

Rick Warren builds bridge to Muslims

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Through years of outreach, Saddleback Church pastor Rick Warren is part of an effort named King's Way that's attempting to bring evangelical Christians and Muslims together.



Rick Warren, center, and his wife, Kate, pose for a photo with a crowd during the grand opening of the PEACE Center at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest on Dec. 12. The center will provide services such as medical help, counseling, tutoring and food for low-income families.

CARLOS DELGADO, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



By JIM HINCH / FOR THE REGISTER

The Rev. Rick Warren, pastor of [Saddleback Church in Lake Forest](#) and one of America's most influential Christian leaders, **has embarked on an effort to heal divisions between evangelical Christians and Muslims by partnering with Southern California mosques and proposing a set of theological principles that includes acknowledging that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.**

The effort, informally dubbed King's Way, caps years of outreach between Warren and Muslims. Warren has broken Ramadan fasts at a Mission Viejo mosque, met Muslim leaders abroad and addressed 8,000 Muslims at a national convention in Washington D.C.

Saddleback worshippers have invited Muslims to Christmas dinner and played interfaith soccer at a picnic in Irvine attended by more than 300 people. (The game pitted pastors and imams against teens from both faiths. The teens won.)

The effort by a prominent Christian leader to bridge what polls show is a deep rift between Muslims and evangelical Christians culminated in December at a dinner at Saddleback attended by 300 Muslims and members of Saddleback's congregation.

At the dinner, Abraham Meulenberg, a Saddleback pastor in charge of interfaith outreach, and Jihad Turk, director of religious affairs at a mosque in Los Angeles, introduced King's Way as "a path to end the 1,400 years of misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians."

The men presented a document they co-authored outlining points of agreement between Islam and Christianity. The document affirms that Christians and Muslims believe in "one God" and share two central commandments: "love of God" and "love of neighbor." The document also commits both faiths to three goals: Making friends with one another,

building peace and working on shared social service projects. The document quotes side-by-side verses from the Bible and the Koran to illustrate its claims.

"We agreed we wouldn't try to evangelize each other," said Turk. "We'd witness to each other but it would be out of 'Love Thy Neighbor,' not focused on conversion."

Saddleback representatives declined to make Warren available for comment. Tom Holladay, associate senior pastor at Saddleback, said the outreach to Muslims is part of Saddleback's [PEACE Plan](#), a wide-ranging effort to solve major world problems by mobilizing governments, businesses and faith communities.

"This is us serving our own community with Muslims here in Orange County," said Holladay. "We realize we don't agree about everything and we're very open about that. ... You just recognize the differences and recognize the points where you can work together."

Warren has faced criticism from some evangelicals for his outreach to Muslims. Late last year, he issued a statement flatly denying rumors that he promulgates what critics term "Chrislam," a merging of Islam and Christianity.

The "rumor is 100 percent false," Warren wrote at [Pastors.com](#), a website he founded that provides practical advice to church leaders. "My life and ministry are built on the truth that Jesus is the only way, and our inerrant Bible is our only true authority."

Polls show that evangelicals are 30 percent more likely than other Christians to hold a negative view of Islam, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Polls also show that evangelicals overwhelmingly favor converting Muslims to Christianity and are more likely to believe that Islam encourages violence.

Warren has repeatedly encouraged evangelicals to set aside such views, arguing that Christians are obliged to treat everyone with love and respect, regardless of faith.

"I don't know if you have noticed this, but God likes variety," Warren told an audience of 8,000 Muslims at a Washington, D.C. convention in 2009, according to a transcript published by the religion news website [beliefnet](#). "People of all beliefs (can) be, and discuss, and, yes, even disagree, without demeaning or debasing each other."

Warren's outreach to Muslims stems directly from his church's location in multiethnic Orange County, home to 170,000 Muslims. For 12 years Warren has lived next door to Yasser Barakat, a Muslim from Syria who worships at a Mission Viejo mosque four miles down the road from Saddleback. The Trabuco Canyon neighbors were friends for years before Barakat realized he lived next door to a world-famous Christian pastor.

When Barakat discovered who Warren was, he invited his neighbor to learn more about Islam. "I was talking to him over the fence," Barakat said. "I said, 'Rick, why don't you go to Syria with me? He said, 'Sure, let's talk about it. Let's do it.' "

Warren traveled with Barakat to Syria in 2006, and Warren and his wife, Kay, began attending Iftar meals at the Mission Viejo mosque. Iftar is the evening meal Muslims eat after fasting all day during the holy month of Ramadan. Invitations followed to address Muslim conferences in Long Beach, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

"We understand that to some people in the religious community these events may be difficult to swallow," said Yassir Fazaga, imam at the Mission Viejo mosque. "But I believe that we have to begin somewhere and just begin to reach out and be accessible to people when they ask about who we are."

Gwynne Guibord, an ordained Episcopal priest and co-founder of a Los Angeles outreach group that fosters relationships between churches and mosques nationwide, said Saddleback's effort is unprecedented. "I'm not aware of any other evangelical church reaching out to the Muslim community," she said.

Guibord said that when she and Jihad Turk co-founded the [Christian-Muslim Consultative Group](#) in 2006, they sent invitations to mosques, the Catholic archdiocese and a variety of mainline Protestant denominations throughout Southern California, but not to evangelical churches.

"I think that many evangelicals feel a mandate to convert people to Christianity," Guibord said. Because the Consultative Group was founded to respond to increasing antagonism between the two faiths, "we would not have made headway" if one side was trying to convert the other, she said. Now, she said, it might be possible to include evangelicals in her group's work.

Turk said the relationship between Saddleback and Muslims, though still in its infancy, has already produced results. "People (at the December dinner) were talking about the bonds they've formed and they were crying," he said. Both sides realized they shared misconceptions about each other's faith.

"We did a quiz at the Christmas dinner," Turk said, "asking basic questions about Islam or Christianity with the scriptures, the Koran or the Bible. And both sides were missing it.... It's an education for everyone."

Barakat said he continues to know Warren as a man who literally loves his neighbor. Barakat said his children could always count on Warren to buy the candy or magazine subscriptions they sold door-to-door for school fundraisers. The Warrens have hosted Barakat's family at a Christmas dinner, he said.

"He calls me his Muslim brother," Barakat said. "It all started with a friendship."