

JOINING HANDS Warren at a rally in Rwanda, and below with President Kagame



Warren of Rwanda

The best-selling megapastor wants to turn the genocide site into the first “purpose-driven nation”

By DAVID VAN BIEMA

PAUL KAGAME, PRESIDENT OF RWANDA, is not known for hugging pastors. Catholic and Protestant clergy have been convicted in connection with the genocide in his country in 1994, and Kagame has repeatedly stated his disdain for religious organizations. Thus a buzz went up in Kigali’s Amahoro Stadium last month when Kagame allowed Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback megachurch in Lake Forest, Calif., and author of the best-selling *The Purpose-Driven Life*, to throw an arm over his shoulders and “pray for the President.”

In fact, their bond now extends well beyond prayerful embrace. Kagame has committed his government to cooperation in a five-to-seven-year self-sufficiency project staffed by Rwandan volunteers but initiated, advised and at least partly funded by Warren’s network of “purpose-driven churches.” Warren talks of turning Rwanda into “the first purpose-driven nation.”

For months the clergyman has alluded in general terms to an immense volunteer effort called the PEACE plan, aimed at transforming 400,000 churches in 47 nations into centers to nurse, feed and educate the poor and even turn them into entrepreneurs. Its details remain unknown, but its Rwandan element seems to have outrun the rest. Warren says he was “looking for a small country where we could actually work on a national model,” and

Kagame, impressed by *The Purpose-Driven Life*, volunteered Rwanda in March. In July Warren and 48 other American Evangelicals, who have backgrounds in areas like health, education, micro-enterprises and justice, held intensive planning meetings with Rwandan Cabinet ministers, governors, clergy and entrepreneurs. One dinner was attended by a third of the Rwandan Parliament. Says Scott Moreau, a professor of missiology at Wheaton College in Illinois: “I’ve



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—SCOTT MOREAU, missiology professor, Wheaton College

never heard of this level of cooperation in the last 100 years between any megachurch, mission agency or even a denomination and a national government.”

Warren will not quote a budget for the effort, stressing its volunteer nature. But he talks of sending each Rwandan church kits he calls “school in a box,” “clinic in a box,” “business in a box” and so on. (The “clinic,” he says, might include medicines for malaria and eventually AIDS, with guides for their

administration.) He has tapped Saddleback congregants to talk with the heads of specific Rwandan sectors. Sam Smith, a retired U.S. federal administrative judge just returned from Kigali, says he hopes to send U.S. police, prosecutors and judges to advise their African counterparts in areas like sexual-assault investigation and police-lab construction. Warren also expects about 500 of the “small groups” that make up Saddleback to “adopt” individual Rwandan villages and begin sending short-term visitors in the fall. With a preacher’s flair, he compares the program to a starter batch of yeast that someone once gave to his mother, which engendered 20 years’ worth of pancakes.

Rwandan officials are eager to get started. “The program seems like something that will lift our country in many ways,” says Minister of Youth, Culture and Sports Joseph Habineza. The project also enjoys the moral support of White House faith-based initiatives czar James Towey, who says, “In the past, government has been indifferent or hostile toward efforts such as this one. That is not the case with this Administration.”

Yet there are some skeptics. Many missions professionals regard short-term site visits by faith-driven amateurs as inefficient. Then there is the program’s improvisational aura. “I’m cheering ‘em on,” says Wheaton’s Moreau. “In Africa, programs appearing well connected can instantly attract a mass of people. But I wonder how many at Saddleback have the cross-cultural experience to convert that [enthusiasm] to feet on the ground.” Says Furaha Mugisha, editor of the Rwandan newspaper *Umuseso*: “I think

[Warren] has good intentions. Some people may benefit. But he is not different from other pastors we have seen. You won’t hear much about his plan after the rally.”

University student Antoinette Mukashema is hopeful. “There are lots of people promising to move mountains and change lives,” she allows. “Often I don’t trust them. But this guy has a workable plan. Let us give him time and see.” —With reporting by Gabriel Gabiro/Kigali