

Evangelical to speak in LDS Tabernacle
November 05, 2004

By Kristen Moulton
Salt Lake Tribune Columnist

Scalpers, take note: Tickets for the hottest event this season are long gone, and people are getting desperate.

An evangelical Christian apologist and philosopher, Ravi Zacharias, is coming to Utah and will speak at, of all places, the Tabernacle on Temple Square.

"I'm just shocked at the interest," said Greg Johnson, president of Standing Together Ministries, a network of 50 evangelical churches that is bringing Zacharias to Utah for three nights. "There are so many people calling and calling and calling back [for tickets]."

The 9,000-plus tickets for the three nights Zacharias will speak - Nov. 13-15 - were snapped up by evangelicals and Mormons within weeks of becoming available - for free - this fall.

The middle night - Sunday, Nov. 14 - Zacharias will speak on "Who Is the Truth? Defending Jesus Christ as The Way, The Truth and The Life" at the Tabernacle belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The night before, he will speak at the University of Utah and the night after, he will speak at Weber State University.

It's the first appearance of a preacher of another faith at the Tabernacle in more than a century. The last in memory was Dwight L. Moody, founder of the Moody Bible Institute and the Billy Graham of his day. He spoke there in 1871 and 1899.

Zacharias, a native of India who moved to Canada as a young man and now lives in Atlanta, is the author of numerous books and has spoken internationally for 33 years. He has a master's degree in divinity.

He has addressed writers of the peace accord in South Africa, President Fujimori's cabinet and parliament in Peru, and military officers at the Lenin Military Academy and the Center for Geopolitical Strategy in Moscow. He has been the main speaker for the National Day of Prayer in Washington and twice has spoken at the Annual Prayer Breakfast at the United Nations.

Johnson, an ordained conservative Baptist minister, brought Zacharias to Utah a decade ago, and two years ago, scheduled this year's appearance.

He helped found Standing Together Ministries in 2001 to foster unity among about 100 evangelical churches and to foster understanding among evangelicals and members of the LDS faith.

The group won friends among the LDS when they greeted those attending General Conference in the spring of 2003 with kind words amid the yelling of anti-LDS street preachers.

Johnson sent a letter to the LDS Church's First Presidency asking to use the Tabernacle as a venue for Zacharias, and he was as stunned as anyone that the reply came back two weeks later.

"It blew me away," said Johnson, who wanted the Tabernacle in part to attract members of the LDS faith. Zacharias also will have a private meeting with the First Presidency on Friday morning.

The First Presidency did not ask for assurances that Zacharias will refrain from criticism of the LDS faith, but Johnson said that would be uncharacteristic of the man who many liken to 20th century Christian writer C.S. Lewis.

"He's a tremendous diplomat for the Christian church in the world," he said.

Robert Millet, who holds The Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at BYU, travels with Johnson around the country speaking to evangelical and LDS groups. He and Johnson met with Zacharias in Atlanta last summer, and Zacharias assured Millet he will say nothing to offend his hosts.

Zacharias' appearance at the Tabernacle is sponsored by the BYU chair. The church is handling everything for the evening, from sound technicians to ticket-takers.

"He won't deal with theology but why Christianity is the answer to the world's problems," Millet said. "It will be something Latter-day Saints are not used to hearing, which is a philosophical defense of Christ."

The First Presidency is aware, but undeterred, Millet said, by the fact that Zacharias wrote the foreword and is listed as the editor of the latest edition of the book "The Kingdom of Cults," which classifies the LDS Church among other world religions as a cult. The book first was published in 1965.

"How much he was involved with it I don't know," Millet said. "He didn't write that chapter [on the LDS Church]."

Johnson said he believes Zacharias' visit will be a watershed event in the effort to bridge the divides among Latter-day Saints and their evangelical neighbors.

Several evangelical churches are fasting for the fruitfulness of Zacharias' visit, he said.

The 1,200 tickets for Kingsbury Hall on Nov. 13 and the 1,000 for WSU were given away within days of the announcement of Zacharias' visit. The 7,000 tickets for the Tabernacle, which Millet and Johnson were passing out, were gone in mid-October.

The Tabernacle can hold about 5,000, there is room for another 1,200 in Assembly Hall and organizers figure that some people with tickets won't show, Johnson said.

"It really has become a catalytic event that has the possibility to open up brand new avenues of dialogue . . . in improving the ways that Latter-day Saints and evangelical Christians talk honestly about our differences," Johnson said.

Information is available at www.standingtogether.org