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Evangelicals' open arms, wary hearts greet Obama

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Mike Dorning, Tribune national correspondent

LAKE FOREST, Calif. -- Sen. Barack Obama, a pro-abortion rights Democrat contemplating a presidential run, on Friday received a warm embrace from one of America's best-known evangelical pastors and an enthusiastic ovation from a national gathering of church leaders not traditionally welcoming of liberal social views.

Obama delivered a speech rich in references to Christian faith, moral imperative and common purpose, urging churches to join with allies among the secular to fight the spread of AIDS and other social ills.

"We have a stake in each other," Obama said. "I am my brother's keeper and I am my sister's keeper. ... What binds us together is greater than what drives us apart. And if we people of faith believe in the truth of that proposition and act on it, then we might not solve every problem, but we can get something meaningful done."

The Illinois senator spoke before about 2,000 mostly evangelical pastors and church leaders at a World AIDS Day summit at the Southern California suburban megachurch that is home base to Rick Warren, leader of a network of evangelical churches and author of the best-selling "Purpose Driven Life" series of books.

Obama has been a prominent advocate among Democrats for a more determined effort to engage evangelicals and churchgoing Americans. His appearance at Warren's Saddleback Church follows a speech last June in which he argued for a greater role for faith in political discourse.

Warren has been a leading voice in a growing movement among evangelicals to expand the movement's political agenda beyond the familiar cultural issues of abortion and gay rights to causes such as AIDS, global disease, poverty and the genocide in Darfur.

Invitation criticized

Warren's invitation to Obama stirred public rebukes from several prominent Christian conservative leaders, who argued that the senator should be denied the forum because of his support for abortion rights.

But Warren greeted the senator onstage with an open-armed bear hug and warm words of praise.

He introduced Obama along with Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), a favorite of Christian conservatives, who also spoke, as leaders of "integrity ... civility ... [and] humility." He described his admiration for the Illinois senator's "heart and soul" and called him "my friend."

"We've got to stop criticizing and start cooperating," Warren said.

Obama recounted his own journeys in Africa to illustrate the toll AIDS has taken in the developing world. But he also devoted much of his speech to a South African woman known as Leo--profiled in a Chicago Tribune feature--a struggling nanny who borrowed money to care for orphans left behind as her brothers and sisters and then neighbors died of AIDS.

"Here's the thing: My faith tells me that Leo's family is my family," Obama said. "We are bound together as God's children, and I have a commitment to them that I cannot relieve because of geographic distance or economic distance."

Obama said he embraced the roles the church has to play not only in committing financial and human resources, but also in "providing people with a moral framework on a faith basis to make better choices" such as sexual abstinence and marital fidelity. But he added, "I have to respectfully but unequivocally disagree" with conservatives who oppose promotion of condoms and microbicides.

"I don't accept the notion that those who make mistakes in their lives should be given an effective death sentence," Obama said.

The senator called for a \$1 billion per year increase in the United States' commitment to spend \$15 billion over five years fighting the spread of

AIDS in less developed countries.

He urged the church leaders to turn away from politics that would look upon the unfortunate and "blame their problems on themselves ... a politics that's punitive and petty, divisive and small."

Reaction favorable, but wary

Tim Morgan, deputy managing editor for Christianity Today, who watched the speech, said Obama spoke about his faith with a natural ease that resonated with the audience.

"He almost speaks here like a pastor," Morgan said. "That's why he gets a standing ovation from an ardently, ardently pro-life audience."

Several church leaders in attendance said they came away with a favorable impression.

"You can tell he has a Christian perspective. ... Caring for people is the No. 1 thing about being a Christian," said John Smith, senior pastor of Crossroads Church in Loveland, Colo. "It didn't feel like he was politicking."

But others noted it would not be enough to make them political supporters.

Robert Myers, senior pastor of Miami Baptist Church in Miami, said the senator's support for abortion rights was an insurmountable obstacle.

"I wouldn't want him making appointments to the Supreme Court. I wouldn't vote for him," Myers said. "But if we had to have a Democrat, I'd like to have a Democrat like him."

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