Homosexuality and Humanitarianism: The case of Rick Warren in Africa

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In December of 2009, Pastor Rick Warren released an unusual video, which he described as a “letter to Ugandan pastors.” Warren was pastor of Saddleback Church, a megachurch in Orange County, California, that was affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. He was also the author of the monumental bestseller, *A Purpose-Driven Life*, which as of 2009 had sold 32 million copies—still in hardback—and had been translated into 85 languages. Warren was also deeply involved in both development programs and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in Africa, which is what had led him to this moment.

In his video letter, Warren was uncomfortably, carefully, negotiating how to respond to a bill that had been proposed in Uganda’s parliament two months earlier. The “Anti-Homosexuality Bill” called for the death penalty for any Ugandan convicted of “aggravated homosexuality.” (The law’s proponents later explained that “aggravated” homosexuality referred to homosexuals who “recruited” young people, although the “offenses” also included having homosexual sex if you were HIV-positive.) Lesser sentences, such as life imprisonment, could be meted out for merely engaging in homosexual activity. Warren had significant connections to a number of pastors in Uganda, but particularly to a minister named Martin Ssempe, who had led anti-homosexual marches in the streets of Uganda and who was a major activist in support of the bill that threatened queer people...
with execution.

Sitting in a warmly lit office, with an image of the globe to his right, Warren began his message by saying that it was not his role to interfere in the politics of other nations. He was a pastor, he said, and not political. However, Warren believed that he did need to correct the “lies and errors and false reports” that had associated him with a law that “I had nothing to do with, I completely oppose, and that I vigorously condemn.” A few days earlier Warren had issued a press statement saying that “Martin Ssempa does not represent me; my wife, Kay; Saddleback Church; nor the Global PEACE Plan strategy.”

The fact that Warren had to make this statement was itself remarkable. Warren was a pastor who, despite his clearly conservative views on homosexuality, had developed a reputation as a compassionate global activist in the fight against HIV/AIDS. His church held a yearly Global Summit on AIDS and the Church that attracted thousands of participants, including people from all over the world. And he did extensive work in Africa, not only on HIV/AIDS but also on issues of poverty and economic development, working through his PEACE project. Warren was a significant player in the world of global humanitarianism. It was Warren’s work in Africa that had made him the darling of many commentators both secular and religious; it also likely had motivated President Obama to invite him to offer a prayer at the president’s inauguration eleven months previously. Yet now it was that same Africa work that embroiled Warren in one of the most unsettling controversies of his career. His close involvement with political and religious leaders in Rwanda and Uganda had taken on a different valence when Ugandan religious leaders began to support radical anti-gay measures.

Warren’s statement was calm, almost pacific, and it offered explicit advice to Uganda’s pastors, saying that it was their role to stand up against this “unchristian” law. He justified this intervention by saying that, while it was not his role to be political, “It is my role to speak out on moral issues. It is my role to shepherd other pastors who look to me for guidance.” In fact, Ugandans had not particularly looked to him for guidance on this issue, and his assured talk of shepherding them had more than an air of paternalism. Warren pretended that he did not know that a number of important Ugandan pastors had supported the law. Instead Warren posited himself as speaking to somewhat adrift allies who just needed a little help in standing up for what they already knew was right. He called the law “terrible” and “unchristian.” For some of Warren’s longtime companions, those would be fighting words.

Warren was known as an important humanitarian in Africa, both on issues of economic development and for his support for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment work. But part of what made Warren’s position so complicated was the fact that the humanitarianism that Warren promoted at his Saddleback church was of a different order than that of other major evangelical humanitarian organizations.

There are two common ways of understanding evangelical humanitarianism, and Warren confounds them both. The first is the idea that evangelicals who do

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humanitarian work are really just trying to proselytize – that their medical clinics or food aid are a cover for their goals of conversion. Exhibit A for this argument is Franklin Graham’s Samaritan’s Purse. Run by the son of Billy Graham, who is a star in his own right – he prayed at both inaugurations for President G.W. Bush – Samaritan’s Purse followed behind US troops in Iraq, delivering blankets and food, along with Bible verses attached to the packages.

