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## Raising Issues Of Race in Anglican Rift

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Conservatives' Links to Africans Questioned by Black U.S. Bishops

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CANTERBURY, England -- For five years, conservative Episcopalians eager to escape their liberal U.S. church have been building ties with African Anglicans half a world away.

But they have few connections with black Americans in their own back yard, said black Episcopal bishops who gathered here for a once-a-decade meeting of Anglican prelates.

"It's something that I like to point out," said Bishop Eugene T. Sutton, the first black Episcopal bishop in Maryland, "the historical anomaly of dioceses that have nothing to do with the black community going all the way to Africa to make these relationships."

Moreover, Sutton and other black bishops at the meeting said the use of Scripture to reject homosexuality in the [Anglican Communion](#) evokes previous eras' biblically based arguments in support of slavery and racism.

African prelates, however, reject that argument, and U.S. conservatives said it is shared theology that motivates their alliances.

"This is just another revisionist attempt to use anything to undermine the orthodox position of the church and spread the agenda of inclusiveness," said the Right Rev. Peter Beckwith, the conservative bishop of Springfield, Ill.

Although the eight black Episcopal bishops at the meeting favor gay rights in their church, most Africans from the Anglican Communion disagree. That conflict forms part of the larger split running through the Lambeth Conference, a gathering of 650 bishops from around the world that ended Sunday. The meeting came as the Anglican Communion, and its U.S. branch, the Episcopal Church, are bitterly divided over whether to allow gay clergy and bless same-sex relationships.

In the small discussion groups that formed the backbone of the conference, some black Episcopal bishops said they have framed their support for gay rights within the context of a long struggle to include blacks and women in the church and in society at large.

"As a person who knows what it means to be oppressed, I refuse to allow my brothers and sisters in the faith to be discriminated against," said Suffragan Bishop Gayle E. Harris of Massachusetts.

But Bishop Sitembela Mzamane of South Africa, who says he is also "the victim of oppression," said it's "very inappropriate to equate the struggle of blacks in Africa or in the diaspora" with those of gays.

"They are not victims of human rights at all," Mzamane said.

Bishop Bernard Ntahoturi of Burundi also disavowed comparisons between abolition and gay rights. "You cannot compare slavery with homosexuality. Slavery is a sin. Homosexuality is not about rights, it's about how God created you," he said.

More than 200 bishops, mainly from Africa, boycotted the Lambeth Conference, saying they wouldn't meet with North American bishops who preach a "false gospel" that condones homosexuality.

The boycotting bishops, who say homosexual acts violate biblical morality, are incensed that the Episcopal Church allows same-sex blessings and elected an openly gay priest, V. [Gene Robinson](#), as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003.

U.S. conservatives, who are mainly white, have reached out to African archbishops from Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Nigeria, urging them to cross traditional church borders by adopting parishes and appointing bishops in the United States.

"They're looking for black faces to give them legitimacy," Sutton said of U.S. conservatives, "because they can't find them at home."

Harris said that the bonds between Africans and U.S. conservatives are a "political expediency" and that "connections made for the time being will not last across the huge gulf of understanding" between the groups.

But Beckwith, who is white and a member of the Global Anglican Future Conference, a conservative movement led by African prelates, said conservatives have the most important thing in common. "We are united and ground in the same faith," he said.

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