



Practicing What She Preaches

by Regan Hofmann

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*Kay Warren, wife of Rick Warren, the international religious icon and author of the best-selling *The Purpose Driven Life*, has stepped up to the pulpit with a sermon all her own. She's preaching to preachers worldwide, challenging spiritual leaders and their congregations to rethink outdated, divisive notions of AIDS. Her message? AIDS is not a "gay cancer" but an epic humanitarian crisis that faith-based organizations must address. Her new fans think she's simply divine*

It's seven o'clock on an August morning here in Toronto, where 26,000 people have gathered to diagnose the state of AIDS around the globe. The coffee has just started percolating at the XVI International AIDS Conference's media center, but everyone seems hypercaffeinated. Russian TV reporters are madly editing; journalists from Swaziland are e-mailing frantically; and French writers are speed blogging all the news that's fit to beam back home. Outside the conference center, activists rally about treatment access; inside, people fight over front row seats for the "Bill-squared" panel, starring Clinton and Gates. There's talk of microbicides, spiking infection rates among minorities, the lack of health care staffing around the world, the absence of Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper and the need to focus on women's issues and better prevention strategies.

This year's conference coincides with the 25th anniversary of the pandemic, and the response to the disease is finally starting to catch up with the devastation AIDS continues to wreak. There's a distinct feeling of urgency, a sense that participants are taking the theme of the conference, "Time to Deliver," deeply to heart. But most exciting, given where we are—and aren't—a quarter of a century into our battle with the retrovirus, is the presence of new blood among the legions of familiar faces of virologists, politicians, pharmaceutical executives, doctors, celebrities, people living with AIDS and global activists who've been fighting it for years.

A prime example is the woman now striding through the media center's long rows of tables. Buttoned into a prim pantsuit, Kay Warren is a Southern California blonde with light-blue eyes that seem lit from within. Hers is hardly the face of the typical AIDS warrior, but these desperate times call for a new breed of activist. Kay looks like a

woman on a serious mission—because, well, she is—but the toenails peeking through her strappy sandals are painted a cheery pink and are adorned with tiny daisies. The wife of Rick Warren, founder and pastor of the Saddleback Church, in Lake Forest, California—one of America’s largest evangelical Christian gatherings, with more than 22,000 congregants—Kay, 52, has launched one hell of a crusade. She fully intends to get 1 billion evangelical Christians to become more compassionate toward those living with AIDS.

Leveraging her husband’s massive following, she’s talking with religious leaders around the world about the need for faith-based organizations to reevaluate their role in the AIDS epidemic. Her brand of Bible beating challenges the stance that organized religion often takes toward HIV positive people: forgetting them or outright ignoring them. The reasons for this are many and complex, such as various religions’ sometimes preconceived notions about behaviors that can lead to contracting the virus, as well as a fear of discussing sex and sexual prevention methods (other than abstinence).

Yet all over the world, people are becoming infected faster than we can teach them prevention tactics or treat them. The situation has become so dire that even those who might once have turned away from AIDS—especially fundamentalist Christian conservatives like Kay Warren—are saying they can no longer live with themselves unless they help.

Kay admits that she personally and the church in general have joined the race a bit late, but the depth of her recent commitment more than compensates for past apathy. She is working fiercely to ensure that Christians worldwide will not remain silent and unengaged on the subject of AIDS. Kay believes that the church, like she herself, has finally been awakened to its opportunity.

She is an intensely spiritual woman. Not only a pastor’s wife but a pastor’s daughter, she says that she “heard about God from the time she was brought home from the hospital.” Kay is not nearly as well known as her husband, who’s a global strategist, Bush confidante, philanthropist (90% of the Warrens’ earnings go to charity) and the author of one of the best-selling books of all time—*The Purpose Driven Life*, which offers a biblical answer to the age-old question “What on earth am I here for?” and has sold more than 25 million copies. But she wishes to get her message out to the world just as pervasively, and may soon be following her husband’s example of touching millions of minds and hearts with his work.

Other HIV ministries are sprinkled around the globe, but Kay and Rick have taken their purpose-driven message to churches in 129 countries. And few other ministries have Saddleback’s scope. The Warrens started Saddleback in their home in 1980, with a congregation of just seven. Today, it is one of the ten largest churches in America, offering more than 200 ministries that serve the congregation and community. The Warrens plan to inspire worshippers worldwide to “take on the global giants of spiritual darkness, the lack of servant leaders, poverty, disease and ignorance through the PEACE plan.” That’s “P” for planting churches, “E” for equipping leaders, “A” for assisting the poor, “C” for caring for the sick (including those with AIDS) and “E” for educating the next generation.

