

Evangelist to speak at Tabernacle  
September 11, 2004

By Carrie A. Moore  
Deseret Morning News

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has opened its signature pulpit to an evangelical Christian preacher in what organizers see as a watershed event for promoting good will and discussion among Utahns of various faiths.

The event is two months away, but it is already generating discussion in the state's faith community.

Ravi Zacharias, an internationally known apologist, philosopher and author, will speak at the Tabernacle on Temple Square in November as part of a three-night speaking engagement in Utah. Some have compared Zacharias' style and tone to that of Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis. He has addressed audiences worldwide in international venues including the United Nations, the White House, Harvard, Cambridge and Princeton.

Zacharias is listed as an editor of the most recent version of a book called "The Kingdom of the Cults," which classifies the LDS Church as a cult along with Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Bahai and Jehovah's Witnesses. The book is widely regarded by evangelicals as "the authoritative reference work on major cult systems for nearly 40 years." Written by Walter Martin, it was first published in 1965.

The planned event has a few locals —both evangelicals and Latter-day Saints — wondering whether the other side is "using" its counterpart to try to smooth over what has in recent years been disputed territory as to whether Mormons are Christians.

The event is co-sponsored by Standing Together Ministries and the Richard L. Evans Chair for Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University. It is scheduled for 6 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 14, and is open to the public.

Word of the event has generated some discussion locally among both evangelicals and Latter-day Saints, according to Pastor Greg Johnson, who leads Standing Together Ministries. When Johnson asked Zacharias several months ago whether he would be willing to speak in the Tabernacle if it could be arranged, the two discussed some of the concerns such a visit might raise.

"I think some of our folks would think you're playing into the hands of the 'enemy' and that the Mormon Church is going to use you," Johnson remembers telling him. Zacharias is not only aware of the Mormons-as-Christians discussion but knows about the nationwide series of discussions that Johnson and Robert Millet, a

BYU religion professor, have teamed up for in recent months over the relationship between Mormons and evangelical Christians.

They also discussed whether there might be an agenda on the part of some Latter-day Saints to use the event as a way to say to the evangelical community, "See, we're Christians, too."

Despite those questions, Johnson sought the Tabernacle pulpit as a venue for Zacharias in a letter earlier this year to the First Presidency of the LDS Church. He believes they agreed, in part, because of the press conference and quiet outreach campaign that local evangelicals staged outside the Conference Center last spring during LDS general conference, designed to counter attempts by self-proclaimed Christian preachers who have sought to antagonize Latter-day Saints.

After discussions with Millet, the First Presidency not only granted permission for Zacharias to speak in the Tabernacle, but they plan to meet with the evangelist personally during his visit to Utah. Johnson said he has discussed the editor role Zacharias played in the latest edition of "The Kingdom of the Cults" with the First Presidency's office — "basically, he agreed to lend his name to it, but he didn't write any of it" — and LDS leaders are "moving forward in great confidence." BYU and the First Presidency are "all informed and still moving forward."

Millet said he and Johnson met with Zacharias for several hours at his headquarters in Atlanta earlier this summer to discuss the evangelist's appearance in Salt Lake City.

As word of the event begins to get out, Millet said local pastors aren't the only ones asking questions. "A few have and will wonder what we're doing inviting someone like this to the Tabernacle.

"I think Latter-day Saints who have a bit of breadth in their soul would be fascinated by this. I contrast that with the littleness of soul" displayed by those who see it as an attempt by evangelicals to simply convince Mormons of their own views, he said.

Because the LDS Church is not a sponsor, it is not advertising the event. Millet said he's told some personal friends who are LDS stake presidents that are "outreach-minded," and they are eager to have their members participate.

"Those with an interest in building better relationships will be fascinated by it. I think they'll be touched by his message," he said.

"It represents tremendous graciousness on the part of the First Presidency in being willing to open the Tabernacle to a man of his stature who is of another faith. It's an effort to build goodwill and bridges of understanding between two vital faith communities," Millet said.

Both Johnson and Millet see it as a major step forward in creating a dialogue among faiths that share many moral values but differ markedly in theology and doctrine.

Johnson believes Zacharias' appearance in the Tabernacle is the first such event in at least a century. In researching whether any evangelical preacher had ever spoken there, Johnson said the last evidence he came up with was an address by Dwight L. Moody, founder of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Moody was apparently invited by Brigham Young to speak in the Tabernacle in 1871.

"If people like Ravi come and have a positive experience and go out to the world saying "something positive is happening in Utah," that will go a long way for what we want to have happen" between Latter-day Saints and the rest of the Christian world, Johnson said.

"I think it's going to be a fun thing. He's just a great soul," Millet said. "He's one of the most sought-after speakers in the Christian world. I wasn't quite sure what I would meet, but he was a very tenderhearted, guileless, brilliant philosopher by training and an apologist.

"He teaches and he shows logically why it makes sense to believe in God and absolute truths and why it makes really good sense to make Christ the center of your life," Millet said.

The topic Zacharias will address at the Tabernacle is "Who Is the Truth? Defending Jesus Christ as The Way, The Truth and The Life." Tickets are available by calling 801-474-1363 or by e-mail at [info@standingtogether.org](mailto:info@standingtogether.org).

Johnson and Millet have long been impressed with the moral values and commitment to Christ each has found in the members of other faiths but are concerned that theological differences stand in the way of cooperating on issues of interest to both. They are eager for the chance to bring Utahns together at the Tabernacle in the hope that new bridge-building can replace some of the historic religious animosity fostered in recent years by such issues as stringent state liquor laws and the controversy over the Main Street Plaza downtown.

"If we allow theological differences to prevent us from joining hands in facing some very challenging social crises, evil will win out in the end," Millet said.

For information, see [www.standingtogether.org](http://www.standingtogether.org) or [www.rzim.org](http://www.rzim.org)

E-mail: [carrie@desnews.com](mailto:carrie@desnews.com)