Samaritan’s Purse was a relatively small organization in the early 1990s but it grew quickly. By 2015, it had a budget of $520 million, making it the twenty-fifth largest charity in the United States. It was almost impossible to tell what percentage of that money was used for missionary work and what purely for humanitarian purposes. Samaritan’s Purse’s programs included emergency relief, community development, and medical services, in places like Sudan, Iraq, and Cambodia, but evangelism was woven into every aspect of what the organization did. However, this kind of evangelism-first model is far from the only story—and in many ways it is no longer the dominant one.

The second myth is that evangelical humanitarians have become just like every other humanitarian on the global stage. Here, World Vision--by far the largest and most influential evangelical aid organization--is the case in point. World Vision had begun as a missionary organization and until the 1970s basically operated through “adopt-a-child” fundraising programs that supported missionary orphanages. From 1970 onward, however, it became more invested in a development agenda. Recently, World Vision has expanded rapidly. In 2000, it was already an impressively large organization, with a budget of $886 million. In 2014, the organization’s expenditures were three times that, $2.8 billion. Of that figure, 48 percent was spent in Africa. Although the organization still required that all employees sign a statement of faith, most of its projects could not be distinguished from those of secular development programs.

When we look at official numbers and clout, something like World Vision seems to define the terms of new and professionalized humanitarianism among evangelicals, and in many ways it does. But if we understand more about Rick Warren, we understand more about the parts of evangelical humanitarian practice that run underneath or alongside these institutions, holding different sets of values and different stakeholders.

Rick Warren highlights a different kind of humanitarianism, one in which US evangelicals work “off the grid” of monitored and accounted-for humanitarianism. Warren and others like him operate within -- and with -- a globalizing evangelical community in which commitments are complex and influence is multi-directional. I argue that, unlike many other humanitarian activities, Warren’s projects were both uncountable and accountable. Uncountable in that they operated outside normal organizational channels. And accountable in that Warren had real and ongoing ties with a number of highly conservative evangelicals in Africa and elsewhere, some of whom would have plenty to say to him when he criticized anti-homosexuality politics in Uganda.

In 2004, as Warren tells the story, the president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, read The Purpose Driven Life and contacted Warren to see if he could help Rwanda become a
“purpose-driven nation.” The next year, Warren traveled to Rwanda, where he found a ready home for launching his PEACE plan. PEACE was an acronym that stood for the tasks Warren saw as central to the church both in the US and in Africa:

- Plant churches (or Partner with existing churches);
- Equip servant leaders;
- Assist the poor;
- Care for the sick; and
- Educate the next generation

The PEACE plan was designed, Warren often said, to respond to five “global giants”: spiritual emptiness, self-serving leadership, poverty, disease, and illiteracy. (Warren seems never to have met a list or acronym he didn’t like.) PEACE was not specifically about Rwanda. Saddleback launched programs all over the world, including Beijing, Buenos Aires, and others. But Warren made Rwanda the showcase.

Starting in 2006 or so, each of the 2600 “small groups” in Saddleback was assigned a particular village or town in Rwanda to pray for. More significantly, Saddleback sent thousands of church members to Rwanda -- 6,000 over 3 years from 2005 to 2008 -- to provide assistance or set up programs. This initially involved what Warren enthusiastically described as “Church in a Box,” meaning a set of materials that would allow people to set up churches simply, quickly, anywhere. The “box” included a film, some educational tapes for a designated pastor, and a few other basic items. The short-term missionaries from Saddleback brought the boxes and tried to work with local people to set up a church. They also did trainings in things like business management or how to do HIV/AIDS testing through the church – that was often through the “Clinic in a Box” program.10

