



Disagreements over Homosexuality Divide African Churches and the ELCA

SARAH K. DREIER

An Ethiopian friend recently expressed to me her grief that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and her home church, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), had allowed their disagreements over homosexuality to divide them:

It is very painful for me to think that this issue has become a hindrance between my church and churches in the west, especially when I think about those missionaries who died in the desert to bring their church to our country.¹

At its 2009 Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, the ELCA voted to allow individual congregations to ordain same-sex partnered clergy and to publicly recognize same-sex partners, if they so choose. This decision punctuated an emerging schism within the seventy-million-member Lutheran World Federation (LWF) between those Lutheran church bodies that reject homosexual behavior (the con-

¹This article draws on interviews that I conducted with US- and Ethiopia-based Mekane Yesus leaders. Given the sensitive and ongoing nature of these dialogues and discourses, I did not reveal the identities of my interviewees. Throughout this article, I directly but anonymously quote these active leaders in order to represent their sentiments but respect their privacy.

The ELCA's 2009 decision to allow congregations to ordain same-sex partnered clergy and to publicly recognize same-sex partners has resulted in severed ties with the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. It remains to be seen what can remain of the path of accompaniment that has characterized the recent history of these churches.

siderable majority of whom hail from the Global South²) and the several Lutheran churches in the Global North that are beginning to adopt more progressive policies that recognize and include gay and lesbian members and leaders in their ranks. Since this 2009 decision, every Lutheran church in Africa has voiced its disagreement with the ELCA's inclusion of sexual minorities. Leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, for example, condemned "sexual perversion in all its manifestations" and proclaimed that homosexual behavior (including same-sex unions) "is not only contrary to God's will as clearly expressed in the Holy Scripture, but also repugnant to the natural created social order."³

Despite this widespread disagreement, the vast majority of LWF member churches in Africa have indicated that these opposing views about homosexuality should not compromise their relationship with the ELCA. But when the issue came before Mekane Yesus's 2013 Church Council meeting, voting members were reportedly appalled, seen spitting out of disgust, and booed at the suggestion that Mekane Yesus even consider remaining in partnership with the ELCA. At that meeting, Mekane Yesus elected to become the first and only member of the LWF to date to register its disagreement with the ELCA by severing all existing ties with its American sister church. Mekane Yesus announced it would deny sharing Holy Communion with ELCA leaders and pastors and called on "all Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus departments and institutions (at every level) to implement this decision." At the same time, Mekane Yesus ended its relationship with the Church of Sweden and any other Lutheran churches "who have openly accepted same-sex marriage."⁴

The present situation has engendered a profound sadness and sense of betrayal in Ethiopian and American Lutherans alike. Ethiopian Lutherans were as disturbed and perplexed by their American counterpart's unilateral embrace of homosexual unions as American Lutherans were by Mekane Yesus's willingness to sacrifice generations of Christian fellowship on the altar of competing cultural norms—which ELCA leadership viewed as only tangentially related, if not irrelevant, to their global partnerships. According to then-Presidenting Bishop of the ELCA, Mark Hanson, "We are not of one mind, but we are one in Christ in faith and in baptism.... The action of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus diminishes our capacity together to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to serve our neighbors and to care for the creation."⁵

The question of whether Christian churches should embrace homosexuality

²"Global South" refers to the nations of Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia, many of which are burdened with extreme poverty and suffer from severely limited resources.

³Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya's Statement on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Resolution on Same Sex Marriage," October 1, 2009, at <http://steadfastlutherans.org/?p=7287> (accessed January 23, 2014).

⁴"Lutheran Church in Ethiopia Severs Relationship with ELCA," *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, February 7, 2013, at <http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7554> (accessed January 23, 2014).

⁵*Ibid.*

is certainly a theological one—one that is not likely to be resolved any time soon. But theology is not the only important dynamic that has shaped the responses to and implications of LWF member churches' disagreements over and decisions related to homosexuality. It is instructive also to examine the historical, cultural, and political contours of this debate. Understanding these social and political realities helps elucidate why a 2009 decision in Minneapolis has caused so much sadness, confusion, and discord in Addis Ababa, and among companion synods that have walked together in the "bonds of fellowship and partnership in the gospel" for more than fifty years.⁶

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Two things are of particular interest. First, we can only begin to understand Mekane Yesus's decision if we examine its domestic context, specifically its relationships with the government of Ethiopia and with other Ethiopian civil society actors. If we look only at bilateral and transnational church dialogues or at the status of relationships among LWF member churches, we run the risk of overlooking the domestic conditions that are likely influencing—and exerting power over—Mekane Yesus. Second, this conversation will force us all, as members of the twenty-first-century global body of Christ, to confront the bitter remnants of the colonial history within which all of our churches are inextricably bound. The discourse and dialogue of our current debate over homosexuality suggests that the colonial legacy of missionary imposition continues to shape the politics of institutions, like the LWF, within which colonizing and colonized entities meet as supposed equals. This article provides important context to this schism over homosexuality and aims to facilitate understanding that will ultimately, I pray, contribute to our two great churches' eventual reconciliation.

