is a very satisfying and emotional moment for Kay and

me. We are filled with love and gratitude for you. Like Paul, we can say *"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. And I have kept the faith!"* 2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV) Now it is time for us to pass the torch on to a new generation who will love, lead, and pastor our church family in the decades ahead."

Last year, Warren revealed that he had been diagnosed with spinal myoclonus, which causes tremors and blurred vision, and that his condition had worsened in recent years. He announced his pending retirement in June of 2021.

Warren says he's thrilled to be able to "pass the torch" to the Woods. Andy Wood is 40 years old and was chosen from among more than 100 candidates.

"Like Kay and me, Andy and Stacie started a brand-new Purpose Driven Church with just a handful of people and they grew it to nearly 3,000 attendees on four campuses," Warren wrote. "Kay and I, and our Elders, have unanimously selected Andy Wood to lead us into the future as a church family. We are all so excited. You're going to absolutely love this couple."

Wood reportedly will step down from Echo Church at the end of June and will move to Orange County to begin the transition.

"For decades, we have admired and respected Pastor Rick and Kay Warren, and their work through the Purpose Driven Church model has been critical," Wood said in a statement. "We've been so blessed by their friendship and, after months of prayer and seeking counsel from others, we believe that God has called us together to step into serving Saddleback Church."

Warren held his first public service on Easter 1980 and 205 people attended. On Sept. 15, 1995, the Lake Forest worship center opened with 10,000 members after a two-year funding campaign that raised \$12 million. In 2018, the church baptized its 50,000th member.

Warren waxed nostalgic on his more than four decades leading Saddleback and how he founded the church with fondness and gratitude to God.

“Forty-three years ago this month, in June 1979, while I was a student at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, I had my Damascus Road experience,” Warren wrote. “It was not a blinding light like Paul saw. Instead, it was with the sim light of a single 75-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling on an old cord in a dusty storage room. It happened in the basement of nearby Texas Christian University library where I had gone to research U.S. Census statistics on West Coast cities.

“Pouring [sic] over census charts that summer afternoon, my eyes fixed on a word I’d neve seen before: Saddleback. I had no idea how that single word, Saddleback, would shape and direct the rest of my life. I felt my gaze strangely frozen on that word. I couldn’t take my eyes off it! The word Saddleback captivated my heart and I felt electric excitement running through my body.

“At that moment, God whispered, ‘That’s where I want you to invest your life growing a new church. I started sobbing. That was my calling to serve you. From that moment on, for the next 43 years, every single day of my life would be dominated by that word—Saddleback.”

Warren has long been one of the most influential Christian leaders in the country. In 1995, he wrote *The Purpose Driven Church*, a *New York Times* bestseller and one of the most influential Christian books in the past half century.

Saddleback is also the birthplace of Celebrate Recovery—a 12-step inspired program to help people deal with their “hurts, hang-ups and habits.” The program has been adopted by tens of thousands of churches around the country.

The Warrens themselves went through major trauma in 2013 when their youngest son, Matthew, 27, took his life after years of

struggle with mental illness. After Matthew's death, the Warrens became staunch advocates for addressing mental health and ministering to those affected by suicide. {eo}

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