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At Axis of Episcopal Split, an Anti-Gay Nigerian

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Virginia church representatives at a Dec. 17 meeting on their split from the Episcopal Church included Richard Crocker, left, of Truro Church.

By [LYDIA POLGREEN](#) and [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)
Published: December 25, 2006

ABUJA, [Nigeria](#), Dec. 20 — The way he tells the story, the first and only time Archbishop Peter J. Akinola knowingly shook a gay person's hand, he sprang backward the moment he realized what he had done.

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George Osodi/Associated Press

Archbishop Peter J. Akinola, right, internationally known for his harsh stance against homosexuality, with bishops in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2005.

Archbishop Akinola, the conservative leader of Nigeria's Anglican Church who has emerged at the center of a schism over homosexuality in the global Anglican Communion, re-enacted the scene from behind his desk Tuesday, shaking his head in wonder and horror.

"This man came up to me after a service, in New York I think, and said, 'Oh, good to see you bishop, this is my partner of many years,' " he recalled. "I said, 'Oh!' I jumped back."

Archbishop Akinola, a man whose international reputation has largely been built on his tough stance against

homosexuality, has become the spiritual head of 21 conservative churches in the United States. They opted to leave the [Episcopal Church](#) over its decision to consecrate an openly gay bishop and allow churches to bless same-sex unions. Among the eight Virginia churches to announce they had joined the archbishop's fold last week are The Falls Church and Truro Church, two large, historic and wealthy parishes.

In a move attacked by some church leaders as a violation of geographical boundaries, Archbishop Akinola has created an offshoot of his Nigerian church in North America for

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The New York Times

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A woman with dark hair is looking at a computer screen. The screen shows a bright, possibly medical or scientific image. The woman is wearing a dark top.

the discontented Americans. In doing so, he has made himself the kingpin of a remarkable alliance between theological conservatives in North America and the developing world that could tip the power to conservatives in the Anglican Communion, a 77-million member confederation of national churches that trace their roots to the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

“He sees himself as the spokesperson for a new Anglicanism, and thus is a direct challenge to the historic authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury,” said the Rev. Dr. Ian T. Douglas of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass.

The 62-year-old son of an illiterate widow, Archbishop Akinola now heads not only Nigeria — the most populous province, or region, in the Anglican Communion, with at least 17 million members — but also the organizations representing the leaders of Anglican provinces in Africa and the developing world. He has also become the most visible advocate for a literal interpretation of Scripture, challenging the traditional Anglican approach of embracing diverse theological viewpoints.

“Why didn’t God make a lion to be a man’s companion?” Archbishop Akinola said at his office here in Abuja. “Why didn’t he make a tree to be a man’s companion? Or better still, why didn’t he make another man to be man’s companion? So even from the creation story, you can see that the mind of God, God’s intention, is for man and woman to be together.”

Archbishop Akinola’s views on homosexuality — that it is an abomination akin to bestiality and pedophilia — are fairly mainstream here. Nigeria is a deeply religious country, evenly divided between Christians and Muslims, and attitudes toward homosexuality, women’s rights and marriage are dictated largely by scripture and enforced by deep social taboos.

Archbishop Akinola spoke forcefully about his unswerving convictions against homosexuality, the ordination of women and the rise of what he called “the liberal agenda,” which he said had “infiltrated our seminaries” in the Anglican Communion.

This view emanating from the developing world is hardly unique to the Anglican church. More and more, churches of many denominations in what many Christian leaders call the “global south,” encompassing Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia, which share these views, are surging as church attendance lags in developed countries.

Bishop Martyn Minns, the rector of Truro Church in Fairfax, Va., who was consecrated by Archbishop Akinola this year to serve as his missionary bishop in North America, said Archbishop Akinola was motivated by a conviction that the Anglican Communion must change its colonial-era leadership structure and mentality.

“He doesn’t want to be the man; he just no longer wants to be the boy,” Bishop Minns said. “He wants to be treated as an equal leader, with equal respect.”

Even among Anglican conservatives, Archbishop Akinola is not universally beloved. In November 2005, he published a letter purporting to be from the leaders, known as primates, of provinces in the global south. It called Europe a “spiritual desert” and criticized the Church of England. Three of the bishops who supposedly signed it later denied adding their names. Some bishops in southern Africa have also challenged his fixation with homosexuality, when [AIDS](#) and poverty are a crisis for the continent.

He has been chastised more recently for creating a missionary branch of the Nigerian church in the United States, called the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, despite Anglican rules and traditions prohibiting bishops from taking control of churches or priests not in their territory.

“There are primates who are very, very concerned about it,” said Archbishop Drexel Gomez, the primate of the West Indies, because “it introduces more fragmentation.”

Other conservative American churches that have split from the Episcopal Church, the

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American branch of the Anglican Communion, have aligned themselves with other archbishops, in Rwanda, Uganda and several provinces in Latin America — often because they already had ties to these provinces through mission work.

Archbishop Gomez said he understood Archbishop Akinola's actions because the American conservatives felt an urgent need to leave the Episcopal Church and were unwilling to wait for a new covenant being written for the Anglican Communion. The new covenant is a lengthy and uncertain process led by Archbishop Gomez that some conservatives hope will eventually end the impasse over homosexuality.

One of Archbishop Akinola's principal arguments, often heard from other conservatives as well, is that Christianity in Nigeria, a country where religious violence has killed tens of thousands in the past decade, must guard its flank lest Islam overtake it. "The church is in the midst of Islam," he said. "Should the church in this country begin to teach that it is appropriate, that it is right to have same sex unions and all that, the church will simply die."

He supports a bill in Nigeria's legislature that would make homosexual sex and any public expression of homosexual identity a crime punishable by five years in prison.

The bill ostensibly aims to ban gay marriage, but it includes measures so extreme that the State Department warned that they would violate basic human rights. Strictly interpreted, the bill would ban two gay people from going out to dinner or seeing a movie together.

It could also lead to the arrest and imprisonment of members of organizations providing all manner of services, particularly those helping people with AIDS.

"They are very loose, those provisions," said Dorothy Aken 'Ova of the International Center for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, a charity that works with rape victims, AIDS patients and gay rights groups. "It could target just about anyone, based on any form of perception from anybody."

Archbishop Akinola said he supported any law that limited marriage to heterosexuals, but declined to say whether he supported the specific provisions criminalizing gay associations. "No bishop in this church will go out and say, 'This man is gay, put him in jail,' " the archbishop said. But, he added, Nigeria has the right to pass such a law if it reflects the country's values.

"Does Nigeria tell America what laws to make?" he said. "Does Nigeria tell England what laws to make? This arrogance, this imperial tendency, should stop for God's sake."

Though he insisted that he was not seeking power or influence, he is clearly relishing the curious role reversal of African archbishops sending missionaries to a Western society he sees as increasingly godless.

Asked whether his installing a bishop in the United States violated the church's longstanding rules, he responded heatedly that he was simply doing what Western churches had done for centuries, sending a bishop to serve Anglicans where there is no church to provide one.

Archbishop Akinola argues that the Convocation, his group in the United States, was established last year to serve Nigerian Anglicans unhappy with the direction of the Episcopal Church, and eventually began to attract non-Nigerians who shared their views. Other church officials and experts say Archbishop Akinola's intention for the Convocation was to attract Americans and become a rival to the Episcopal Church.

"Self-seeking, self-glory, that is not me," he said. "No. Many people say I embarrass them with my humility."

Anyone who criticizes him as power-seeking is simply trying to undermine his message, he said. "The more they demonize, the stronger the works of God," he said.

Lydia Polgreen reported from Abuja, and Laurie Goodstein from New York.

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