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U.S. Bishop, Making It Official, Throws in Lot With African Churchman

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

WOODBIDGE, Va. May 5 — The Anglican archbishop of Nigeria, Peter J. Akinola, on Saturday installed Bishop Martyn Minns of Virginia as the new leader of a diocese that would take in congregations around the country that want to leave the [Episcopal Church](#). In doing so, Archbishop Akinola rejected requests by leaders of the worldwide Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church to refrain from taking part in the ceremony.

Archbishop Akinola's role in the installation celebration for Bishop Minns forged another tie in an increasingly confident alliance between theological traditionalists in the United States and church leaders overseas who are deeply opposed to the Episcopal Church's liberal stance on homosexuality. A decision by the Episcopal Church in 2003 to ordain an openly gay man, [V. Gene Robinson](#), as bishop of New Hampshire outraged traditionalists in the United States and abroad, who believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the Anglican Communion, sent a letter to Archbishop Akinola late last week urging him to cancel his plans to visit the United States.

His letter repeated requests made by Katharine Jefferts Schori, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, the American branch of Anglicanism. Bishop Jefferts Schori said that by attending the ceremony, Archbishop Akinola would heighten tensions between the Episcopal Church and many in the 77-million-member Anglican Communion.

The hope among leaders of the new diocese, the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, is that it will eventually be recognized by the communion as its rightful representative in the United States, replacing an Episcopal Church they say has strayed from traditional Anglican teachings.

"I see it as a building block for that," Bishops Minns said in a news conference preceding his installation ceremony. He said the convocation would work with other groups of disaffected congregations to create a successor to the Episcopal Church.

Tensions have mounted since the communion's archbishops, or primates, met earlier this year in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and issued an ultimatum insisting that the Episcopal Church pledge not to consecrate as bishops gay men or lesbians who are in relationships. The primates also demanded that the American church stop allowing bishops and priests from authorizing blessings of same-sex couples.

The Episcopal Church must give its decision by Sept. 30. If it rejects the ultimatum, the church risks a reduced role in the world's third-largest Christian denomination, leaving the door open, some believe, for another group to take on the Anglican mantle in the United States.

So far, only a few dozen of about 7,600 Episcopal congregations have left. About 30 congregations are affiliated with the convocation, Bishop Minns said.

Despite the group's tiny membership and some empty pews at the Virginia chapel Saturday, those at the ceremony were not about to let it become "a convergence of the unhappy," as Bishop Minns said they had been described.

In a traditional ceremony that echoed one just a few months ago, held in Washington for Bishop Jefferts Schori, a procession of bishops entered the chapel and sat on a raised stage, waiting for Bishop Minns to enter. He rapped on the door three times before it was opened by the registrar of the ceremony, who said, "This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter it."

Dressed in a gold miter and cape, Archbishop Akinola handed the pastoral staff to Bishop Minns on the stage and asked him

to show himself as “a true apostle of Christ.”

Normally, as the bishop presiding at such a ceremony, Archbishop Akinola would have been expected to preach, Bishop Minns said. But it was Bishop Minns who delivered the sermon, which touched on the tensions in the global Anglican Communion.

“The Communion is wrestling with irreconcilable truths,” Bishop Minns said of the dispute over homosexuality. “It’s not clear how it will turn out.”

He offered the convocation as a gift to those in the Episcopal Church who crave a different theology. Bishop Minns called the convocation a celebration that had been wrought from the crisis.

By the end of the ceremony, some Nigerian congregants danced and all broke into a spirited singing of “Days of Elijah.” Finally, Archbishop Akinola told those gathered that the ceremony was “simply the first step” in a long road.

“The Church of Nigeria itself has almost nothing to offer,” he said, although the church is the largest in the global communion. “We are doing this on behalf of the Communion. If we had not done this many of you would be lost to other churches, maybe to nothing at all.”

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