

Elusive communion: The Anglican conversation on sexuality

by [Michael Battle](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

The conflict in the Anglican Communion over homosexuality is usually represented as a split between the U.S., British and Canadian churches on the one hand and the rest of the Anglican world on the other. Often cited is the 2004 statement issued at a meeting in Nigeria by the Anglican Primates of the Global South, representing 18 Anglican provinces. The primates declared their “unequivocal opposition to the unilateral decision” by the Episcopal Church in the U.S. to consecrate as a bishop a man living in a same-sex partnership. “This deliberate disobedience of the revealed will of God in the Holy Scriptures is a flagrant departure from the consensual and clearly communicated mind and will of the Anglican Communion,” declared the primates.

Given that more than half of all Anglicans live in the global South (there are more Anglicans in Kenya—3 million—than there are Episcopalians in the United States—2.2 million), the rift in the Anglican world seems clear.

But it is a mistake to treat Africans as unanimous on this issue. There is considerable difference between Anglicans in central Africa and those in southern Africa, a difference that can be traced in part to the traits of the original Anglican evangelizers. Countries like Nigeria and Uganda were evangelized by the theologically conservative Church Missionary Society, while southern Africa was evangelized by the high-church, theologically liberal United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

That helps explain why Desmond Tutu, for example, is an outspoken advocate of including gays and lesbians fully in the church. Tutu is also shaped by his response to apartheid in his country, which made him vow never to make moral scapegoats or single out any human identity as inferior.

Taking a similar position is Barney Pitso, a candidate to be the next archbishop of Cape Town. And Christopher Senyonjo, retired bishop of West Buganda, has

defended the lesbian and gay organization in Uganda called Integrity-Uganda.

In May, 35 lesbian and gay leaders from West African Christian groups met in Lome, Togo. They came from Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Senegal and Togo; they were Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic. For most participants, this meeting was the first time that gays and lesbians were able to share the Eucharist openly with one another. The meeting produced the following statement:

We believe we are created in the image of God,
to love and to express the love we feel.
We are proud of who we are.
We will not live our lives in darkness.
We want to be fully included in the churches to which we
belong.
We want our voices to be heard.
We want our churches to learn about our sexual
identities.
We want our churches to accept and honor our
relationships.

Esther Mombo, former academic dean at the Anglican school St. Paul's College in Limur, Kenya, states, "It is an error to treat Africa as a homogenous cultural set." She goes on to say that "those advocating for the authority of scripture on issues of sexuality seem not to be in dialogue with other dimensions of human knowledge, especially science. . . . We need a dialogue between theology and science, especially physiology and psychology on this subject [of sexuality]."

Mombo urges Anglicans from different parts of the globe to spend time in each other's medical clinics and to help each other read the Bible in different contexts.

The sexuality debate offers the chance for a true discovery of mutuality. Such mutuality means that all voices need to be heard. Communion with God and one another in Christ is a friendship expedition.

In order to move beyond the maintenance of the Anglican Communion we must first recognize that there really was very little communion there in the first place. There was more of a European unilateral way of doing and being. We have an opportunity now to "set the broken bone." Although it is painful, such suffering can be

redeemed, and the body will learn to run again. Our African partners have been particularly outspoken regarding the stances on human sexuality taken in North America. It is wise to listen—to all of their voices.