

Splitting up: Anglican angst

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

Last year the Church of the Resurrection in suburban West Chicago closed its doors and put its building up for sale. The Episcopal congregation had suffered membership losses 14 years earlier when some conservative members left to start their own church, also called the Church of the Resurrection, in nearby Glen Ellyn. The new congregation later aligned itself with the Anglican Mission in the Americas (AMIA), which is connected to the Anglican Church in Rwanda.

The new Church of the Resurrection later experienced its own split, with some members leaving to launch the Church of the Great Shepherd—also affiliated with AMIA—in Wheaton. The Church of the Great Shepherd eventually closed its doors, but not before a 2004 split led to the formation of the Church of the Savior back in West Chicago. During this time the ranks of St. Mark's, an Episcopal congregation in Glen Ellyn, had been swelling—until the Episcopal Church consecrated an openly gay bishop in 2003, whereupon many St. Mark's members left to form All Souls, still another AMIA church, in Wheaton. Meanwhile, another split at the original Church of the Resurrection in West Chicago, which had experienced renewed growth, led to the creation of the Church of the Resurrection Anglican, a church which is overseen by the archbishop of Uganda. So now there are two Resurrection churches in the area, both formed in exodus from the original—now defunct—Church of the Resurrection, and both affiliated with African Anglican bodies, not with the Episcopal Church in the United States, sometimes abbreviated as TEC.

Got all that?

Even for Anglicans in the vicinity it takes a long memory or a flow chart to keep straight all the Episcopal-Anglican divisions and acronyms that have developed in the well-heeled suburbs of DuPage County, just west of Chicago.

Many observers of the Anglican splits assume that the key issue is homosexuality, but a closer look reveals that several other factors are also at work. In fact, the local Anglican story is largely about charismatic leaders coming and going, and congregations growing in their presence or folding in their absence. Among the AMIA

folks, the juiciest disagreements have been over the ordination of women rather than the ordination of gays. And the biggest fight to date has been over the relationship between church and state in Rwanda, not in the U.S.

The energy in all these churches comes to a great extent from the many evangelicals who have converted to Anglicanism, a phenomenon outlined some 20 years ago by Robert Webber in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*. For the most part, evangelicals joined the Episcopal Church out of an appreciation for its liturgy and tradition, not for its generally liberal approach to sexual ethics and scripture. Many of these people have an association with evangelically oriented Wheaton College, where Webber taught for many years.

The various conservative groups that have broken away from the Episcopal Church in the U.S. have conglomerated into Common Cause, a group that has formed an alliance with churches in the global South in an effort to reverse the long liberal trend of the Anglican Communion in the Northern Hemisphere. Its advocates champion a thesis advanced by historian Philip Jenkins and others: Christianity's axis of power is tilting south and east, with church membership growing rapidly in the developing world while it declines in Europe and America. The late Diane Knippers, a leader among conservative Anglicans, summarized the situation this way: "Today's statistically typical Anglican is not drinking tea in an English vicarage. She is a 26-year-old African mother of four."

And, Knippers might have added, the typical Anglican is strongly opposed to homosexuality. One of the leaders of Common Cause is Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria, who readily uses the word *abomination* in reference to homosexuality. He likens homosexuality in the church to a "cancerous lump," compares same-sex coupling to animal behavior, and supports severe prison sentences for homosexual practice.

The alliance that conservative Anglicans in the U.S. have made with African Anglicans presents an unusual challenge to the liberal Episcopalian mainstream. It's hard to accuse AMIA members of being bigoted malcontents when they are, in effect, members of African churches. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference of world Anglican leaders, John Shelby Spong, the now retired über-liberal bishop of Newark, dismissed his African colleagues who were adamantly opposed to liberalizing the church's rules on homosexuality as "superstitious, fundamentalist Christians." In remarks that have been frequently cited by his detractors, Spong complained that

African Anglicans had “moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity” and had yet to face “the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we’ve had to face in the developing world.” For AMIA and its friends, here was evidence that white so-called progressives were the real bigots.

