

Anglican maneuvers

By [Samuel Wells](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopalian Dissidents and Their African Allies Are Reshaping Anglicanism

Miranda K. Hassett
Princeton University Press

The opening in July 1998 of the 13th Lambeth Conference of 800 bishops of the Anglican Communion was an exuberant celebration of multiculturalism, a Eucharist of rejoicing in the many tongues and the crackling fire of a new Pentecost.

But all was not as it seemed. The conference can now be seen as a momentous changing of the guard, when an unlikely coalition emerged, a coalition whose cocktail of scriptural ingenuousness and political sophistication has since come to dominate global Anglicanism.

The story goes like this: Evangelical Anglicanism virtually died out in the Episcopal Church in the 19th century, but movements emphasizing personal conversion, biblical authority, evangelism, expository preaching and gifts of the Spirit reemerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The people involved in these movements found themselves out of sympathy with the Episcopal Church on a number of issues and viewed what they perceived as its progressive ethos with mounting dismay. It seemed that they had to choose between two unsatisfactory options: they could compromise their convictions and stay within an errant church or split off and become a small, officially unrecognized Anglican body. But in the mid-1990s a new strategy appeared: they could involve other Anglicans, particularly African bishops, in their effort to reform the Episcopal Church—and thus become the true Episcopal Church, recognized as such by the global Anglican Communion if not by most American Episcopalians.

It is the emergence of the third option that Miranda Hassett describes in her evenhanded, informative and wholly admirable book. She plausibly identifies a series of significant moments in an unfolding drama. In 1996 a committee of bishops threw out charges of heresy against Bishop Walter Righter after he was accused of knowingly ordaining a noncelibate gay man. The precedent convinced conservatives that the Episcopal Church could not be reformed from within. Revolution by acronym began, with the American Anglican Council and the Ekklesia Society among the protagonists.

Having lost the battle for orthodoxy within the Episcopal Church, as they saw it, American conservatives changed tactics and looked instead toward the global South. In a series of significant gatherings at Kuala Lumpur, Dallas and Kampala, they developed an ethos, a strategy and momentum for transferring the American conflict onto a world stage.

Homosexuality, already an emblematic issue in the North American culture wars, became a signal issue in many African bishops' effort to redraw the postcolonial map of Anglican power and decision making. While American conservatives rapidly learned the vocabulary of debt relief and other apparently key African issues, African bishops quickly acquired the techniques of conference management—the caucuses, the lobbying, the friendly amendments—and became adept at using the Internet.

Late in the three-week 1998 Lambeth Conference, the sexuality debate finally came, and a remarkably conservative, though subtly moderated, statement was overwhelmingly passed, with the support not only of Southern postcolonial revisionists but also of scores of Northern moderates who feared that otherwise there would be something much less digestible. (The majority was huge: if the African bishops had all voted against the resolution, it would still have passed.)

What Hassett deftly shows is that Northern reaction on both sides of this landmark vote was and remains equally, though differently, colonial in attitude. The Northerners deem Africa either to have earned or to lack moral authority in the sexuality debate on the basis of its youth, zeal, population, suffering and poverty. In every case it is sub-Saharan Africa's difference from, rather than similarity to, the world of its American interlocutors that the Northerners consider relevant. Africa is essentially a place of continuous crisis. It exists in the American consciousness as an angel of innocence or a demon of ignorance. "The argument over orthodoxy and sexual ethics in the Northern church is often now phrased as an argument over the value and character of African Christianity: whether it is pure, traditional, inspired (so we should listen to the Africans) or ignorant, premodern, fundamentalist (so we need not listen to the Africans)."

Each side offered ample evidence of the absurdities its opponents derided. As long as the liberals had Bishop John Shelby Spong on their team, they remained beyond parody. Meanwhile the conservatives exceeded the liberals' dire predictions when in 2000 in Singapore, two Southern primates consecrated two American bishops to establish the Anglican Mission in America. Hassett's compelling narrative convincingly shows that the election and consecration of V. Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire was neither the beginning nor the end of anything, but a gesture that makes sense in the light of the maneuverings of the previous eight years. Hassett skillfully tells the story in such a way that the bewildering centripetalism of contemporary Anglicanism becomes logical and comprehensible (if not thereby justifiable) to conservative, moderate and liberal alike.

Hassett does not dodge the elephant on the African plain: money. With great insight and sensitivity, she challenges the assumption, frequently entertained in the West, that there is such a thing as no-strings financial giving—and points out that such a notion is unknown in Africa. Carefully highlighting the many characters in this story who do not fit the stereotypes—gay Ugandans, for example—she simultaneously dismantles cynicism and deepens the reader's respect for the diverse theological, cultural and personal dynamics at work in each dimension of her story.

Hassett has provided not only a measured, balanced and sober account of a sometimes mystifying sequence of events, but also a brilliant study of the complexities and surprises of globalization. For this reason, it is not Anglicans alone who are in her debt, but anyone eager to challenge facile perceptions of power and conviction in a new global politics.