

Obama, Warren defy culture war: A controversial invitation

by [John Dart](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

When President Barack Obama tapped megachurch pastor Rick Warren to give the invocation at his inauguration, many liberal activists decried the choice of a high-profile evangelical figure who has opposed gay marriage and abortion rights. It did not matter to them that civil rights veteran Joseph Lowery, a backer of same-sex marriage, was picked by Obama to deliver the benediction at the January 20 ceremony.

To critics who deemed Warren a symbolically bad choice, Obama responded in mid-December by saying that he himself is “a fierce advocate of equality for gay and lesbian Americans.” Moreover, he added, “it is important for Americans to come together even though we may have disagreements on certain social issues.”

Obama’s emphasis on crossing partisan lines also characterizes Warren’s approach. Warren, a registered independent, lured both Democrat and Republican lawmakers to his Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, in support of anti-AIDS campaigns; his televised forum for Obama and Senator John McCain (R., Ariz.) in August launched the presidential debate season.

A Southern Baptist, Warren has long been an iconoclast in that conservative denomination. Warren, 54, endorses the fight against global warming, speaks against the use of torture and backs church-state separation to keep government out of religious affairs.

Neither Warren, a best-selling author, nor his wife, Kay, donated any money to support California’s Proposition 8, which struck down gay marriage in the state, according to the Associated Press. While he has been caught on videotape disparaging homosexuality by comparing it to incest and pedophilia, Warren’s endorsement of the ballot measure was announced to church members on the Saddleback Web site only ten days before the November 4 election.

V. Gene Robinson, the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, told Religion News Service that he had “a lot of respect for Rick Warren,” citing his compassionate response to AIDS and “his commitment to alleviating poverty.” But he also said that asking Warren to pray at Obama’s inauguration “was just really, really unfortunate” in light of Warren’s views on homosexuality.

The top official of the gay-oriented Metropolitan Community Churches, Nancy L. Wilson, took a different view on the inaugural prayer, complimenting Obama for being “fearless” in seeking national unity. Successor to founder Troy Perry as MCC moderator, Wilson also praised Warren as a “bridge-builder” in an open letter dated December 22, saying she has used his book *The Purpose-Driven Church* in churches.

“Your profound challenge to seek God’s purpose for our lives struck a powerful chord with many of us,” said Wilson, who identified herself as a lesbian in a 31-year committed relationship. “We may come from different theological perspectives, yet we share a common biblical commitment to caring radically about poverty, violence and the nurture of our Earth.”

Wilson said Warren’s statements on homosexuality are “dated and uninformed.” She noted that the MCC also rejects the evangelical motto of “hate the sin, love the sinner,” but said she commends Warren for his compassion toward those with HIV and AIDS. Wilson challenged Warren to meet with spiritual leaders in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community sometime after the inauguration.

The invitation might not be ignored. On December 20 in Long Beach, California, Warren spoke at the annual conference of the two-decade-old Muslim Public Affairs Council, based in Los Angeles and Washington.

“Let me just get this over very quickly,” Warren said in the MPAC speech. “I love Muslims. I also happen to love Hindus and Jews and Buddhists, . . . Democrats and Republicans. And for the media’s purpose, I happen to love gays and straights.

“We don’t have to see eye to eye to walk hand in hand, and you can disagree without being disagreeable,” he said. “And this is what Barack Obama and I happen to agree on.”

Warren declared that religious organizations are the only groups “that can successfully combat the five global illnesses of spiritual emptiness, corrupt leadership, disease pandemics, dire poverty and illiteracy, and we must actively and

directly cooperate with mosques to get the job done.”

Warren’s openness toward cooperation with Muslims, while untypical for Southern Baptists, resonates with dialogue efforts undertaken in recent years by A. Roy Medley, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches. Medley cochaired a Baptist-Muslim task force with Sayyid Syeed, interfaith director for the Islamic Society of North America, at the latter’s conference in September.

Warren was introduced to MPAC leaders last year at an interfaith picnic with members of the Saddleback Church. Council spokesperson Edina Lekovic told the *Los Angeles Times* that some Muslims had objected to Warren as a keynote speaker, but she said that Warren’s ministries and MPAC “have a lot in common.”

The advocacy group, besides combating anti-Muslim bigotry, strives to get Muslim Americans involved in public service.

MPAC executive director Salam al-Marayati said that its recent conference featuring musicians, authors, a State Department official and singer Melissa Etheridge “illustrates the inclusiveness and pluralism that are hallmarks of the new era of America.”

As it happened, Warren also talked about Etheridge, an openly lesbian activist who earlier had performed “Ring the Bells,” a song she wrote with friend Salman Ahmed, a Sufi Muslim from Pakistan. The song, on a new Christmas album, calls for peace and unity in the world.

Warren said that he has most of Etheridge’s albums and that the two of them had a “wonderful conversation” at the conference. “I’m enough of a groupie,” the pastor said, “that I got her autograph on the Christmas album.”

Recounting their conversations on the online Huffington Post, Etheridge said her first thought was to bow out after learning Warren was on the conference program. Instead, “in the spirit of unity” she asked her manager to give Warren her telephone number.

Called by Warren on the day of the conference, Etheridge said, “This didn’t sound like a gay hater, much less a preacher.” He explained that he believes in equal rights for all but that “he struggled with Proposition 8 because he didn’t want to see marriage redefined as anything other than between a man and a woman.”

According to the singer, Warren said he regretted his choice of words in a video message when he mentioned pedophiles and those who commit incest.

Etheridge said the pastor invited her to his church, and she invited him “to my home to meet my wife and kids.” When the two met later that day, “he entered the room with open arms and an open heart,” she wrote. “We agreed to build bridges to the future.”