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To: UPCHAT

From: Jim Kelsey

Attached and pasted below is an article written by John Chane (Bishop of Washington, DC) which appeared in today's Washington Post. I think it is an important statement at a critical time in the life of our Church and our country.

A Gospel of Intolerance

By John Bryson Chane

Sunday, February 26, 2006; B07

It's no secret that the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion are engaged in a bitter internal struggle over the role of gay and lesbian people within the church. But despite this struggle, the leaders of our global communion of 77 million members have consistently reiterated their pastoral concern for gays and lesbians. Meeting last February, the primates who lead our 38 member provinces issued a unanimous statement that said in part: "The victimization or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex is anathema to us." We now have reason to doubt those words. Archbishop Peter J. Akinola, primate of the Church of Nigeria and leader of the conservative wing of the communion, recently threw his prestige and resources behind a new law that criminalizes same-sex marriage in his country and denies gay citizens the freedoms to assemble and petition their government. The law also infringes upon press and religious freedom by authorizing Nigeria's government to prosecute newspapers that publicize same-sex associations and religious organizations that permit same-sex unions.

Were Archbishop Akinola a solitary figure and Nigeria an isolated church, his support for institutionalized bigotry would be significant only within his own country. But the archbishop is perhaps the most powerful member of a global alliance of conservative bishops and theologians, generously supported by foundations and individual donors in the United States, who seek to dominate the Anglican Communion and expel those who oppose them, particularly the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. Failing that, the archbishop and his allies have talked of forming their own purified communion --

possibly with Archbishop Akinola at its head.

Because the conflict over homosexuality is not unique to Anglicanism, civil libertarians in this country, and other people as well, should also be aware of the archbishop and his movement. Gifts from such wealthy donors as Howard Ahmanson Jr. and the Bradley, Coors and Scaife families, or their foundations, allow the Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy to sponsor so-called "renewal" movements that fight the inclusion of gays and lesbians within the Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches and in the United Church of Christ. Should the institute succeed in "renewing" these churches, what we see in Nigeria today may well be on the agenda of the Christian right tomorrow.

Many countries have laws restricting marriage on any number of grounds. Some of these, such as age, kinship and marital status, for instance, are prudent, while most of us believe other sorts of restrictions, including race and religion, are oppressive and indefensible. Our global community has certainly achieved no consensus on the issue of same-sex marriage or the related issues of civil unions. But the Nigerian law has crossed the line in several important respects. Its most outrageous provision deals not with marriage but with "same-sex relationships" and prohibits essentially any public or private activity in any way related to homosexuality. It reads in part: "Publicity, procession and public show of same sex amorous relationship through the electronic or print media physically, directly, indirectly or otherwise are prohibited in Nigeria."

Any person involved in the "sustenance, procession or meetings, publicity and public show of same sex amorous relationship directly or indirectly" is subject to five years' imprisonment.

The archbishop's support for this law violates numerous Anglican Communion documents that call for a "listening process" involving gay Christians and their leaders. But his contempt for international agreements also extends to Articles 18-20 of the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which articulates the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, association and assembly.

Surprisingly, few voices -- Anglican or otherwise -- have been raised in opposition to the archbishop. When I compare this silence with the cacophony that followed the Episcopal Church's decision to consecrate the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, a gay man who lives openly with his partner, as the bishop of New Hampshire, I am compelled to ask whether the global Christian community has lost not only its backbone but its moral bearings. Have we become so cowed by the periodic eruptions about the decadent West that Archbishop Akinola and

his allies issue that we are no longer willing to name an injustice when we see one?

I also feel compelled to ask the archbishop's many high-profile supporters in this country why they have not publicly dissociated themselves from his attack on the human rights of a vulnerable population. Is it because they support this sort of legislation, or because the rights of gay men and women are not worth the risk of tangling with an important alliance?

As a matter of logic, it must be one or the other, and it is urgent that members of our church, and citizens of our country, know your mind.

The writer is Episcopal bishop of Washington

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