

Nigeria to the Rescue

Throughout history have come shifts in the type of leaders who are Christians.

With his important book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press), Pennsylvania State University historian of religion Philip Jenkins turned religious sociology on its head by declaring in 2003 that Islam was not the fastest-growing religion in the world, as many journalists and other experts wrongly “knew.” In fact, Christianity was.

Jenkins demolished another cliché beloved by critics of Christianity—that Christianity is a “Western” religion. He showed that by 2025 as much as 67 percent of the world’s Christians would live in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

By 2050, he predicted, the largest proportion of humanity’s 2-plus-billion Christians (who would still easily outnumber Muslims) would not be North American or European at all. The average Christian in the world would, in fact, be an African woman.

What Jenkins could only have guessed at was the significance of the shift in Christianity’s center of gravity to Africa with regard to one significant component of global Protestantism, the Anglican Communion, specifically the American portion of that Communion, the Episcopal Church in the USA (ECUSA).

Continuing its trend since the 1960s away from adherence to the orthodox tradition, ECUSA last August confirmed as Bishop of New Hampshire the Rev. V. Gene Robinson, 57, a man who

admitted he had been living in a homosexual relationship with another man for 13 years. The consecration and its confirmation offended the overwhelming majority of the Anglican Communion's 77 million members, who took it up with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.

The archbishop, himself a liberal on homosexual issues, did what all good church bureaucrats do when confronted with a thorny problem. He appointed a committee to study it.

In the United States, a dismayed minority of dioceses and parishes, guided by a leadership group called the American Anglican Council, formed an alternative association to ECUSA called the Network of Confessing Churches. The leadership bureaucracy of ECUSA huffed and puffed about "schism," with Bishop Peter Lee of Virginia (my diocese) infamously proclaiming that even heresy was always preferable to schism.

It looked as if indecision within the Anglican leadership would drag on forever. But then the Africans took decisive action. Archbishop of Nigeria Peter Akinola, whose 17.5 million Anglicans dwarf in number both the entire ECUSA and churchgoing Anglicans in England, said he would refuse to have communion with ECUSA clerics who supported Robinson's ordination.

He hinted at even more drastic moves. If Lambeth (the Archbishop of Canterbury's headquarters in London) refused to recognize the Network of Confessing Churches as an alternative "province" (the designation of Anglicans living in one nation or group of nations) to ECUSA, Akinola suggested that he just might take Nigeria and other African provinces out of the Anglican Communion altogether. Because the Anglican Communion in Africa has received substantial financial support from the

prosperous ECUSA, it was a courageous move.

Said Akinola: "We will not, on the altar of money, mortgage our conscience, mortgage our faith, mortgage our salvation."

Akinola, for one, is aware of how devastating the consecration of Robinson has been for the reputation of Christianity among Muslims. His initiative will surely speed up the process by which biblically traditionalist Anglicans in America look elsewhere for Episcopal oversight.

The Almighty must surely now be enjoying the humor of it all. Here are the American cousins of the English, whose orthodox missionary ancestors took the gospel to Africa at great personal risk more than a century ago, being rescued from heresy by their African brethren who are at great financial risk for their decision.

Jenkins wrote of the shift in Christianity's center of gravity as being primarily demographic. But as has been the case throughout history, with shifts in the type of people who are Christians come shifts in the type of leaders.

Hooray for the Nigerians.