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## Creating those connections

### Pastor's aim is to cultivate spiritual and personal bonds

**By Sandi Dolbee**

UNION-TRIBUNE RELIGION &amp; ETHICS EDITOR

December 15, 2007

Christmas is what marketing specialists might call a window of opportunity. People who spend their Sundays doing everything but going to church will find themselves inside sanctuaries on Christmas Eve, drawn by family or tradition or some other holiday force.

Rick Warren knows about these folks. He calls them the “lily and poinsettia people” – because they tend to show up at Easter and Christmas.

So how does a pastor get them to stay?

Warren, who heads the humongous Saddleback Church in southern Orange County, said the key is to get them involved in a small group.

“We believe congregations have to grow large and small at the same time,” Warren said Thursday afternoon via cell phone. He was boarding a plane on the East Coast, where he spoke at a White House meeting on HIV/AIDS, (see related story on E4) and was on his way to San Diego, where he spoke Thursday night at the Union for Reform Judaism's biennial convention.



SEAN M. HAFEEY / Union-Tribune  
Pastor Rick Warren addressed the Union for Reform Judaism Convention in San Diego Thursday night.

Saddleback's turnout for weekend services – usually about 22,000 people – is what Warren calls “the crowd.” But the weekly small group meetings – 3,800 of them from Malibu to Carlsbad – are what he calls “the congregation.”

“A crowd is not the church,” said Warren, who may be best known as the author of the mega-selling, spiritual how-to book, “The Purpose-Driven Life.”

He added: “We don't really feel like people are in the congregation until they're in small groups.”

Warren urges clergy to use the crowded moments – like holiday services – to get the word out about other programs. Saddleback's small groups range from Bible studies to stress management sessions. People can plug into the groups via the church's Web site.

Despite America's penchant for traveling alone, dining alone and even bowling alone, Warren argues that people are hungry for relationship.

“We have a pandemic of loneliness,” he said. “We weren't meant to go through life by ourself.”

A few hours later, at the San Diego Convention Center, Warren shared his advice on building community with several-thousand leaders of Reform Judaism in North America.

“There are some principles that apply regardless of our faith, if it's Jewish or Christian,” he told the convention. The biennial meeting of the largest branch of Judaism in the U.S. began Wednesday and continues through tomorrow in downtown San Diego.

One of Warren's principles: “Just be nice to people. Smile.”

Warren was joined on the stage by two successful Southern California rabbis – Laura Geller of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills and David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles. He spoke for a few minutes at the podium and then settled into chairs alongside the rabbis for a kind of living-room chat about strengthening congregational life.

Among the ideas they shared:

- Allow people to tell their stories. “Ultimately, what we need to do is deepen relationships,” said Geller.
- Think like a visitor. “We have to look at everything from an outsider's viewpoint,” said Warren, who spoke of simplifying worship terms.
- Make strangers feel welcome. Go up and talk to them. Use greeters from a range of ages at each service (with kids greeting visiting kids and seniors greeting visiting seniors).
- Cultivate your music programs. “Nothing moves people like music,” said Wolpe.
- Encourage conversations. Geller's synagogue emphasizes opportunities for people to meet together one-on-one to get to know each other better.

Warren told the audience of arriving in Southern California in 1980 to start a church. He was fresh out of seminary, with “no building, no members and no money.”

Twenty-seven years later, Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, will have 14 services for Christmas, drawing an estimated 45,000 people.

“The congregation that really loves people, you have to lock the doors to keep people out,” he said.

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■ Sandi Dolbee: (619) 293-2082; [sandi.dolbee@uniontrib.com](mailto:sandi.dolbee@uniontrib.com)

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