Warren also had a lot of meetings with Rwandan leaders, including Kagame, and he made some big picture suggestions, arguing that Rwanda should develop a plan to export its fruit to Europe, showing little or no understanding of the European Union policies that made that difficult, or the market inequities that made a windfall unlikely. All of this was before the outcry, both within and outside evangelical churches, that clinics in boxes and quick fix marketing ideas were a ridiculous way to do development.11

Saddleback provided impressive numbers about people sent to Rwanda and other parts of the world, numbers of people helped, and even orphans adopted. But, unlike other NGOs, churches are not required to fill out the IRS Form 990 that reports on annual income and expenditures. In Saddleback’s tide of impressive data about people helped, some numbers were missing: exactly how many projects, did Saddleback support and how much money did the church (or its members) spend on those projects?

Rick Warren is a globally recognized brand, a pastor to pastors, who was deeply linked to churches throughout the global South. Indeed, he operated within, and very much saw himself as part of, a global evangelical community that was both audience and ally. In 2010, almost 70 percent of evangelicals lived outside the United States and Europe. By the year 2050, approximately 38 percent of the world’s Christians will live in sub-
Saharan Africa. These demographic realities are also political ones. While the US church remains a very powerful force globally, the church leaders of the global South see themselves as the future of the church and often as the site of Christianity’s most authentic expression.

Not surprisingly, by the early 2000s most global South Christians were no longer willing to see themselves as in need of doctrinal tutoring. Starting in the 1990s, for example, there were a series of debates in the Anglican Communion over homosexuality, in which conservative bishops, many from the global South, faced off against liberal Episcopalians and Anglicans largely from the US and UK. One Ugandan bishop was appalled by how condescending he found the liberals to be, many of whom seemed to assume that the Africans in particular took their conservative positions against homosexuality because they were ignorant of theology. This bishop asked how it was that African church leaders could go to schools in the US or Europe, get degrees (as many do), and still be subject that assumption. “[W]e have the same training…[b]ut they are saying we have not gone very far, we are still primitive, untrained, because we supported orthodox teaching.” The perceived racism and/or neocolonial attitudes of the US and European churches would matter a great deal when Warren had to deal with the anti-homosexuality law in Uganda.

Warren’s links to the politics of homosexuality in Uganda developed in large part through his HIV/AIDS work. In December 2005, Saddleback Church hosted the first HIV/AIDS Global Summit, attended by 1600 people. Warren clearly wanted the HIV/AIDS work to be understood as in tandem with his PEACE initiative, as part of a church profile that focused on compassion as centrally as evangelism. The Summit quickly became a major event, and US politicians and other leading figures made their pilgrimages to Orange County to participate. In 2006, Senators Sam Brownback and Barack Obama both spoke, followed by Franklin Graham of Samaritan’s Purse. The keynote speaker in 2005 was Rev. Martin Seempa, who delivered an address on Uganda’s success story with lowering HIV/AIDS rates. He also led a breakout session on abstinence-only education. For the next decade, the Summit would be perhaps the most visible global project that Saddleback or Warren had.

The Summit was remarkable for two reasons. The first was just how hard it had been to get HIV/AIDS on the evangelical agenda. In 2000, when World Vision had wanted to begin supporting AIDS treatment in Africa, they did a survey of their donors. When asked if they would be willing to give to a Christian organization to help children who had lost both parents to AIDS, only seven percent said they would definitely help, while over 50 percent said they probably would not. Donors equated World Vision with a wholesome image; they did not want to hear about AIDS, prostitutes, or long-haul truckers. In fact, they did not even want to hear about AIDS orphans. “It was stark and clear,” one staff member said, “that our donors felt that AIDS sufferers had somehow deserved their fate.”

