

Episcopal Church refuses to resettle White Afrikaners, ends partnership with US government

by [Jack Jenkins](#)

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White South Africans celebrate in support of US President Donald Trump in front of the US embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, February 15. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay, File)

In a striking move that ends a nearly four-decades-old relationship between the federal government and the Episcopal Church, the denomination announced on Monday that it is terminating its partnership with the government to resettle refugees, citing moral opposition to resettling White Afrikaners from South Africa who have been classified as refugees by President Donald Trump's administration.

[In a letter](#) sent to members of the church, Sean W. Rowe—the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church—said that two weeks ago the government “informed Episcopal Migration Ministries that under the terms of our federal grant, we are expected to resettle white Afrikaners from South Africa whom the U.S. government has classified as refugees.”

The request, Rowe said, crossed a moral line for the Episcopal Church, which is part of the global Anglican Communion that includes among its leaders [the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu](#), a celebrated and vocal opponent of apartheid in South Africa.

“In light of our church’s steadfast commitment to racial justice and reconciliation and our historic ties with the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, we are not able to take this step,” Rowe wrote. “Accordingly, we have determined that, by the end of the federal fiscal year, we will conclude our refugee resettlement grant agreements with the U.S. federal government.”

Rowe stressed that while Episcopal Migration Ministries will seek to “wind down all federally funded services by the end of the federal fiscal year in September,” the denomination will continue to support immigrants and refugees in other ways, such as offering aid to refugees who have already been resettled.

The announcement came just as flights with Afrikaners were scheduled to arrive at Dulles International Airport outside of Washington, DC, the first batch of entries after Trump [declared via a February executive order](#) that the US would take in “Afrikaners in South Africa who are victims of unjust racial discrimination.” The South African government has stridently [denied allegations](#) of systemic racial animus, as has a coalition of [White religious leaders in the region](#) that [includes many Anglicans](#).

“The stated reasons for (Trump’s actions) are claims of victimisation, violence and hateful rhetoric against white people in South Africa along with legislation providing for the expropriation of land without compensation,” read the letter from white South African religious leaders, which included among its four authors an Anglican priest. “As white South Africans in active leadership within the Christian community, representing diverse political and theological perspectives, we unanimously reject these claims.”

In addition to ties with Tutu, the Episcopal Church has a long history of advocating against apartheid in South Africa. It first began altering its [financial holdings in the](#)

[region in 1966](#), and by the [mid-1980s](#), the church voted to [divest](#) from companies doing business in South Africa.

Rowe noted his announcement comes as the Trump administration has otherwise all but frozen the refugee program, with Afrikaners among the few—and possibly only—people granted entry as refugees since January. Shortly after he was sworn in, Trump [signed an executive order](#) that essentially halted the refugee program and stopped payments to organizations that assist with refugee resettlement—including, according to one group, [payments for work already performed](#).

That change has left refugees without a clear path forward and forced the 10 refugee resettlement groups, seven of which are faith-based, to lay off scores of workers while still trying to support refugees who had recently arrived. Four of the faith groups have since filed [two separate lawsuits](#), one of which recently resulted in a ruling that should have restarted the program. However, refugee groups have accused the government of “delaying compliance” with the court order.

A representative for Church World Service, which is among the groups currently suing the administration, said the organization “has agreed to support one family through remote services,” but pointed to an additional statement from last week that voiced ongoing frustration with the government’s actions.

“We are concerned that the US Government has chosen to fast-track the admission of Afrikaners, while actively fighting court orders to provide life-saving resettlement to other refugee populations who are in desperate need of resettlement,” Rick Santos, head of Church World Service, one of the resettlement groups suing the government, said in a statement last week.

“By resettling this population, the Government is demonstrating that it still has the capacity to quickly screen, process, and depart refugees to the United States. It’s time for the administration to honor our nation’s commitment to the thousands of refugee families it abandoned with its cruel and illegal executive order.”

Matthew Soerens, vice president of advocacy and policy at World Relief, an evangelical Christian group that helps resettle refugees, said in an email that his group anticipates “serving a small number” of the arrivals who qualify for Office of Refugee Resettlement-funded services. But he said the situation is “complicated by the reality that the government is not bringing them to the US through the traditional State Department initial resettlement process, where World Relief has

historically been one of the ten private agencies that implement this public-private partnership, because that process remains suspended.”

He added: “Our primary response to this situation is to continue to urge the administration to resume that initial resettlement process for a broad range of individuals who have fled persecution on account of their faith, political opinion, race, or other reasons outlined under US law—and to highlight the support for doing so from the evangelical Christians who are World Relief’s core base of support, including some very conservative evangelicals who see refugee resettlement as a vital tool to protect those denied religious freedom abroad.” —Religion News Service