

## Message From A Megachurch

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

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American politics took an important turn last week at a church in the foothills of Southern California's Santa Ana Mountains.

When Rick Warren, one of the nation's most popular evangelical pastors, faced down right-wing pressure and invited Sen. Barack Obama to speak at a gathering at his Saddleback Valley Community Church about the AIDS crisis, he sent a signal: A significant group of theologically conservative Christians no longer wants to be treated as a cog in the Republican political machine.

For his part, Obama, the former community organizer from Chicago, showed why he is this moment's hottest commodity in 2008 presidential politics, even though he has not entered the race yet.

For a quarter-century since the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, white evangelical Christians have been widely seen as a Republican preserve. No one did a more comprehensive job of organizing them than President Bush, and he carried the white evangelical vote in 2004 over John Kerry by a ratio of nearly 4 to 1. Many of the most politically active evangelical leaders have insisted that the morally freighted social issues -- abortion, stem-cell research, same-sex marriage -- took priority over all questions.

Enter Warren, or Pastor Rick, as he likes to be known. Warren is no political liberal. On the contrary, his views on the hot-button issues are reliably conservative, and he has said that members of his sprawling Orange County congregation probably vote overwhelmingly Republican.

But Warren speaks for a new generation of evangelicals who think that harnessing religious faith too closely to electoral politics is bad for religion, and who are broadening the evangelical public agenda to include a concern for global poverty and the scourge of AIDS.

Warren is also the most gifted religious entrepreneur since Billy Graham. Warren's book "The Purpose Driven Life" has sold in the tens of millions, and his specific model for the megachurch has spread all over the country. He is not building a new denomination. He is building a new network, and it's powerful. Warren and his wife, Kay, have made alleviating the AIDS crisis in Africa one of the central components of their mission.

And thus it came to pass that when Warren called a conference at his church last Friday on World AIDS Day, among those he invited were two potential presidential candidates. It was unsurprising that one of them was Sen. Sam Brownback, the Kansas Republican and a loyal social conservative who has taken up the AIDS issue with passion and commitment.

But when the other invitee turned out to be Obama, parts of the old evangelical political apparatus went after Warren as a heretic. Rob Schenck, president of the National Clergy Council, declared that Obama's views on

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abortion -- Obama is pro-choice -- represented "the antithesis of biblical ethics and morality" and insisted that Warren had no business inviting him to Saddleback.

Warren's church issued a statement reaffirming its strong opposition to abortion, but Warren did not back down. Indeed, he seemed to revel in rejecting the old evangelical political model. "I'm a pastor, not a politician," Warren told ABC News. "People always say, 'Rick, are you right wing or left wing?' I say 'I'm for the whole bird.'"

When it came his turn to speak, Obama took on the moral message of evangelical AIDS activists -- and then challenged them.

"Let me say this and let me say this loud and clear: I don't think that we can deny that there is a moral and spiritual component to prevention," he declared. "In too many places . . . the relationship between men and women, between sexuality and spirituality, has broken down and needs to be repaired."

Then Obama got to what "may be the difficult part for some," as he put it, that "abstinence and fidelity, although the ideal, may not always be the reality."

"We're dealing with flesh-and-blood men and women, and not abstractions," Obama said, and "if condoms and potentially things like microbicides can prevent millions of deaths, then they should be made more widely available. . . . I don't accept the notion that those who make mistakes in their lives should be given an effective death sentence."

That Obama received a standing ovation suggests that Warren is right to sense that growing numbers of Christians are tired of narrowly partisan politics and share his interest in "the whole bird." In their different spheres, Warren and Obama are both in the business of retailing hope.

One more thing: If you read Obama's [speech](#), you'll realize he demonstrates a much truer Christian spirit than the GOP masterminds who have recently tried to push people away from Obama by pointing out that his middle name is Hussein.

[postchat@aol.com](mailto:postchat@aol.com)

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