But in 2002, a group of evangelicals led by Franklin Graham lobbied President Bush to increase HIV/AIDS funding for Africa. Bush did, announcing the PEPFAR (President’s
Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) program, which committed $15 billion over five years for both prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean.¹⁸ Uganda received a great deal of PEPFAR funding in the first eight years, in part because it had a reputation as having instituted programs that were already being successful. In the 1980s, almost fifteen percent of the population of Uganda as infected with HIV; the prevalence rates were down to 6.5 percent by the early 2000s.¹⁹

The second remarkable thing was the presence of Martin Ssempe and his abstinence message. Religious conservatives in US had successfully lobbied to ensure that one third of all PEPFAR prevention funding was for abstinence-only education. This meant that both international evangelical NGOs, like World Vision, and local churches and groups in Uganda, like Martin Ssempe’s Campus Alliance to Wipe Out AIDS, were well positioned to receive PEPFAR funding, because they were friendly to this abstinence model.²⁰ ²¹

But this was just the beginning. By the early 2000s, Ssempe and many other conservative Christians in Uganda had begun to rewrite Uganda’s history in HIV/AIDS programs to argue that it had always promoted primarily abstinence. This was not the case; condom use had been strongly promoted in the late 1980s and 1990s. And while there are scholarly debates about what actually helped lower the prevalence of HIV—whether it was peer-to-peer education, the movement to encourage later sexual onset, or condoms—there is no serious debate among scholars or journalists about Uganda’s pioneering role in what later became the ABC model of HIV/AIDS prevention – Abstinence, Be Faithful, Use a Condom.²² Ssempe, however, argued differently, saying that condom use was a foreign import and that international NGOs were promoting promiscuity.

In 2005 testimony before the US House Committee on International Relations, Ssempe argued, as he often did, that HIV/AIDS was due to sexual misbehavior: “I mince no words with you. The reasons why other Africans and Ugandans are dying is because of sexual promiscuity. That is what is killing us.” The problem in Ssempe’s view was that funders were interested in the “C” of ABC more than A and B. This, he said, was because of their condescending views of Africans. “I believe it’s because the Uganda’s...program was established by Africans for Africans. This angers many so-called ‘professionals’ in the AIDS community who have promoted condom social marketing.”²³

It is important to note here that at this time HIV/AIDS was a heterosexual disease in most of Africa. Queer people got infected, of course, but the discourse largely ignored them. It was only later that people like Ssempe began to focus on homosexuality as a threat rather than heterosexual promiscuity.²⁴ But the terms of the debate were set: promiscuity was a problem; sex outside of marriage was a problem; and ultimately, homosexuality would be defined as the primary example of both of these things.

By 2007, Ssempe had become a major leader in the anti-homosexuality movement in Uganda, becoming more and more aggressive promoting an anti-homosexuality
agenda. At that point, Warren distanced himself from Ssempa, but he retained close contact with a number of other church leaders, including a group of conservative clerics in the Anglican Communion. In 2008, Warren went to Kampala at the invitation of Anglican clergy to declare Uganda a “Purpose-Driven Nation.”

Thus Warren found himself in a difficult position when it turned out that, like Ssempa, many of those church leaders supported the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, even if they sometimes expressed reservations about particular components. In 2009, a meeting of two hundred members of the Interreligious Council of Uganda, which included Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim representatives, came out in support of the bill, saying that the Ugandan parliament should resist foreign pressure to abandon it or moderate its content. The Anglican Church of Uganda issued a statement that it opposed the use of the death penalty and was also disturbed by the provision that required clergy, doctors, and teachers to report homosexuality. The Church agreed, however, that homosexuality should not be a human right, and it commended the law’s objective of defining marriage as between a man and woman. The Church also wanted to strengthen the law by prohibiting “procurement of material and [the] promotion of homosexuality as normal or an alternative lifestyle.” In other words, the Anglicans in Uganda suggested specific revisions that would keep the basic punitive goals of the law intact.

