

Warren's forum aims for 'civility'

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With a California megachurch as the setting for their first joint campaign appearance, Republican John McCain gave crisp, campaign-tested responses, and Democrat Barack Obama offered nuanced replies to questions on religion, character, leadership and public policy.

It was not a debate, and the clearest winner—in terms of heightened influence—of the mid-August, nationally televised “civil forum” surely was pastor-interrogator Rick Warren.

Using his acquaintance with both senators, Warren brought them to his 120-acre Saddleback Church campus in Orange County for sequential one-hour interviews. Obama has been openly courting evangelicals, especially those who see common ground with him on global warming, poverty, religious tolerance and health issues.

McCain is often uneasy in talking about personal faith, much like the Episcopalian-raised first President Bush. McCain, who has long described himself as an Episcopalian, attends a congregation in Phoenix that, like Saddleback, is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (though that denominational link is purposely obscured in laid-back California).

A weekly average attendance of 22,000 worshipers puts Saddleback Church, in suburban Lake Forest, among the five largest megachurches in the country.

Like the big-church pastors of Crystal Cathedral, about 20 miles away, and Willow Creek Community Church, near Chicago, Warren maintains a huge network of fellow clergy who attend his workshops and receive his newsletter. Many of the several hundred thousand on his mailing list first connected to Warren when they read his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Church*.

Warren captured further attention with *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold some 40 million copies, and through his world-traveling efforts, along with his wife, Kay, to fight poverty and HIV-AIDS.

But Warren, 54, “is not quite a household name yet,” said polling expert John Green on the Web site of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life before the August 16 forum was held. A poll last year of likely voters in Western states found that fewer than 20 percent could identify Warren. The 2007 Pew Research Center national survey sample found that about 80 percent of adults were familiar with Billy Graham and about one-third knew the name of religious broadcaster James Dobson.

Warren, who is in position to have the ear of the next president, appears to prefer the diplomatic style of Graham over Dobson’s hard-line approach.

However, according to *Time*, two weeks before the 2004 presidential election, Warren sent an e-mail to several hundred thousand pastors that, while it did not endorse George W. Bush, listed “nonnegotiable” issues for Christians: abortion, gay marriage, human cloning and stem cell research.

For the recent forum, Warren posed questions on those topics to Obama and McCain, but also asked them to name the three wisest people they know, their greatest moral failure, and an issue on which they had changed their minds. He prefaced that last question with implicit criticism of “gotcha” political tactics that always treat position reappraisals as flip-flopping.

The forum pleased some Christian conservatives who have been critical of Warren’s embrace of an expanded social agenda. “He showed me he’s at least as good at interviews as he is at selling books,” wrote Joel Belz, founder of *World*, a conservative Christian magazine based in Asheville, North Carolina. “And he was fair,” Belz said, adding that “all three men were very, very good.”

Applause also came from Rob Schenck, president of the Washington-based National Clergy Council, a conservative critic of Warren quoted by two news organizations as predicting that the California pastor would avoid hot-button questions. “I made the wrong assumptions,” Schenk said. “It was better than I prayed it would be.”

Less enthusiasm was evident in other circles. Columnist David Waters, writing for On Faith, a Web site sponsored by *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, said that “Warren’s questions were grounded in the priorities and worldview of American

cultural conservatives.”

In his Sunday sermon on August 17, Warren urged his congregation to look not just at issues but also at candidates’ character. Giving no sign of a preference, the pastor said “they were very different in personality, in philosophy, in direction, in goals and in vision, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Warren asked worshipers in the 3,000-seat sanctuary, and others who could listen on the Saddleback Web site, to look at each candidate and ask, “Does he live with integrity, [do] service with humility, share with generosity, or not?”

During the forum event, nearly all attendees were given free seats. But spokesperson A. Larry Ross said that about 250 persons paid \$250 to \$2,000 each to defray expenses. Church members made up most of the audience, though each campaign received 100 seats, perhaps accounting for the candidates’ getting roughly equal amounts of applause.

Asked about abortion, the Illinois senator sidestepped the question of when a baby is accorded human rights. To answer that from a theological or scientific perspective is “above my pay grade,” he said.

“If you believe that life begins at conception—and you are consistent in that belief,” he added, “then I can’t argue with you on that because that is a core issue of faith for you.” Obama said he was pro-choice in line with the U.S. Supreme Court case allowing women the right to choose. “I don’t think women make these decisions casually.”

Asked at what point life begins, the Arizona senator replied quickly, “At conception,” adding that he would be “a pro-life president and this presidency will have pro-life policies.”

McCain did not budge, however, on his longtime support for embryonic stem cell research. While admitting it is “a terrible dilemma,” he seemed to echo Warren’s suggestion that some adult stem cell research has shown promise for medical treatment. McCain said he was “wildly optimistic” that further research would “make this debate an academic one.”

McCain has heard warnings recently from some pro-life Republicans, many of whom became reluctant supporters after other GOP hopefuls were beaten in the primaries.

He sparked ire days before the Sadddleback forum when he said he would not rule out Tom Ridge as a running mate just because the former Pennsylvania governor “happens to be pro-choice.”

According to Warren, the purpose of the forum was to foster civility: “We’ve got to learn to disagree without demonizing each other and we need to restore civility in our civil discourse.”