HOMOSEXUALITY IN AFRICA

Homosexuality is as much a cultural, political, and social concept as it is an individual expression of private sexual preferences. We who are US Christians have seen this in our own national context. Over the last several years, US churches, state laws, and public spaces have contemporaneously evolved to ordain gay clergy, recognize same-sex marriage, welcome gay military personnel, and even feature beaming lesbian brides in mainstream wedding advertisements.⁷ These

⁶Ibid., quoting Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director for ELCA Global Mission.

⁷See, for example, Nordstrom's "The Ultimate Wedding Party" at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCbFWGPPbwg&feature=youtube_gdata_player (accessed January 23, 2014).

steps toward equality and inclusion were unimaginable even a decade ago. Persisting antihomosexual perspectives in the United States notwithstanding, our society has evolved to a time when US President Barack Obama can declare in his 2013 Inauguration Address that the American journey toward equality and justice “is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law, for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.”⁸ American religion, government, and society are progressing toward embracing LGBT inclusion and equality, and will in all likelihood continue to move in this direction. The ELCA’s 2009 vote to open its doors to LGBT Lutherans and its pulpits to gay and lesbian clergy is part of this progressive trajectory.

The same cannot be said of Lutheran churches and societies in many parts of the world—including much of sub-Saharan Africa—where homosexuality is rejected as a deviant affront to traditional African values and Christian and Muslim principles. According to one Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) announcement, released shortly after the ELCA’s 2009 vote: “We as Tanzanians/Africans have our own values and cultures, built over the years, that have guided our lifestyles and which accept only marriages between man and woman.”⁹

As a general rule, states and societies in sub-Saharan Africa have not accepted homosexuality or opened their institutions to LGBT people. Quite the contrary: in the last several years, Nigeria and Uganda have captured international attention by proposing legislation that would criminalize homosexual behavior with prohibitive punishments, including the death penalty. Even in South Africa, which can claim one of the most progressive constitutions in the world and registers higher levels of public support for homosexuality than most other countries in Africa, tales of “corrective rape” of gay men and lesbians, designed to “cure” them of their homosexuality, emerge with notable frequency.¹⁰

High numbers of people surveyed in sub-Saharan Africa support antigay public policy measures. In a 2007 Pew Research Center poll, 97 percent of surveyed Nigerians and Ethiopians, 96 percent of Ugandans and Kenyans, and 95 percent of Tanzanians believed their respective societies should reject homosexuality.¹¹

⁸Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama,” January 21, 2013, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama> (accessed January 23, 2014).

⁹Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, “The Dodoma Statement 2.6,” April 29, 2010, at <http://www.elct.org/news/2010.04.004.html> (accessed January 23, 2014).

¹⁰Clare Carter, “The Brutality of ‘Corrective Rape,’” *New York Times*, July 27, 2013, at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/26/opinion/26corrective-rape.html?_r=0 (accessed January 23, 2014).

¹¹The Pew Global Attitudes Project, “National Pew Global Attitudes Survey,” 2007, at <http://pewglobal.org/files/pdf/258.pdf> (accessed January 23, 2014). These levels remained largely unchanged in a 2013 survey, which found that 98 percent of Nigerians and 96 percent of Ugandans believe homosexuality should not be accepted. In Kenya, however, those numbers fell slightly from 96 to 90 percent. Ethiopians and Tanzanians were not surveyed in 2013. Pew Research Center, “The Global Divide on Homosexuality: Greater Acceptance in More Secular and Affluent Countries,” 2013, at <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2013/06/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Homosexuality-Report-FINAL-JUNE-4-2013.pdf> (accessed January 23, 2014).

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon recently critiqued African nations' widespread rejection of homosexuality and the high levels of discrimination and violence that gay Africans must endure. Ban demanded a shift in those norms of rejection and violence, calling on African governments to cease treating homosexual minorities as "second class citizens or even criminals" and to confront the sexual orientation-based discrimination that African states are often responsible for perpetuating, sanctioning, or implicitly supporting.¹²

It is difficult, if not futile, to pinpoint the origins of these antihomosexual norms or to explain precisely why some countries and their accompanying national LWF member churches today are committed to LGBT equality while others are not. These trends in Africa have been attributed, at least in part, to the Western colonial missionaries who imposed upon their African subjects their own Christian rejection of homosexuality, which was the prevailing interpretation of the Bible of their time. Once communities in Africa embraced, adapted, and integrated Christianity within their cultural traditions, rejecting homosexuality became an important expression of their Christian faith.

