

False choices plague anti-AIDS fight: Obama joins Warren at conference

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The choice between preventing AIDS by teaching abstinence or by distributing condoms is a false choice, Democratic senator Barack Obama of Illinois said to a mostly evangelical conference held at the southern California megachurch founded by pastor-author Rick Warren.

Both methods for dealing with HIV/AIDS should be used to their fullest extent, said Obama, a man increasingly touted by admirers as presidential material.

The high-profile conference with videotaped messages from rock star Bono and philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates coincided with World AIDS Day December 1. Held at Warren's Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, the meeting also, in the view of some religious right figures, presented a poor choice of speakers.

A group of pro-life activists and Christian conservatives criticized the pastor's inclusion of Obama, a liberal who favors abortion rights, as sending the wrong moral message. "This kind of conference is just going to lead people astray," contended pastor Wiley Drake of Buena Park, California, and second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"If Senator Obama cannot defend the most helpless citizens in our country, he has nothing to say to the AIDS crisis," said a letter circulated by Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum. "We will never work with those who can support the murder of babies in the womb," said the letter, which was also signed by Tim Wildmon of the American Family Foundation.

That protesting coalition was answered by 28 religious progressives, among them Baptist sociologist Tony Campolo; Steven Thurston, president of the National Baptist Convention of America; Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance; historian Randall Balmer and evangelical author Lauren Winner.

David Kuo, former special assistant to President Bush, asked on his Beliefnet blog: “Are they [the protesters] so blind and possessed with such a narrow definition of life that they can think of life only in utero?”

Warren, a Southern Baptist, also responded. He told reporters that he and his wife, Kay, would work with anyone committed to ending AIDS, no matter what their motivation or beliefs. Obama shared the Saddleback pulpit with Senator Sam Brownback (R., Kan.), a pro-life Catholic convert.

“Kay and I have built our entire ministry on being unifiers, not dividers,” Warren said. “There will always be people who criticize us. If you can only work with people you agree with on everything, you’ve ruled out the world, because nobody agrees with you on everything.”

Obama, who also appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* while in California, said in his December 1 talk that churches can fill the need for religious dimensions to fighting AIDS. “Let me say this: I don’t think we can deny that there is a moral and spiritual component to prevention, that in too many places all over the world where AIDS is prevalent—including our own country, by the way—the relationship between men and women, between sexuality and spirituality, has broken down, and needs to be repaired.”

When a husband hides infidelity from his wife, Obama said, it’s not only a sin, it’s a potential death sentence. That is a problem in many African countries where AIDS has spread unchecked. When trying to change attitudes about a man’s prerogative for promiscuity and rape, he added, local churches like Saddleback provide a moral basis for better choices.

But faith-based morality alone won’t stop AIDS, he warned. “I also believe that we cannot ignore that abstinence and fidelity may too often be the ideal and not the reality—that we are dealing with flesh-and-blood men and women and not abstractions—and that if condoms and potentially microbicides can prevent millions of deaths, they should be made more widely available.”

A member of the United Church of Christ, Obama told the group that his faith reminds him that all people are sinners. He said that living according to the example set by Jesus is the most difficult kind of faith but the most rewarding as well.

“My Bible tells me that when God sent his only Son to earth, it was to heal the sick and comfort the weary; to feed the hungry and clothe the naked; to befriend the outcast and redeem those who strayed from righteousness,” he said. “It is a way of life that can not only light our way as people of faith, but guide us to a new and better politics as Americans.”

To the surprise of some, Obama praised the White House and Congress for spending billions on AIDS programs abroad. “I don’t do that often,” he said, drawing laughter. “This is an area where I think the Bush administration has not gotten enough credit.”
-Associated Baptist Press, other sources