

Demise of a Denomination?

It would be sad if a once-great denomination jumped off a cliff by pushing the gay agenda.

During the last week in July many of the 80 million members of the Anglican Communion—those Christians whose churches stemmed originally from the Church of England—held their breath. Would the Episcopal Church . (ECUSA), the American “province” of the Anglican Communion, do the unthinkable and confirm the election of V. Gene Robinson—a bishop in New Hampshire who is an open, practicing homosexual?

The question is not for theologians alone because the answer could affect millions of sincere believers worldwide.

ECUSA is small by global Anglican standards, with fewer than 2 million members. If numbers were the whole story, who would care if a small American denomination had an internal tiff and split?

But American Episcopalians have had a distinguished history in the United States. Some 11 of them have been U.S. presidents, and numerous others have been cabinet officials, major politicians and high financiers. More important, the ECUSA is heir to the magnificent heritage of the English Reformation: martyrs such as William Tyndale, who first gave us the English Bible, and Thomas Cranmer, who compiled the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549.

In the past, the Church of England’s most devoted members also have honored the gospel in incalculable ways. It was the earnest missionary work of heroic Anglicans, for example, that

helped turn large chunks of Africa and South America into Anglican provinces—moreover, provinces that were steadfastly orthodox and biblical in their doctrine and practice.

And still are. Ever since the last worldwide gathering of Anglican bishops at Lambeth in 1998, it has been the African, South American and Asian Anglicans who have upheld Christian orthodoxy while ECUSA and Anglican bishops in England, Canada and Australia have seemed hell-bent on undermining it.

Now, leading bishops of these Anglican provinces in the Southern Hemisphere have hinted that they might split altogether from Canterbury (the English home church of Anglicanism) if the Episcopalians either confirm Bishop-Elect Robinson or authorize “rites” for same-sex unions.

In a closed meeting of some 60 Anglican leaders from all over the world held at Truro Episcopal Church in Fairfax, Virginia, in July, Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria—leader of 18 million Anglicans—blasted the New Hampshire gay bishop-elect as “heretical” and said he would lead a new, orthodox segment of Anglicans if ECUSA insisted on going forward in approving the election.

If ECUSA is foolish enough to defy the overwhelming majority of Anglicans in the rest of the world by continuing to promote approval of homosexuality, then large numbers of American Episcopal parishes will withdraw from ECUSA. Most would then rather submit to the leadership of an orthodox Nigerian archbishop than be part of a church that is rewriting Christianity and continuing to decline in membership (a 33 percent decline since 1960).

More strikingly, those dioceses that have been most stridently liberal in their theology have declined even more rapidly. The strongly pro-gay diocese of New York has withered by 57 percent during the same period. Even Episcopalians, sometimes derided as “God’s chosen frozen,” vote with their feet when it comes to orthodox Christian doctrine.

It would be sad if a once-great denomination jumped off a cliff by pushing the gay agenda. But it might not be a tragedy at all for global Christianity. Sheer church-growth records reveal that the center of gravity of world Christianity is already shifting to the Southern Hemisphere, to the fast-growing churches in Africa, South America and Asia.

Episcopalians who long for Christianity to develop as strongly as possible all over the world would rejoice at a vigorous and powerful new leadership for their church bodies, even if such leadership came from nations thousands of miles away.

As a pale-skinned Anglo Anglican, I would far rather be obedient to a Nigerian archbishop, if he were true to the gospel, than to a fellow Anglo unable to distinguish between genuine orthodoxy and blatant heresy.