

Executive Summary

U.S. conservatives have successfully recruited a significant number of prominent African religious leaders to a campaign seeking to restrict the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The flagship issue of this campaign is the ordination of LGBT clergy by mainline Protestant denominations—particularly the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches—in the United States. **Involvement of African clerics in this U.S. “culture war” has had the effect of slowing, if not stopping altogether, the recognition by these churches of the full equality of LGBT people.**

The campaign’s consequences in the home countries of the African clergy—including Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria which are investigated in this report—are even more threatening to the human rights of sexual minorities than the setbacks engineered in the United States. **As a direct result of this campaign, homophobia is on the rise in Africa—from increased incidents of violence to antigay legislation that carries the death penalty.**

In the struggle for full social equality for LGBT people, churches are an especially significant battleground. Arguments against LGBT equality are generally articulated in moral terms, and the prospect that churches—traditional arbiters of social morality—might support LGBT equality and ordain gay clergy and bishops is of particular concern to religious conservatives in the United States.

U.S. conservatives mobilized African clergy in their domestic culture wars at a time when the demographic center of Christianity is shifting from the global North to the global South, increasing Africa’s influence on Christianity worldwide. **American conservatives who are in the minority within mainline churches depend on African religious leaders to legitimize their positions.** The intensity of the resulting debates promotes the very real threat of schism in global church bodies, particularly within the Anglican Communion of which The Episcopal Church, USA, is a part.

U.S. RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES

The conflict over ordination of gay clergy highlights a role reversal of sorts for liberal and conservative U.S. church and related organizations active on the African continent. For decades in Africa, U.S. mainline Protestant churches joined struggles—opposed by the U.S. Right—to topple racist colonial regimes in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa, and to empower oppressed people of all sorts.

But one of the main organizations promoting homophobia in both Africa and the United States over the last decade is the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), a well-funded neoconservative think tank that opposed the African liberation struggles. **In Africa, IRD and other U.S. conservatives present mainline denominations’ commitments to human rights as imperialistic attempts to manipulate Africans into accepting homosexuality—which they characterize as a purely western phenomenon.** For IRD, this campaign is part of a long-term, deliberate, and successful strategy to weaken and split U.S. mainline denominations, block their powerful progressive social witness promoting social and economic justice, and promote political and social conservatism in the United States. Using African leaders as a wedge in U.S. conflicts is only its latest and perhaps most effective tactic.

IRD supports renewal movements, theologically conservative groupings in mainline U.S. Protestant churches that promote antigay and other socially conservative positions. These renewal movements, IRD, and conservative U.S. evangelicals have built relationships with African religious leaders of all denominations to oppose progress on LGBT issues—sometimes through deception but always through substantial financial incentives to African religious leaders. **Through their extensive communications networks in Africa, social welfare projects, Bible schools, and educational materials, U.S. religious conservatives warn of the dangers of homosexuals**

and present themselves as the true representatives of U.S. evangelicalism, so helping to marginalize mainline churches.

Traditionally, evangelical African churches have been biblically and doctrinally orthodox but progressive on such social issues as national liberation and poverty, making them natural partners of the politically liberal western churches. However, their religious orthodoxy provides the U.S. Right with an opportunity. Africans resonate with the denunciation of homosexuality as a postcolonial plot; their homophobia is as much an expression of resistance to the West as a statement about human sexuality.

Conservative U.S. evangelicals play a strong role in promoting homophobia in Africa by spreading their views and underwriting the widespread conservative educational, social service, and financial infrastructure. Right-wing groups have enticed African religious leaders to reject funding from mainline denominations—which require documentation of how the money is spent—and instead to accept funds from conservatives. This money usually goes to individual bishops without accountability or oversight for how it is used.