In 2003, after traveling around the world to see firsthand how the disease was destroying lives and countries, Kay launched the HIV/AIDS Initiative at Saddleback Church (the HIV/AIDS Caring Community, www.PurposeDriven.com/HIV), and she was instrumental in presenting Saddleback's first HIV/AIDS conference, titled "Disturbing Voices." She speaks to churches and church leaders directly, and her venues range from live simulcasts in South Africa to national HIV/AIDS conferences to church-sponsored events, government-coordinated forums, small villages and packed stadiums. She has wrapped her arms around those suffering at Mother Theresa's Home for the Dying in Kolkata, India; at the leper colony and AIDS hospice in Manila, Philippines; and those struggling in Thailand, Cambodia and Africa.

People worldwide have received her warmly and, occasionally, not so warmly. "Sometimes," Kay says, "people are shocked by AIDS statistics or by the sudden exposure of their hard, apathetic hearts. Of course, not everybody believes I'm sincere; they doubt my motives and my reasons for getting involved," insinuating for instance, that she's merely trying to convert the sick and vulnerable to her religious philosophy. "Some others," she adds, "believe that HIV/AIDS is not in the purview of churches; it's a medical issue." But she refuses to let such ideas slow her mission, which dovetails with that of her husband: to "punch holes in darkness."

Kay has been a pastor's wife since 1975, but her life-changing AIDS revelation came in 2002, as she was flipping through a newsmagazine. She landed on a story about AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa and had, she says, an epiphany that the church wasn't doing enough to help those with AIDS. She'd read stories about people with AIDS before, but she had never met someone with the disease and felt no emotional or spiritual connection to the issue. Something changed in her that morning while she sipped her coffee and read the article about the children left alone in the wake of AIDS, many of them HIV positive themselves.

She clasped her fingers over her eyes to shield herself from the painful image of a person ravaged by the retrovirus. "I was trying to partially cover my eyes so I couldn't see the pictures, but I could still take in the words. It's the way I watch horror movies. Because it was horror I was seeing," she says. "There was a little box in the middle of the article that said 12 million children were orphaned in Africa because of AIDS. Living in affluent Orange County, California, I didn't know a single orphan and could not relate. It haunted me. I couldn't get away from that number. After about a month of personal struggle, that number wouldn't leave me alone. I kept seeing the subject of AIDS everywhere. I realized I had come to a decision point. I could either go back to my very simple little life, thank you very much, and pretend I hadn't seen what I had, or I could make a conscious decision to become engaged in my heart. I said, 'Yes,' and in that moment, my heart was broken open. It felt like God had taken my heart and put it through a meat grinder. What came out on the other side? Hamburger. My heart felt like it skipped a million beats, and it completely changed the trajectory of my life.

"I've got incredible empathy for people who have HIV—or any other life-threatening illness," says Kay, who fought for her own life through bouts of breast cancer in 2003 and melanoma in 2005. "I know what it's like to get that message that you have a serious illness. To wonder if my life is going to be shorter than I always thought it would be. Whether I'll die a painful death. Whether people will stay with me when I get sick. Knowing those things has increased my empathy for those living with HIV."

She realized that Saddleback had ignored the AIDS pandemic. “I do believe evangelical Christians in particular have been uncaring and apathetic. I think the way I used to be represents the way a lot of people think. That’s probably why I’m so passionate about talking to pastors and church leaders—because I know where they’re sitting. And I’ve sat there. I can’t explain, even to myself, what took me so long. Last week, a man listened to me talk. When I sat down, he said, ‘I’m mad at God, and I’m so angry at you.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, why?’ And he said, ‘Why did it take the pictures of African men and women dying [to make you act]? Why couldn’t it have been a gay man dying in America that caught your attention? Why didn’t God put those pictures in front of you?’ And I looked at him and said, ‘Please don’t be angry at God. God did put this message in front of me every single day. I just didn’t get it. I didn’t respond.’

“For me, it became a spiritual issue of how I can lay claim to being a representative of Jesus Christ, who is the epitome of caring compassion, when I wasn’t caring for those with AIDS. I realized I had been wrong.”

Warren has apologized publicly about doing nothing about AIDS—she stood before her vast congregation and has spoken through the Christian press asking fellow evangelicals to repent for ignoring the AIDS crisis. She says she has also made amends to God privately for not doing something sooner. Immediately after her realization, she appealed to Rick to help her start an HIV ministry as part of Saddleback’s mission. Already, Saddleback’s HIV ministry serves as a landing place for the ever-growing number of Christian churches addressing HIV/AIDS. The website offers resources for churches at all stages of response to the epidemic, from those who have been addressing AIDS for years to “congregations just waking up to the crisis.” She believes that the church can provide the thing that’s missing in the battle against AIDS: a worldwide grassroots network. She intends to use the church’s existing distribution channel to dispense information, treatment and a heaping dose of much-needed humanity to those who are suffering.

