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SUCCESS STORY

Pastors in Swaziland Learn to Address HIV Issues from the Pulpit

Dream for Africa mobilizes volunteers to work in sub-Saharan Africa on hunger and food security, orphans and vulnerable children, poverty alleviation, and AIDS prevention.



Dream for Africa

Dr. Bruce Wilkinson, Chairman of Dream for Africa, and Pastor Zakes Nxumalo exchange greetings at the HIV/AIDS Prevention Conference for Pastors in Swaziland.

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MORE THAN 500 PASTORS from across Swaziland participated in an HIV/AIDS prevention conference June 6–9, 2005, funded by President Bush’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief through USAID. The conference was led by Dr. Bruce Wilkinson, Chairman of the faith-based organization Dream for Africa, based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and author of *The Prayer of Jabez* and other books on the necessary link between humanitarian service and spirituality.

Dream for Africa mobilizes volunteers from around the world to work in sub-Saharan Africa on projects related to hunger and food security, orphans and vulnerable children, poverty alleviation, and AIDS prevention. As a Christian pastor and leader in the Evangelical community, Dr. Wilkinson recognizes the vast potential impact the church and the faith community can have on the HIV/AIDS crisis.

At the conference, Dr. Wilkinson trained the pastors on the best methods of talking appropriately and effectively to their congregations about sexual abstinence until marriage and about fidelity to one’s partner. Because the unequal treatment of women—both culturally and legally—contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS, Dr. Wilkinson challenged pastors to make clear to their congregations that men and women are, according to their own sacred text, created equal. Dr. Wilkinson shared with the participants specific verses of scripture that encourage women to own property and to make work decisions. The message was clear: women should have control over their own bodies.

Stigma presents an enormous barrier to care, treatment, and prevention of HIV around the world. In light of this challenge, stigmatization related to HIV/AIDS was discussed at length during one session of the pastors’ conference. And it was in that setting that two pastors publicly disclosed their HIV-positive status. After congratulating the men on their courage, Dr. Wilkinson asked why others did not come forward to acknowledge their HIV status. He reminded them that Jesus did not blame people because of how they had contracted a disease. Dr. Wilkinson admonished the pastors not only to seek counseling and testing for themselves, but also to facilitate testing for their congregants.

One Zionist Church pastor who ministers to a small village told a USAID official, “This is an amazing week. People like us have never ever been invited to come to a place like this and learn all these things and give our views on the problem.... I never thought that we pastors could help stop AIDS. I’m going back to my church a new man, a new pastor.”