With this groundwork, U.S. conservatives mobilize African church leaders to exert a conservative influence on policy matters within U.S. mainline denominations. To name a few examples documented in the report:

- As early as 1999, members of The Episcopal Church USA’s renewal movement affiliated with IRD went to Africa to ask African bishops to support suspending the American church from the worldwide Anglican Communion for being too gay friendly and socially liberal.
- IRD and UMC renewal groups organized African delegates to support those seeking to prevent the United Methodist Church from lifting its ban on the ordination of LGBT clergy during its global General Conference in 2008.
- U.S. conservatives rewrote a major statement from a Liberian Methodist cleric to align it with their U.S. goals **in one of many examples of the U.S. Right ghostwriting African religious leaders’ statements about the United States.**

COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN AFRICA

News coverage of the marriage equality and ordination conflicts in the United States not only glosses over U.S. religious conservatives’ cross-continental organizing but also **underreports the growing persecution of LGBT people in African countries whose churches are players in the U.S. church conflicts.**

As they have cultivated African political and religious leaders, conservatives ranging from megachurch minister Rick Warren to Holocaust revisionist Scott Lively have used their broad access to push for antigay politics in Africa. Christian Right activists use rhetoric about “family values” to foment homophobia in Africa with disastrous consequences, such as the currently pending national antigay legislation in Uganda that would persecute and even issue the death penalty to homosexuals. Ironically, “family,” like “evangelical,” means something different in Africa than in the United States. In Africa, “family” expresses the idea that to be human is to be embedded in community—a concept called *ubuntu*. As for “evangelical,” in Africa the word conveys the notion of Protestant Christianity as a whole, which overlooks the substantive distinctions made by U.S. religious groups.

While homophobia in Africa is fomented largely for U.S. domestic purposes, by depicting advances in the United States as evidence of a worldwide neo-colonial homosexual threat, U.S. conservatives have engendered an insidious, inverse relationship between LGBT rights in the United States and in Africa. **Scott Lively and other evangelicals portray victories for equality in the United States as evidence of the encroaching gay conspiracy, exciting bigotry and violence among their African audiences.** In this respect, Africans have become a kind of “collateral damage” of the U.S. culture wars. The globalization of the U.S. culture wars requires that human rights advocates reconsider their responsibility and role in respect to Africa, as well as the actions required to overcome the opponents of LGBT equality at home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are informed by the findings of this report, as well as by our conversations with human rights activists in both Africa and the United States.

1. Confront IRD and U.S. renewal movements.

Progressives should expose these groups' full agenda both in the United States and in Africa, thereby facilitating more effective human rights organizing on both continents. African Christians and political leaders will be able to make better-informed decisions about the alliances they make in the United States. The right-wing ecumenism of IRD-sponsored renewal movements cries out for more robust ecumenical work among U.S. church-based human rights activists and their allies.

2. Expose and confront U.S. religious conservatives who foment homophobia in Africa.

In Africa, U.S. religious conservatives successfully present themselves as representative of their country's evangelicalism. They misrepresent the views of mainline denominations, and they use homophobia to mobilize African Christians for their own ends. Progressives should confront major figures in these campaigns, including Rick Warren and Scott Lively, and call upon them to stop their promotion of homophobia.

3. Support African activists and scholars to lead the struggle for LGBT rights and the study of sexuality in Africa.

Work on LGBT issues in Africa should be led by Africans themselves. Because so many Africans see homosexuality as a western aberration, U.S. activists' organizing work on the ground there only fuels bigotry and attacks on African LGBT people. Similarly, western scholars and journalists should promote research by Africans into sexuality.

4. Build relationships with upcoming African church leadership.

Conservatives have cultivated religious leaders in Africa by funding seminaries and conferences. Progressives should seek out, support, educate, and network young church leaders committed to human rights, rather than focusing on dialogue with entrenched leadership.

5. Work across denominations and around hierarchies. Bishop-to-bishop contact is not sufficient to create authentic African-U.S. connections. Instead, organizing should be more horizontal, so that the true positions of mainline churches are clear to African church leaders and congregants.

6. Expose the covert financing of African conservatives by various American sources.

Additional research is needed to show Africans that what has been marketed to them as an anticolonial struggle is actually something else: a campaign by western conservatives who are providing funding to African churches in order to use them as a proxy force in their U.S. culture war.

7. Disseminate reliable information and continue the research.

The destructive campaigns of IRD and other U.S. conservatives against LGBT people and mainline denominations are not widely known. A robust and sustained research and communications effort is needed. The scope of such research should also be broadened beyond the English-speaking countries of Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda.

About the Publisher

Political Research Associates (PRA) is a progressive think tank devoted to supporting movements that are building a more just and inclusive democratic society. We expose movements, institutions, and ideologies that undermine human rights, with a focus on the U.S. political Right. Political Research Associates seeks to advance progressive thinking and action by providing accurate research-based information, analysis, and referrals.

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