

South African church torn on gay issues: Ndungane and Akinola compete to be dominant voice

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Life is often violent at the intersection of white and black in the scrappy Cape Town suburb of Mowbray. Wedged between the exclusive neighborhoods near the mountain and the vast squalor of the townships, Mowbray sits at the front lines of South African integration.

Anglican bishop David Russell, who lives here with his wife behind a large security fence, fought the apartheid regime that exploited and fanned these racial tensions. Now the retired bishop sees the nation dividing along new lines—this time over sexuality.

Some, Russell included, claim that the battle over gay marriage that has shaken the political and religious foundations of South African society is an extension of the freedom struggle. Conservatives call that notion a sin; some also say it is “un-African.”

“When social pressures begin to push the traditional position, you’ll have that backlash,” Russell said in an interview. “It’s come up now drastically, as a last ditch to stop this ‘wicked way’ from changing things.”

As the Anglican Communion watches the U.S. Episcopal Church tear apart over the same issue, there is nervousness that the Province of Southern Africa may reach the same fate.

The archbishop of Cape Town, Njongonkulu Ndungane, is an outspoken supporter of openly gay bishop V. Gene Robinson in New Hampshire. The South African government’s recent approval of gay marriage—with little or no opposition from the Anglican Church—has fueled the speculation.

But Russell warns that comparisons may be too hasty. The South African church has had an openly gay—although celibate—bishop for nearly 20 years, and has survived intact. Like the neighborhood of Mowbray, the Anglican Church here sits between two distinct camps but is not necessarily leaning toward either one.

South Africa is a society striving to be liberal on paper, but it is still deeply conservative at the core.

“In comparison with [the rest of] Africa, it’s a huge difference, but in comparison with the Episcopal Church, there’s also a huge difference,” Russell said. “It seems to me that in the Episcopal Church, a slight majority is in favor of these kinds of changes. The Christian culture, the mind-set, the cultural convictions coming together—at least the dominant ones—say this is OK. Whereas here, they have not.”

At least not yet. In a continent where homosexuality is a criminal offense in 29 countries, South Africa sticks out as an anomaly. Now that South Africa is the fifth country in the world to allow gay marriage, Russell predicts a parallel—if slow—shift in attitude within the church.

“Despite the fact that the vast majority are clearly holding on to the traditional position, once your law changes it has an effect on attitudes,” Russell said. “It provides a kind of space for a different way of thinking, even though in the gut, people down in the congregations say, ‘That’s shocking, it’s against what God wants. It’s not right.’”

But while those in the pews may balk at the change, their leader is famous for accepting it.

Ndungane, who followed apartheid warrior Desmond Tutu as archbishop of Cape Town, sparked a bitter outcry within his own domain—stretching from the tip of South Africa to the northern limits of Angola and Mozambique—and throughout the continent when he congratulated Robinson on his 2003 election.

Ndungane’s support for the American church has remained solid. He has called the gay-marriage issue a “pastoral, secondary problem,” and, like Tutu, has warned Anglicans to focus on more “fundamental” matters such as poverty, HIV/AIDS and access to education.

He said the damage done by apartheid should have taught Africans to treat others with more respect. "I think that one of the key things that we have learned, both as a country and as a church, is the principle of nondiscrimination because the people were discriminated against on grounds of things they couldn't alter," said Ndungane, who is scheduled to retire in 2008, in an interview at his residence.

Peter Akinola, the ultraconservative Anglican archbishop of Nigeria, has accused Ndungane of "failing to grasp the nature of the issues at stake" and supporting the "Satanic attack on God's church."

As the two archbishops compete to be the church's dominant voice from Africa, Russell has watched popular opinion in the southern province split along similar lines. But no one wishes to see the division that's rattling Americans cross the Atlantic, Russell said.

"I think there is a worry and they're watching," Russell added. "They're monitoring."

In the coastal community of Kalk Bay, about an hour's train ride from Cape Town, Bishop Geoff Davies said that most Anglicans still fall firmly within the Akinola camp, even within South Africa.

Ndungane resists comparisons between his province and other branches of the Anglican Communion—particularly the divided Episcopal Church. "We don't compare ourselves with anybody," Ndungane said flatly. "And I thank God for being a member of the Anglican Church in southern Africa. We are a church which has lived with diversity . . . from our inception." *-Jason Kane, Religion News Service*