

True Love Waits Expands Abstinence Message in Africa

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By Don Beehler

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--While True Love Waits (TLW) was holding its first national event in July 1994, a second smaller but perhaps even more powerful True Love Waits observance was taking place half a world away.

On the same day that more than 210,000 covenant cards were being displayed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C, missionaries Larry and Sharon Pumpelly organized a parade in downtown Kampala, Uganda, to introduce the True Love Waits' abstinence-until-marriage message to a continent that was being decimated by AIDS.

Twelve years later, True Love Waits has been credited by government leaders in Uganda for a remarkable decrease in the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate (the percentage of people living with HIV/AIDS)—which in some areas was above 30 percent—dropped to about 6 percent.

As True Love Waits makes plans to expand its work in Africa through LifeWay's *A Defining Moment* capital campaign, a small team of ministry representatives journeyed to Kenya and Uganda last month to learn more about how the abstinence message was saving lives and bringing hope to millions.

Jimmy Hester, co-founder of True Love Waits; Dr. Jimmy Draper, president emeritus of LifeWay Christian Resources; Jack Tompkins, a businessman and president's cabinet member of *A Defining Moment*; and Gary McCauley, director of LifeWay's Capital Resource Development Department, were guided by the Pumpellys, who previously spent 21 years as missionaries in both countries.

During their whirlwind seven-day trip, the group visited churches with HIV/AIDS support groups, including one in the heart of a Nairobi slum; observed TLW presentations in schools; toured HIV/AIDS testing centers operated by the Baptist AIDS Response Agency (BARA); and met with the president of Uganda's wife, who serves as national spokesperson for True Love Waits.

"Everyone seemed convinced that True Love Waits has been a huge success," Tompkins noted in his journal, writing that it is not just a program but rather "a ministry that allows a great opportunity for evangelism and the teaching of obedience."

On the first day, the group visited the modest BARA office, where they learned that one of its small centers outside Nairobi tests more people than 17 government-operated centers in the area because of the compassion shown by BARA volunteers.

They also visited a small church consisting of 2x4s and corrugated metal, with a dirt floor, and a school constructed by some dedicated Christians, both of which are located in a Nairobi slum.

The pastor introduced them to a group of women from the church that are HIV positive and have formed a support group to assist each other. Support groups are vital because there is a huge stigma to being HIV/AIDS positive in Africa, and such individuals usually are ostracized.

At one stop in Uganda, they met with several young adults from Kampala Baptist Church who had signed TLW cards years earlier.

“To talk with young people who made TLW commitments years ago and today are the role models who are challenging others to make commitments to abstinence was an emotional and rewarding experience,” Hester said.

“They were able to testify as to the significant positive differences they experienced as a result of adopting a lifestyle of sexual abstinence before marriage,” Tompkins commented. “One of the young men interviewed told us of the pain he experienced when he had lost his dad and two brothers to AIDS in a single year.”

The highlight was a visit with Janet Museveni, the first lady of Uganda, who has championed the True Love Waits movement since its introduction in that country. Her children took the TLW pledge in 1994, and when they married they presented their commitment cards to their spouses at their weddings.

Several African countries have sent representatives to Uganda to learn how it has so radically decreased its HIV/AIDS rate. The first lady told the group she believes True Love Waits could be done anywhere and be effective.

“The impact of True Love Waits in Uganda is seen not only in statistics, but in the fact that all Christian-based abstinence groups use TLW commitment cards as part of what they do, even the first lady’s group,” said Sharon Pumpelly.

“The fingers of AIDS reach far and TLW is only a part of the whole issue, but a part which certainly affects the future of AIDS,” she added.

“Our experiences impressed upon me the need for this work to be enhanced and continued, even in countries with a history of using True Love Waits,” Hester said. “The future existence of a generation, as well as the quality of life, depends on decisions made by young people today.”

“We could not have had a better look at True Love Waits’ ministry in East Africa,” Draper added. “What is happening in Uganda and Kenya can be duplicated all over Africa.”

Near the end of their trip, the group journeyed to the countryside over difficult roads to witness a final TLW presentation at a high school that operates without water or electricity. The students, neatly dressed in school uniforms, listened respectfully and intently to the presentation, and asked many questions about what it means to take a True Love Waits vow.

Afterwards, the TLW group learned that almost all of the students have lost close friends and/or family members to AIDS. “The principal told me this type of presentation should be made to every high school in Africa,” Tompkins noted in his journal.

“He said it could change the course of history in Africa.”

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