At the local level, the growth of the original Church of the Resurrection in West Chicago was sparked in the early 1990s by its pastor, William Beasley. As a theological and moral conservative, Beasley represented a minority in the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. One element of his congregation’s revitalized ministry was a program called Redeemed Lives, dedicated to helping gays and lesbians reorient their sexuality around “biblical principles” so as to embrace either heterosexuality or celibacy. Meanwhile, the Episcopal bishop of Chicago, Frank Griswold, was ordaining openly gay and lesbian pastors (contrary to canons then in place in TEC).

But when I met with Beasley, who is now a church planter with AMIA’s Midwest Anglican Awakening, I could hardly get him to talk about homosexuality. Almost every question I raised he used as an opportunity to talk about reaching the unchurched: “Our goal is to reach just one-hundredth of the unchurched people in Chicago. Out of 6 million, that’s a lot!” Interestingly, it was the Church of the Resurrection that sought divorce from TEC. The Diocese of Chicago was then willing to tolerate a church that touted gay reparative therapy.

Last fall the Church of the Resurrection in Glen Ellyn hosted a regionwide AMIA event in Wheaton, with Archbishop Akinola as the honored guest. Over 1,000 worshipers from Chicagoland’s two dozen or so Common Cause churches attended. A small batch of protesters mugged for the cameras outside. Akinola’s very presence was a sign of Anglican division, since Anglican bishops do not ordinarily invite themselves into another diocese—and Akinola had not bothered to contact William Persell, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago.

The worship service that day was charismatic in nature—a reflection of Resurrection’s normal liturgical practice (by contrast, Wheaton’s All Souls AMIA church has a formal Anglo-Catholic liturgy). Hundreds of worshipers waved their hands at the high points in the eucharistic liturgy, giving the worship an almost Pentecostal quality. There were other evangelical touches, including a prayer ministry conducted by lay leaders after communion. The gathering was overwhelmingly young, with many hand-waving young mothers holding babies on their hips. Akinola made no explicit reference to homosexuality, but his challenge to

the Episcopal Church was clear: “The gospel is the foundation of unity—there is no other. . . . Until we have obedience and transformation in ourselves, we can’t have unity.”

At a press conference afterward, Stewart Ruch, the pastor of Church of the Resurrection in Glen Ellyn, described the gathering as the fruit of grassroots-level friendships between African and American Anglicans. He would not respond to questions about protesters or about homosexuality. When I told Beasley that I was pleased not to have heard gay-bashing comments from AMIA people, he seemed puzzled: “Well, of course—that would be sinful.” Ruch did say that a “true multiethnic gospel relationship” is like a marriage—each partner has different strengths and points on which correction and forgiveness are needed.

A split occurred at Church of the Resurrection (AMIA) when a group of members started the Church of the Great Shepherd, led by Lyle Dorsett, a professor of evangelism at Wheaton College. (Church of the Resurrection officially recalls this event as a church plant.) By all accounts Dorsett’s charismatic personality and dynamic preaching were largely responsible for the church’s growth. Great Shepherd put aside for missions half of every dollar it collected—an impressive commitment which allowed it to support mission work far beyond the capacity of most churches with 600 members.

But when Dorsett left Wheaton in 2005 to teach at Beeson Divinity School in Alabama, the future of Great Shepherd was put in question. The church closed its doors in 2007, with members scattering back to Resurrection or going elsewhere. Beasley puts a positive spin on the closure. For a church dedicated to mission, “It’s no defeat to spend yourself out of existence.” Resurrection’s Web site blames the turmoil over Great Shepherd on the lack of episcopal oversight—now provided by AMIA and African bishops.

George Koch, pastor of Church of the Resurrection Anglican, views this history more simply: “Divorce breeds divorce.” Bishop Persell, viewing the scene from the perspective of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago, draws an even stronger conclusion: “If you’re formed in opposition and negativity, you’re bound to keep on splitting—there’s always need for more purity, and you don’t live with ambiguity very well, so you end up in a church of one.”