This is just one indication of the ways that Warren’s multiple humanitarian investments — in the PEACE plan, in HIV/AIDS activism -- as well as his global Christian contacts via the Purpose-Driven Life networks and the Anglican communion’s conservative movements, meant that he was tied deeply to African churches and African church leaders, sometimes in ways that were deeply problematic. It is clear that Warren never supported a law that allowed for the execution of homosexuals. But he remained silent for several months after the bill was proposed because he well understood that African church leaders were deeply impatient with what they saw as neocolonial attitudes from the US or European churches, on this issue as well as others. When Warren did issue his condemnation, Ssempa and other leaders attacked him — as Warren surely expected they would.

Almost immediately after Warren issued his “video letter,” Ssempa produced a response, which was also released to Christian media outlets in the US as an open letter to Warren. Seempa criticized Warren within the larger context of changes in the church, including the Anglican Communion. “We are troubled,” he said, “that Christianity in the global North has fallen so much from Gods word that homosexuals and lesbians are being ordained into Bishops!”

Ssempa could not understand how Warren could have fallen so far away from Biblical teaching; he must have given in to pressure from “homosexual champions.” Ssempa went on to explain that “we want to make sure that Africa purposefully avoids the mistakes of the Global North Church [in its liberalism].” Then, using a series of code words that referred to Warren’s work, Ssempa went on: "Since the Bible says that the giant of homosexuality is an 'abomination' or a great evil, you cannot achieve the peace plan without a purpose-driven confrontation with evil." “Giants,” “purpose-driven,” “peace plan”; Sempa was making clear that Warren would be held accountable for his
energetic projects, now rewritten into Ssempa’s own terms, as the language of countering Warren’s supposed liberalism.

Analyzing Ssempa and other Ugandan conservatives, it is important to say that not all African Christians, or all African evangelicals, supported a homophobic agenda. Certainly people in Africa and Asia and Latin America have disagreed about the Bible and its politics as vociferously as Americans have. And liberal African Christians, including liberal African evangelicals, continued to be on the frontline of a number of social justice struggles in Africa. The Anglican priest Kapya Kaoma, for example, was an important leader in supporting queer rights, and wrote one of the most comprehensive accounts of rising homophobia in the African church. Kaoma was also a strong critic of Warren. “In America Warren says “I love gays,”” Kaoma commented. “In Africa, he says it’s not a natural way of life.”

Despite this liberal strand, the truth was that, with his close ties to African Protestant leaders, Warren had to face the reality of what a truly independent and globalized church might sometimes mean. This is the accountable part of the uncountable transnational projects that Warren ran. Global South Christians were not obligingly presenting themselves as abject brothers and sisters in Christ who were in need of support. And, despite what somebody like Warren wanted to think, the Biblical interpretations of global South Christians would not necessarily shore up the respectable conservatism that he was trying to promote and protect. And when those disjunctures appeared, it became clear that humanitarianism, debates about church doctrine, sexuality, and concerns over neocolonialism within the church were fundamentally intertwined. People like Warren did not and could not control the terms of debate in the global evangelical community of which they were, increasingly, only one small part.

Suggested reading:


4 “The 50 Largest U.S. Charities,” *Forbes*, accessed August 16, 2016, http://www.forbes.com/top-charities/list/. Other Christian groups in the top 25 were Salvation Army (#2); Food for the Poor (#8); Habitat for Humanity (#13); Catholic Charities (#15), and Lutheran Services in America (#17).


14 Here I want to note that the HIV/AIDS Initiative was actually started by Warren’s wife Kay Warren. There is a good deal to be said about her role, and the particular forms of sympathetic visibility taken by evangelical women. I discuss this more fully in my forthcoming book, *Our God in the World: The Global Visions of American Evangelicals*.


In 2014, Uganda’s population of 34 million people was 85 percent Christian. Of that total population, 39% were Catholic; 32% were part of the Church of Uganda, which is Anglican; and 11% were Pentecostal. Muslims were almost 14 percent of the population. Less than one-tenth of one percent of Ugandans identified as practicing African Traditional Religion.


