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Sent: Thursday, November 16, 2006 5:58 PM

To:

Subject: Letter sent to Saddleback Church Family from Pastor Rick Warren
ABOUT SYRIA

Dear Saddleback Family,

Tomorrow our team heads home from a three-nation P.E.A.C.E. plan tour of Germany, Syria, and Rwanda. Our trip began with a P.E.A.C.E. Plan briefing for 44 Christian missions organizations we'd gathered in Atlanta.

In hindsight, I wish we'd been better prepared for our visit to Syria. We would have handled some meetings differently, watched our words more closely, and been more aware of the agenda of their state press. We wanted to just slip in and out, but that's nearly impossible for me to do anymore. It's been a learning experience. Be sure to read the press release at the end of this note that gives you all the details.

Why did we go to Syria? The simple truth is that I was invited by my neighbor, Yassar. When we arrived, our first event was a home cooked meal with 20 of Yassar's family. Then, we were shown many of the historical Christian sites in Syria: the road to Damascus where Paul was converted, Straight street where the Holy Spirit led Paul, the house where Ananias prayed for his healing, the wall where Paul was let down in a basket to escape the Romans, the tomb of John the Baptist and the oldest Christian church building in existence.

Next, my neighbor arranged for us to meet some key Christian leaders, Muslim leaders, and government leaders - including the president of Syria. Franklin Graham has had years of experience with Lebanon and Syria, so I asked him what to say to the Syrian President. Franklin told me, "Thank him for protecting the freedom of Christians and Jews to worship there."

As we left, the official state-controlled Syrian news agency issued some press releases that sounded like I was a politician negotiating the Iraq war by praising the Syrian President and everything else in Syria! Of course, that's ridiculous, but it created a stir among bloggers who tend to editorialize before verifying the truth. Does it seem ironic to you that people who distrust Syria are now believing Syrian press releases?

In our meeting with the president, I explained (as usual) the Saddleback P.E.A.C.E. Plan, and he gave us permission to send teams to Syria.

Friends, I am aware that inaccuracies, misquotes, and misperceived motivations get reported about me in the press daily. Most of the time, I just ignore them. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first." (John 15:18 - NCV)

I love the paraphrase of Matthew 5:11-12 (Msg): "Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble."

Just don't believe everything you read on the Internet or hear in the media.

I love you all and I'm praying for this weekend's FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OFFERING. I'm excited about getting back home to see you!

Pastor Rick
PRESS RELEASE
A. Larry Ross

Kigali, Rwanda, November 16

– Dr. Rick Warren, best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and founding pastor of Southern California's Saddleback Church, concluded a four-day pastoral visit to Syria earlier this week as part of a three-nation pastoral training and PEACE Plan tour. The trip began last week in Germany, where more than 5,000 church leaders gathered to hear Dr. Warren give an overview of a plan to mobilize local churches to attack the global problems of poverty, disease, illiteracy, corruption and spiritual emptiness. Similar training with church leaders in Rwanda continues this week.

Contrary to reports by the official state-controlled Syrian news agency, Dr. Warren was in Syria to meet with and encourage the country's key Christian leaders; dialogue with top Muslim leaders; and promote religious freedom. Leaders who met with Dr. Warren included the Patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church; the leader of the coalition of Evangelical Churches of Syria; and the pastor of the world's oldest standing church dating back to 315 AD; and Mufti of the Arab Republic of Syria Sheikh Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun.

Dr. Warren's visit to Syria was neither official nor political, but rather came out of a promise to his Muslim neighbor in California. While discussing over their backyard fence Warren's frequent international travel, the neighbor asked him to visit his home country of Syria, with its many sites sacred to Christians and church history that date back 2,000 years.

Many Americans don't realize that both Christianity and Judaism are legal in Syria. In addition, the government provides free electricity and water to all churches; allows pastors to purchase a car tax-free (a tax break not given to Muslim imams); appoints pastors as Christian judges to handle Christian cases; and allows Christians to create their own civil law instead of having to follow Muslim law. Every Christian with whom Dr. Warren's team met — including those in the city of Malula, where they represent two-thirds of the population — expressed gratitude for the government's protection of their right to worship.

”Let there be no doubt about our support for President Bush, our troops in Iraq and the war on terror,” he told the Mufti. When asked if American opinion had turned against the Iraq war. Warren replied, “Yes —The New York Times reported that 80 percent of Americans indicated in Election Day exit polls they now oppose keeping troops in Iraq.” Later, Dr. Warren’s team was told by a Syrian official that it would be a mistake for American troops to immediately pull out.

Because Dr. Warren often meets with presidents of nations he visits, his neighbor also arranged a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Dr. Warren sought counsel in advance from Syrian experts in Washington, and was told that Syria’s state-controlled media would likely distribute press releases after the meeting, which they did.

”The Syrian government has long had a bad reputation in America, but if one considers a positive action like welcoming in thousands of Christian refugees from Iraq, or the protection of freedom to worship for Christians and Jews in Syria, it should not be ignored,” Dr. Warren said from Rwanda. He further explained that in terms of religious freedom, Syria is far more tolerant than places like Burma, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and nations identified in the U.S. Commission Report on International Religious Freedom. “Muslims and Christians have lived side by side in Syria for more than a thousand years, often with mosques and churches built next to each other,” he added. “What can we learn from them?”

”I believe it is a mistake to not talk to nations considered hostile — isolation and silence has never solved conflict anywhere, whether between spouses or between nations,” Dr. Warren concluded. He further shared his experience in Rwanda, a country that is experiencing peace after years of conflict by emphasizing reconciliation instead of retaliation. He noted that, as a pastor, he always urges couples in conflict to keep talking to each other — no matter how angry they are. As long as they keep talking, there is hope for a resolution; but if they refuse to even talk, divorce is inevitable.

Other issues Dr. Warren discussed with Syrian religious, academic and governmental leadership included the importance of civil dialogue among religions; possible student exchange and academic cooperation with Christian universities; and Saddleback Church’s “P.E.A.C.E. Plan” to train local churches to attack poverty, disease, corruption, illiteracy, and spiritual emptiness in cooperation with businesses and governments.

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