When AMIA leaders talked to me about their departure from the Episcopal Church, they focused more on the doctrinal problems represented by Bishop Spong than on the sexual issues raised by the election of gay bishop V. Gene Robinson. Spong has been an outspoken advocate of gays in ministry, but as bishop he was also the author of several books on Christianity that present a sharp critique of Christian tradition and a decidedly unorthodox view of Jesus and Mary. Elizabeth Sausele, who was an associate pastor at All Souls, said that what prompted her to leave the Episcopal Church was that she didn't believe that "the faith once delivered to the apostles was being guarded by the House of Bishops. For a bishop of the church to say that Jesus didn't bodily rise from the dead and that the atonement is child abuse . . ." For her the lack of theological oversight was obvious.

Bishop Persell, however, downplays Spong's importance in this family feud: "He's one bishop among hundreds in the U.S., retired, with no vote in the House of Bishops or the convention." He added, "And most of what he says makes sense."

AMIA is determined to bring about a return to Anglican tradition. That makes Sausele's position all the more extraordinary: she is AMIA's only woman priest. A task force set up in AMIA's early days considered the issue of women's ordination and ruled against it (though women can be ordained as deacons). Sausele, having been ordained a priest in TEC, traveled to Rwanda and offered to resign her orders. Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini, primate of the Church of Rwanda, declined to accept her offer. Kolini has ordained women priests in Rwanda for years, though AMIA, the North American mission he oversees, does not. Common Cause churches speak of women's ordination as an issue on which they can agree to disagree, but AMIA's stance against ordaining women has, if anything, grown stauncher. Not a few dissident Anglicans joined the group specifically because of its stance on this issue.

"I'm grateful to my core that I left TEC before 2003," Sausele says, referring to the fact that her departure happened before the election of Bishop Robinson and therefore was not about homosexuality. "It's far more grievous that the church hasn't censored people like Spong for their contradiction of foundational Christian teaching," she argues. Her critique of the Episcopal Church extends to its current presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori. "The primates pleaded with the U.S. church not to do anything inflammatory" when it elected its presiding bishop, she recalls. She says her problem isn't that the church chose a woman but that its choice was a slap in the face to the churches of the global South. "She's been ordained only two years longer than I have," she said. It might have been different if

the U.S. church had chosen someone with, say, a quarter of a century of experience and a Ph.D. in theology, not someone “from a tiny diocese, and she’s, what, a biologist?” (Jefferts Schori is actually an oceanographer.)

On homosexuality, Sausele mostly faults the way that sexuality is talked about in TEC. “I’m a 42-year-old single person,” she said. “I understand that I have to be celibate, and that’s not always pleasant.” So she dismisses the argument, which she says she hears advocates of gay ordination making, that people cannot be expected to resist their hard-wired sexual desires. Sausele also disapproves of the way that the denomination handled women’s ordination. It was done, she says, without theological grounding and solely on the basis of “rights” language: “‘I can be a CEO, and you can’t stop me from being a priest,’ they said. The church never did the theological and biblical work that needs doing.”

Nevertheless, one detects a certain loneliness in Sausele. She fled TEC liberals to join AMIA traditionalists who oppose women’s ordination. The recognition of the validity of her ordination by Archbishop Kolini—and some hints of openness toward women’s ordination from Akinola himself—coupled with her being called to All Souls in Wheaton suggests that women’s ministry may be an issue in the future for Common Cause. Will its adherents ordain women—and do it on better grounds than TEC did? Or will it be an issue on which people agree to disagree? (If so, why couldn’t they have remained Episcopalians?) When I asked Alan Jacobs, a lay catechist at All Souls and an English professor at Wheaton, about women in ministry, he defended Sausele’s ordination with another mention of Spong: “I don’t have any problem with ordaining women. I have a problem with ordaining heretics.”

