

# Evangelical leaders decry Uganda's antigay law

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue

American evangelicals are denouncing a new Ugandan law that criminalizes homosexuality, reiterating a position that many have held for years but which has nonetheless drawn scrutiny and skepticism from critics.

Since 2009, several American pastors and leaders have condemned legislation in Uganda that, in its initial version, imposed the death penalty for some offenders. Under the revised law signed recently by President Yoweri Museveni, the death penalty was removed and replaced with life in prison in some cases.

Now, American evangelicals who insist they never supported either version of the law nonetheless find themselves playing defense, saying their statements against homosexuality at home are being twisted as an endorsement of harsh penalties against gays and lesbians abroad.

Decrying laws in countries such as Uganda and Russia, Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said he knows no evangelicals who would support legislation like Uganda's.

"We always must balance a fear of Western cultural imperialism with a responsibility to speak to global human rights around the world," said Moore, who has also denounced Russia's anti-gay laws because he has adopted sons from Russia.

"Those of us who hold to a Christian sexual ethic don't want to see those who disagree with us jailed; we want to see them reconciled to God through the gospel."

The timing of Uganda's legislation coincided with heated debates in the United States over proposed legislation in Arizona, which was vetoed, that would have allowed businesses in the state to deny services to people who are gay if they felt that serving them would violate their religious rights.

“The situations in Uganda and Arizona are galaxies apart,” Moore said. “I think that in Arizona and several other states, an attempt to preserve our religious liberties, regardless of how we agree with how it’s being done, can hardly compare with persecution around the world.”

California megachurch pastor Rick Warren, writing on March 2 on his Facebook page, denied allegations that he had supported the Ugandan bill. In 2009, Warren posted an “encyclical video” on YouTube in which he says he opposes the criminalization of homosexuality.

“Last week, the nation of Uganda passed a bad law, which I have publicly opposed for nearly five years,” Warren wrote. “I still oppose it, but rumors persist because lies and errors are never removed from the Internet.”

The Evangelical humanitarian organization World Vision has opposed the bill since 2009, arguing that it could hamper efforts to reduce HIV/AIDS. “More people would be reluctant to seek, receive, or even provide care and compassion out of fear of being reported,” the organization said in a statement. “This would also make their families and children even more vulnerable.”

Uganda is not the only country to criminalize same-sex relations. The United Nations estimates that 78 countries ban homosexuality.

Since the law passed, Uganda has been hit with substantial aid cuts from Western nations; the World Bank has postponed a \$90 million loan for the country’s health systems. Secretary of State John Kerry has likened Uganda’s law to South Africa’s apartheid-era ban on interracial unions.

Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said March 4 that “homosexuals are not criminals” and should not receive a sentence of life in prison.

Initial opposition to the series of Ugandan bills was strong among U.S. evangelicals, but it gradually faded due to “Uganda fatigue,” said Warren Throckmorton, a professor of psychology at Grove City College.

“Early on, Rick Warren went out in a big way against the bill, and he still got blamed for it at times. Some of the vigor early on was worn down over time,” Throckmorton said. “The bill came up and then died several times. Just when you thought it was

gone and over with, the Ugandan parliament passed it in the middle of the night, so to speak.”

Throckmorton said he would have expected a more vigorous response from evangelicals who have a stake in Uganda.

“Evangelicals have missionaries there, televangelists have shows on TV there. There is a substantial American Christian presence there,” he said. “From the Ugandans’ point of view, the bill was passed as a way to make Uganda a more Christian nation; evangelicals could’ve been more vocal by saying, ‘This is not how it’s done.’” —RNS

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