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Religion and Health Editors

PASTOR RICK & KAY WARREN BRING TOGETHER LEADERS TO DISCUSS UNIFICATION OF EXPERTISE TO STOP HIV/AIDS: Saddleback Church Hosts International AIDS Conference Satellite Session on the Partnership of Government, Business & the Church

MEXICO CITY, Mexico, Aug. 6 – Kay Warren, HIV/AIDS advocate, author and executive director of the Saddleback HIV/AIDS Initiative, moderated a panel of Rwandan government and church leaders; business and medical experts; and Saddleback HIV/AIDS Initiative directors; along with her husband, Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback Church and best-selling author of “The Purpose Driven Life,” to address the issue of global partnership ventures to help people living with HIV/AIDS. The satellite session titled, “Government, Faith and Business: Building Effective Multi-Sector Partnerships,” was held yesterday as part of the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City.

“When Rick and I first got involved, we thought we were just two people; what could we possibly do against a pandemic?” Kay Warren said. “But as we began to travel and learn about how HIV/AIDS is affecting different parts of the world, we realized that there was a very major piece of the fight that was missing – or at least under mobilized and underutilized – and that is the local church.”

“We are at this conference because we think this is where the Church ought to be,” Pastor Warren added. “What we have before us is a global pandemic, and the Church needs to show compassion, kindness and the love of Christ as part of the solution.”

This satellite session differed from all others during the six-day, biennial conference in that it focused on a revolutionary concept of transforming health care delivery through the full engagement of the local church linked to existing health care systems to work together for the common purpose of community health.

In addition to the Warrens, the panel included Dr. Agnes Binagwaho, executive secretary of the National AIDS Control Commission of Rwanda; Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini of the Episcopal Church in Rwanda and chairman of the National Commission for the Fight Against HIV/AIDS, Interfaith/Rwanda, the Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace and the steering committee for the Purpose Driven/P.E.A.C.E. Plan in Rwanda; and Dale Dawson, chair of Opportunity International’s President’s Council and founder of Bridge2Rwanda.

Other members of the Saddleback HIV/AIDS Initiative also presented, including Dr. Gil Odendaal, global director; and Elizabeth Styffe, co-director, and executive director of the Saddleback Orphan Care Initiative and Western Rwanda HIV/AIDS Healthcare Initiative, who presented her content also that developed by Dr. Robert Redfield, co-founder of the Institute of Human Virology at the University of Maryland, who was invited, but unable to attend.

During the session, the leaders spoke of how each of their segments of society – government, business and church – can work in tandem to solve the problem of HIV/AIDS. “Both a one-legged and a two-legged stool will fall over, but a three-legged stool will stand,” Pastor Warren explained. “There is a public sector role of government and NGOs; there is the private or profit sector role of businesses; and there is the faith sector role of churches and houses of worship.

“Each of these sectors brings something to the table that the others don’t have,” Pastor Warren added. “If you say the faith community cannot participate in healthcare, you have just taken out most of the world because the amount of those without faith in the world is very small.”

According to Binagwaho, there are more than 430 healthcare facilities in Rwanda, 40 percent of which belong to a church. With more than 98 percent of the people in the country living within 1 kilometer of a church, the local pastor has the trust of the people, putting him in the ideal position to help provide healthcare needs.

“After 25 years, HIV is still a new disease, and we need new strategies, tools and programs,” said Binagwaho. “This is all about partnership, and if we partner it is because we are different, not because we are the same.”

Dawson, a business man who formerly was an investment banker for one of the wealthiest families in America, is now working to bring healthcare to children in Rwanda. On the strength of his success, he is now using his resources and influence to make a significant change halfway around the world. “One of the unusual things about this partnership with Rwanda is that I’m not in the same position to lead with the vision that the Rwandans are,” he said. “My role in this is much different; in America, I can lead, as it is my mission, my country and my culture. But in Rwanda, I’m in fact a servant. I’m not a minister, and I’m not a missionary, I’m a businessman who is trying to find significance in the second half of my life – and there are many others like me.”

According to Odendaal, the genius of the Saddleback healthcare model in Rwanda is that it is not church-based, but church-initiated. “Our emphasis is on sustainability and scalability, not speed. We are in this for the long haul.”

Styffe emphasized that the best persons to deliver anti-retroviral drugs (ARV’s) are men and women who have themselves been successfully treated for HIV/AIDS, and the country is going to run out of treatment partners unless the church is mobilized. “Through the development of a church model, the number of potential health care partners is growing from only 200 doctors, to more than 1,500 trained workers – two per church – and more than 51,000 Western Rwandans are now on ARV treatment.”

Founded in 1980 by the Warrens, Saddleback Church is located in Orange County, Calif. With an average weekly attendance of 22,000, it is one of the five largest churches in America. For more information about the Saddleback HIV/AIDS Initiative, visit www.HIVandTheChurch.com or www.RwandaHealthcare.com.