Last fall, All Souls, a parish with some 150 worshipers, pulled off a coup: it announced that it was bringing Paul Rusesabagina, a hero during the Rwandan genocide, to speak. Rusesabagina is the compassionate Hutu hotel manager who rescued hundreds of his compatriots—Hutus and Tutsis—and whose story was the subject of the movie *Hotel Rwanda*. Rusesabagina had heard of All Souls’ work to build a school in a Rwandan village and wanted to thank the congregation personally.

At the last moment, however, All Souls canceled the event, responding to a directive from Archbishop Kolini. The decision was presented to Martin Johnson, pastor of All Souls, in no uncertain terms: “There was no invitation to dialogue,” he said.

The reason for the archbishop's request? Rusesabagina, a critic of Rwanda's president Paul Kagame, has maintained that Kagame's government, which claims to seek ethnic reconciliation, is made up of an elite group of Tutsis. The Anglican Church in Rwanda, which wishes to present itself as a conciliatory force as well—especially since many churches (itself included) failed to protect their people during the genocide—is closely allied to the government. So Rwanda's Anglican Church is not eager to push Rusesabagina's point of view. Rusesabagina has pointed to retaliatory killings engaged in by the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Kagame's government in turn has accused Rusesabagina of extorting money from people who took refuge in his hotel.

Much of this complex history was lost on conservative American Anglicans who had fled TEC for AMIA. Sandra Joireman, a professor of international relations at Wheaton College, says of All Souls: "A little church in Wheaton avoided the Scylla at home but not the Charybdis of African ethnic politics."

The situation is especially ironic because AMIA often uses invocations of the Rwandan genocide to its advantage. Archbishop Kolini even compares TEC with the perpetrators of the genocide, accusing it of engaging in a "spiritual genocide of the truth." He also says, "Ten years ago, when Rwanda cried out to the world for help, no one answered. So when we heard the American church crying out for help, we decided to answer." Western guilt is invoked, African heroism is lauded and AMIA can feel good about itself. But the whole narrative depends on a romanticized vision of church and state in the African country.

I asked Johnson of All Souls if his church can be accused, at best, of being ignorant of church-state relations in Rwanda or, at worst, of having a romanticized view of African Christianity. He said both accusations are fair. "We can only assent to our critics," he said. "But where we are is where we are."

Anglicanism has generally been a faith that is allied with the state. But the obvious ethical messiness of being involved with Rwandan tribal politics brings up again the question of whether AMIA can justify its departure from the Episcopal Church. "We don't exult in all this," Johnson said. "We pray God would forgive us for breaking off again, and we pray that we might reunite." Then, sounding even more like a member of TEC: "I can't stand the loss of diversity. I like a wide tent." But he stands by the decision to ally with the Rwandan church, quoting a story common in AMIA circles about an African bishop who asked his Western colleagues, "You brought us

the gospel 150 years ago—why are you not preaching the same one now?”

Speaking with these former Episcopalians, I was struck that each gave me a slightly different rationale for separating from TEC. Sausele and Jacobs of All Souls focused on doctrinal issues raised by a figure like Spong. For Koch of the Anglican Church of the Resurrection the problem was what he sees as TEC’s relativism in matters of salvation. For Dorsett of the now defunct Great Shepherd, it was what he calls the denomination’s disdain of scripture. For Beasley, who left TEC in the early 1990s, it was liberal views on homosexuality—though he downplays that now and emphasizes issues of scripture and doctrine. Jacobs also points to what he calls TEC’s elevation of tolerance as the *sine qua non* of the church. He told me that if TEC were in the habit of advancing theologically rigorous arguments like those offered by orthodox (and gay) theologian Eugene Rogers in *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, he’d still be in the denomination— “part of the loyal opposition” but still in communion, he said.

Theologians from Augustine onward have insisted that the effort to leave one church to start a better one results not in a better church but a worse one—and it also fosters the bad habit of defection. The history of Western Christendom attests to the wisdom of this view. The question for the Anglican Mission in the Americas is whether antagonism toward the Episcopal Church is enough to shape a coherent Anglican identity in a complex global setting.