During their most recent world travels, Kay and Rick have been home to see their family only three days of the past 31. She looks like someone who’s been flying back and forth between time zones, but beneath a veneer of sleepiness, her core energy burns intensely. “Before I became interested in HIV, I used to travel mostly to speak with pastors’ wives. Now, when I travel, it almost exclusively has to do with HIV. When you see how people around the world live with HIV, especially compared to how life is here, you will see that it’s not right. What I have seen has seriously disturbed me. I am a seriously disturbed woman.

“I was in a little hut in Cambodia with a woman who had AIDS right when my hair started growing back, after my chemotherapy treatment. I looked like a French poodle,” says Kay. “There were several people sitting on her bed with her, when Elizabeth, a dear friend of mine who helped me through my cancer, and I walked in. I could look at this woman and say, ‘I know a little bit of what it’s like to be so sick.’ I was able to use my own personal experiences of facing death and the fear of being sick to help her.”

Kay’s ability to get church members to open their minds, eyes and hearts to those living with HIV springs directly from her ability to get them to connect to God. “There are a certain number of people in our church who agree that we have to take the blinders off our eyes and the cotton out of our ears and stand up and care for people who live with HIV.

For those people, it was almost an instant 'I didn't care, but now I do moment.' And then there are those who've been a little slower to come around, and, frankly, there are those who aren't there yet. That's OK. We're not going to stop talking about it or promoting care for people with HIV."

Kay's connection with God has been honed through a lifetime of worship. She says He speaks to her and helps guide her. "I feel an absolutely direct connection to God. It's not like I'm sitting there and all of a sudden I'm like, 'Hey, it's God!' you know. I don't see the writing in the sky. It's not a *Bruce Almighty* kind of thing. But knowing Him and being able to have a relationship with Him is the most important thing in my life. I talk to Him every day. When I read the Bible, it's not just a book, I believe it's God talking to me. I liken my connection to God to the one I have with Rick. I know my husband really well. We've been married for 31 years. There are many times I'm faced with a decision and I can't reach my husband to talk with him face to face but I've spent so much time with him, I know what he'd tell me to do. I don't have to hear my husband talking to me to know what he would say. I just know it, I just feel it. My relationship to God is similar."

From November 29 through December 1, some 2,000 people living with HIV will give testimony to their lives at Saddleback's 2006 Purpose Driven HIV/AIDS Conference. The theme: "Race Against Time." Speakers will include progressive Illinois senator Barack Obama, who won national attention for HIV testing this past summer by getting tested himself during a goodwill mission to Kenya.

In the past, people who've shared their story at Saddleback have received a warm welcome. "There is a man in our church who has had AIDS for a long, long time. He was infected maybe 23 years ago. When he and his wife told their church, they were asked to leave. So they decided they weren't going to tell anyone ever again. They lived with the secret, so afraid someone would find out.

He came to me, and we started talking. He asked if he really was going to be accepted. Finally, he figured out that we meant what we said when we said we would embrace him, and he stood in front of our congregation and told us his story. People jumped to their feet and gave thunderous applause. It was amazing," she says.

Kay is deft in her approach to getting those who historically have been more comfortable avoiding AIDS to talk about it by approaching the subject from a humanitarian angle. Delicately sidestepping such issues as the particulars of prevention methods or sexual preference, she encourages people to open their hearts to people living with HIV irrespective of how they contracted the virus. "The question should not be 'How did you get infected?' but 'How can I help?' There's nothing compared to touching someone who needs help. I've felt like an untouchable in my life before, and there's nothing better than having someone put their arms around me and show me they are not afraid."

After her time here at the International AIDS Conference, Kay will return briefly to her family's compound in Southern California, where she and Rick will unwind with their three children and two grandchildren. Kay also loves to play the piano, and, of course, read the Bible. One of her favorite pieces of Scripture is John 6:1 through 14, in which Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fishes offered to him by a child. Kay sees these verses as an indication that God intends to use ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things when they surrender their lives to Him.

“I claim to be God’s representative in the world. So I’d better ask myself to provide love and compassion,” says Kay. “Sometimes, I get tired. You can just say, ‘Yeah, I’m tired.’ But you have to have a motivation that comes from within and allows you to move past your fatigue to help people on this earth. I want AIDS to end. I want to stamp out HIV. I want it to be done. I don’t want the next generation to have to struggle.”