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Churches to tackle AIDS

EPIDEMIC: Organizers hope to convince pastors that the problem needs their attention.

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By **BETTYE WELLS MILLER** / The Press-Enterprise

AIDS is a global catastrophe that churches must tackle head-on.

That is the theme of a three-day HIV-AIDS conference at Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest that starts Tuesday and features an Inland physician as well as nationally known clergy, leading medical researchers and high-ranking federal officials.

Dr. Eric Walsh, a physician at Loma Linda University Medical Center and a Rubidoux youth pastor, will conduct a workshop on Wednesday focusing on factors that contribute to the global HIV-AIDS epidemic such as poverty, prejudice and cultural myths.

Walsh said the Saddleback event -- called the "Disturbing Voices Conference" -- could make an impact in the United States.

"Once that many pastors are exposed to this information and find what is working in other places, I think it will help people create meaningful programs," such as prevention education and caring for those have AIDS, the physician said by phone.

The goal of the conference, which concludes on World AIDS Day, is to show pastors in churches of every size how their congregations can help prevent the spread of HIV and care for people who are sick.

Riverside and San Bernardino counties rank sixth and seventh among California's 58 counties this year in the number of people infected with HIV, and sixth and ninth for the number of AIDS cases, as of Sept. 30.

County	HIV	AIDS
Riverside	1,540	5,017
San Bernardino	1,204	3,311

Source: California Department of Health Services

Global epidemic

Adults with HIV: 38 million

Women with HIV: 17.5 million

Children with HIV: 2.3 million

New infections 2005: 4.9 million estimated

Total AIDS deaths 2005: 3.1 million estimated

Child AIDS deaths 2005: 570,000 estimated

Children who have lost their mother or both parents to AIDS: 15 million

Source: World Health Organization

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"Every church has someone with HIV or who has a relative or friend with HIV," said Kay Warren, president of the Acts of Mercy foundation and wife of internationally known Saddleback pastor Rick Warren. "Certainly every community has somebody who is HIV positive. Churches have been largely silent and uncaring about people with HIV."

The Rev. Lacy Sykes, pastor of CrossWord Christian Church in Riverside, said he and his wife, Karen, plan to attend the conference to learn how to set up an Inland ministry that would train churches how to educate their congregations about preventing the spread of HIV.

"The AIDS epidemic is really hitting the African-American and Latino community," he said by phone. "It's something people are afraid to address because they associate it with the homosexual community. It's affecting young African-American and Latino men and women 15 to 24. The church needs to be the center of information to let people know about the disease. ... We need to educate people and tell them they won't get it by hugging someone or by loving someone."

Other speakers include the Warrens; Bill and Lynne Hybels, founders of Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago; Claude Allen, a domestic policy adviser to President Bush; Ambassador Randall Tobias, the State Department global AIDS coordinator; Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives; Edward Green, a Harvard University anthropologist and AIDS prevention expert; Gary Haugen, president of International Justice Mission, a human rights agency; and Dr. Robert Redfield, co-founder of the Institute for Human Virology at the University of Maryland.

More than 1,400 pastors, health-care professionals and others from the United States and around the world have registered for the conference that Kay Warren said she hopes to repeat every year or biennially.

"This is a starting place," she said of the event. "Globally, the problem is gigantic. If you look in your own community it's easy to find people. ... This is a wakeup call and a kick in the butt. I hope this wakes people up and stirs them to do something."

Fear and ignorance prevent many Christians from tackling AIDS, Warren said.

"I don't think HIV is on the radar screen of most pastors or most Americans," she said. "I was like that before the blinders came off. I had no idea that 40 million people are infected around the world or that there are 15 million (AIDS) orphans in Africa."

Warren said she became aware of the number of children orphaned by AIDS three years ago.

"I came to a T in the road and had to decide if I was going to ignore what I had learned and go back to my comfortable life or choose to let my heart become engaged," she said. "I decided to let my heart be engaged. The moment, I did my heart was broken into a million pieces. I have not recovered. I became a seriously disturbed woman. ..."

"Everyone should live (at) a certain level of being disturbed. If we are not seriously disturbed then nothing will be done. ... We have to permeate the culture with the truth that God cares about people that are sick. Jesus certainly cared about people who were sick. If we claim to wear his name we have to act like he did."

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