

Ugandan pastors defend anti-homosexuality Bill

by Lillian Kwon, Christian Post

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Pastors in Uganda recently chided evangelical pastor Rick Warren after he urged them to speak out against the country's anti-homosexuality Bill.

A group of 20 denominational heads recently formed the Uganda National Pastors Task Force Against Homosexuality and demanded that Warren "biblically issue an apology for having wronged us".

"Your letter has caused great distress and the pastors are demanding that you issue a formal apology for insulting the people of Africa by your very inappropriate (sic) bully use of your church and purpose driven pulpits to coerse us into the 'evil' of Sodomy and Gaymorrah (sic)," stated the pastors, including Martin Ssempe, in a letter emailed to Warren.

They also note, "As you yourself have said, '.the Bible says evil has to be opposed. Evil has to be stopped. The Bible does not say negotiate with evil. It says stop it. Stop evil'. (12/2007) Since homosexuality is evil, you cannot possibly be against a law that seeks to stop it unless you have misunderstood it."

Warren, who works with pastors in Uganda on the "Purpose Driven" campaign and P.E.A.C.E. Plan, addressed Ugandan pastors in a video earlier this month. He condemned the criminalisation of homosexuality, particularly the death penalty as proposed in the Uganda Bill, and called it unjust and un-Christian.

The Purpose Driven pastor was among a number of US religious leaders who expressed opposition and concern over the Bill.

But Ugandan pastors state in their letter to Warren that the Bill has been "greatly misrepresented by some homosexual activists causing hysteria".

They stress that the proposed death penalty applies only in special cases termed "aggravated homosexuality", which include those convicted of the homosexual rape of a child or handicapped invalid.

"This is a conviction of paedophilles!" they exclaim, noting that the country has for 15 years had a death penalty in place for those who sexually abuse a girl under the age of 18 years. The proposed measure simply extends the protection to boys, they say.

Attempting to clarify what they believe is misinformation regarding the anti-homosexuality Bill, the pastors task force says the proposed requirement that people report offenses of homosexuality was included because of high levels of unreported heterosexual and homosexual rape and harassment especially in single-sex schools. School officials and some police officers "maintain a conspiracy of silence" and ignore the pleas of the children and victims who report such crimes, the task force points out.

Critics, including Warren, say the Bill places "everybody" at risk – including parents, teachers, landlords, doctors, media and religious leaders who provide counselling to someone struggling with their sexuality, work with those infected with HIV and Aids, or do not report an offense within 24 hours of discovery.

Warren believes it would hurt the church ministry of caring for people with HIV and Aids. Out of fear of being reported, those infected would be reluctant to seek care or comfort from churches, the southern California pastor pointed out.

Homosexuality is already illegal in Uganda and can be punished with life imprisonment. But the anti-homosexuality legislation was designed to "fill the gaps" in the provisions of existing laws and "strengthen the nation's capacity to deal with emerging internal

and external threats to the traditional heterosexual family".

The pastors task force includes representatives of the National Fellowship of Born again Churches, the Seventh Adventists Church, Orthodox Church in Uganda, Roman Catholic Church in Uganda, Islamic Office of Social Welfare in Uganda, and the Born Again Faith Federation.

They argue that the Bill was "necessitated" by the increasing incidents of homosexual abuse of children, the growing promotion of homosexuality in Uganda, and western societies "waking up too late" on realising that homosexuality affects the entire society including what children are taught at school.

"We note with sadness the increasing levels of accepting of the evil of homosexuality," they state. "In these increasingly dark days, we encourage you not to give into the temptation to water down what the Bible says so as not to offend people."

Moreover, they make the case that homosexual practice is associated with serious, yet preventable public-health risks, including HIV transmission, and an increase in such practices could "rapidly reverse Uganda's success against HIV/AIDS".

Dr Warren Throckmorton, associate professor of psychology at Grove City College in Pennsylvania and a strong opponent of the measure, is not convinced. He says the Ugandan pastors "ignore the religious arguments against the Bill and attempt to make a weak public health argument".

Both Throckmorton and Rick Warren believe homosexual behaviour is a sin, but they call for love and mercy rather than condemnation.

In the UK, the United Reformed Church said it was "appalled" at the "draconian" measures being proposed in Uganda's anti-homosexuality Bill.

URC spokesman Simon Loveitt said the draft legislation represented a "clear infringement of human rights" and was "morally repugnant".

"It also infringes on the African principles of ubuntu (the concept that one's humanity can only be expressed through the humanity of others) and we add our voice to the many calling for the immediate withdrawal of this discriminatory Bill," he said.

More than 200 of Uganda's religious leaders support strengthening the law against homosexuality. The current debate is on what penalties are appropriate.

After months of uproar from around the globe, the Uganda National Pastors Task Force Against Homosexuality has recommended that the sentence for the offense of aggravated homosexuality be reduced from the death penalty to 20 years imprisonment. The group has also suggested the inclusion of a provision for counseling and rehabilitation to persons experiencing homosexual temptations. But even with that provision, "homosexuality should remain a punishable offense to control its spread," the task force added.

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