

Rick Warren publicly pursuing programs against world poverty: Book proceeds to support humanitarian work

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Usually when the words *evangelical* and *poverty* appear in the same sentence, the minister at the helm is Jim Wallis, Ron Sider or Tony Campolo. When Rick Warren is written and talked about, it's almost never in the context of any political issue.

But Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, and the author of the blockbuster *The Purpose-Driven Life*, is diving into the issue of Christian responsibility to combat global poverty.

The move was signaled by an open letter campaign to President Bush, launched June 3 by Warren with heavyweights Billy Graham and British evangelical John Stott and sent to more than 150,000 evangelicals nationwide.

"I deeply believe that if we as evangelicals remain silent and do not speak up in defense of the poor, we lose our credibility and our right to witness about God's love for the world," Warren wrote in his appeal for participants in the campaign.

As a top evangelical leader, Warren lends powerful weight to the cause of ending global poverty. Following its publication in 2002, *The Purpose-Driven Life* went on to become the best-selling book for 2003 and 2004 and the all-time best-selling nonfiction hardback, with sales of more than 22 million copies.

Warren and his wife, Kay, have set up three foundations through which to distribute 90 percent of the proceeds from the book into global ministry, including assistance to individuals in Third World countries who are battling AIDS.

Warren stressed that his action did not signal a new, political phase of his career. "I've never been involved in partisan politics—and don't intend to do so now—but

global poverty is an issue that rises far above mere politics,” he wrote in his letter. “It is a moral issue . . . a compassion issue . . . and because Jesus commanded us to help the poor, it is an obedience issue!”

He is the keynote speaker in late July in Britain at the World Baptist Alliance—a world body celebrating its 100th anniversary—despite the withdrawal of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is Warren’s denomination.

Warren’s increasingly outspoken endorsement of a global agenda has some thinking that a natural alliance is emerging between Warren and his socially conservative colleagues and liberal antipoverty figures like U2 rock star Bono.

But in order for such an alliance to fully materialize, conservative Christians might have to take a break from the “culture wars” centered on abortion and gay marriage, says commentator David Brooks. “We can have a culture war in this country, or we can have a war on poverty, but we can’t have both,” Brooks wrote in a May 26 *New York Times* column.

The boundaries between the two sides may be becoming somewhat more permeable, as evidenced by Pat Robertson’s appearance alongside Brad Pitt, Tom Hanks, Ellen DeGeneres and P. Diddy in a recent public service announcement for The ONE Campaign to end poverty.

Warren’s push is part of a larger vision he has been unfolding over the last few months.

In April, during Saddleback’s 25th anniversary celebration, he announced that he would lead thousands of churches around the world in eradicating five “giant problems” that oppress billions of people: global poverty; diseases, such as AIDS, that affect billions of people; illiteracy among half the world’s population; spiritual emptiness among billions of people who don’t know their purpose in life; and self-centered leadership.

Saddleback’s network of 2,600 small groups is now in the process of adopting villages in Rwanda, where a million people were killed in a 1994 genocide. Warren chose Rwanda after a recent visit there, and he recently hosted the Rwandan president at Saddleback. —*Holly Lebowitz Rossi, Beliefnet*