

# Morality alone cannot stop AIDS

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**By Hannah Elliott**

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LAKE FOREST, Calif. (ABP)—The choice between preventing AIDS by teaching abstinence or by distributing condoms is a false choice, Sen. Barack Obama told a mostly evangelical audience on World AIDS Day.

Instead, both methods for dealing with HIV/AIDS should be used to their fullest extent, Obama (D-Ill.) told listeners at the Global Summit on AIDS and the Church at Saddleback Church in Southern California.

Barack Obama
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There is a spiritual and moral dimension to fighting AIDS, he continued, and churches can fill that need.

“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,” he said.

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, he noted.

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When trying to change attitudes about a man's prerogative for promiscuity and rape, Obama said, 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," he added.

Obama, a special guest of Saddleback Church pastor and author Rick Warren, appeared at the summit despite calls from pro-life activists and Religious Right hardliners for Warren to rescind the invitation because of the senator's pro-choice stance on abortion.

Protestors, led by Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum, circulated a letter condemning the senator and asking Warren how he can hope "to fight one evil while justifying another." Based in Alton, Ill., the Eagle Forum has championed the pro-life cause since 1972.

"If Senator Obama cannot defend the most helpless citizens in our country, he has nothing to say to the AIDS crisis. ... We will never work with those can support the murder of babies in the womb," the letter said.

Warren, for his part, was nonplused by the criticism. He told reporters he would work with anyone committed to ending AIDS, no matter what their motivation or peripheral beliefs. Obama shared the Saddleback pulpit with Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) a pro-choice conservative Christian.

"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 took the same stance. While acknowledging disagreements about the best way to slow the spread of HIV/AIDS, he said the tendency to frame the issue in either/or terms is wrong.

Some people say the only way to prevent the disease is for men and women to change their sexual behavior, but for others such a prescription is unrealistic, Obama said.

He also said he “respectfully but unequivocally” disagrees with those who, out of sincere religious convictions, oppose condom distribution, microbicides and programs promoting delayed sexual activity. He said he does not accept the notion that “those who make mistakes in their lives should be given an effective death sentence.” He insisted he is unwilling to allow innocent people—wives with unfaithful husbands or children who contract the virus through birth—to “suffer, when condoms or other measures would have kept them from harm.”

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

“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.”

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