But regardless of their origins, today's cultural crevasses reflect distinct and diverging approaches to theology. Demographics suggest that Christians in what are often referred to as "economically developed" countries are embracing individualized and privatized theologies, especially with regard to gender and sexual politics.¹³ It is becoming increasingly common in these communities to believe that "anyone should be able to see that the idea that God, the creator and lord of the universe, is concerned about human sexuality is on its way out."¹⁴ Meanwhile, Christians in what are known as "developing" or "underdeveloped" countries of the Global South tend to embrace more traditional, literal, supernatural approaches to Scripture and spirituality. They tend to take much more conservative stances on sexuality issues.¹⁵

INTERNAL DISAGREEMENTS WITHIN THE LWF

Correctly anticipating that disagreements over homosexuality would become increasingly pronounced within the global Lutheran community, the LWF began in 1995 to discuss how it would maintain a coherent Lutheran identity—not to mention the rich cross-national relationships between its member churches—amid these growing internal disagreements. That year, then-General Secretary Rev.

¹²"African Union: Ban Ki-moon Urges Respect for Gay Rights," *BBC News*, January 29, 2012, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16780079> (accessed January 23, 2014).

¹³José Casanova, "The Church in the World: The Theological Responsibility of a Lay Sociologist," presented on the occasion of receiving the Theological Prize of the Salzburger Hochschulwochen in Salzburg, August 2013. See also Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁴Phillip Jenkins, "The Next Christianity," *The Atlantic*, October 2002, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/10/the-next-christianity/302591/> (accessed January 23, 2014).

¹⁵See Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Dr. Ishmael Noko identified the “growing concern within the member churches and indeed throughout the ecumenical community [on] the church’s pastoral and social response to the questions relating to homosexuality.” Noko noted that these disagreements are embedded in differences between LWF member churches’ cultural and legal contexts, theological understandings, and even language structures.¹⁶

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Almost a decade later, at the 2003 LWF Assembly in Canada, Noko articulated the LWF’s commitment to maintaining a fruitful and thriving global Lutheran community amid disagreement over the age-old question of homosexuality. He proclaimed, in no uncertain terms, that discerning a position on homosexuality would be an issue of concern for all LWF member churches until it was of concern to none:

This is an issue that has been with humankind since time immemorial, and will continue to be with us in the future. It will not go away. It is a complex matter with ethical dimensions related to culture, anthropology and spirituality.

There are some churches in which this issue has not been raised for discussion, some others in which it has become a discussion of great controversy, and still some others in which it has been addressed with little or no difficulty. Since we are a communion of interdependent churches, no member church can ignore the issue, or consider it closed one way or the other, while sister churches are struggling with it.¹⁷

At that assembly, the LWF committed to a period of dialogue to “clarify our understandings and learn from the Scriptures, contemporary knowledge and our different experiences” while preserving “the human rights and dignity of all people.” This period of dialogue was intended to prevent the existing disagreements from becoming “the basis on which barriers are built that exclude persons and communities from participating fully in the life that God envisions for all.”¹⁸

Some have argued that the ELCA’s 2009 vote toward LGBT inclusion under-

¹⁶Some languages lack the terminology to identify and express the concept of homosexuality. The LWF has identified the barrier that this lack of syntax in some languages and cultures presents to the possibility of productive conversation about homosexuality. In some languages, where the term “sexuality” does not exist, efforts to translate it involves “using phrases with different nuances that may conjure negative associations.” This further undermines attempts toward reconciliation and shared understanding. Lutheran World Federation, “A Chronological Compilation of Key Official LWF Discussions and Decisions on Family, Marriage and Sexuality,” June 2012, at <http://blogs.lutheranworld.org/wordpress/council2012/files/2012/06/EXHIBIT-10.4-LWF-Emmaus-chronological-compilation.pdf> (accessed January 23, 2014).

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Lutheran World Federation, “Message from the Tenth Assembly,” July 2013, at http://www.lwf-assembly2003.org/lwf-assembly/htdocs/PDFs/LWF_Assembly_Message-EN.pdf (accessed January 23, 2014).

mined this period of dialogue. Furthermore, many Lutheran leaders in Africa believe the ELCA's decision is an un-Christian concession to Western secularization and a betrayal of the evangelist theology that Western colonial missionaries brought to Africa. In response to this perceived threat of antireligious secularism, leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) urged "every believer in the ELCT to be very careful, alert and discerning lest they lose their faith in the face of this strange doctrine that could easily seduce people in this age of globalization."¹⁹

UNDERSTANDING MEKANE YESUS'S REJECTION OF THE ELCA

The question remains: What was unique about the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus that inspired Ethiopian Lutherans to reject entirely their American partnerships over this disagreement? I suggest four social/political conditions that likely contributed to Mekane Yesus's decision to distinguish and separate itself from the ELCA.

Ethiopia was never a colonized territory. Ethiopia's national pride as an un-colonized nation manifests a theological and ecclesiological independence within Mekane Yesus.

First, Mekane Yesus has a unique history of social and theological independence. In 1963, Mekane Yesus became one of the first African churches to join the LWF. With as many as six million members today,²⁰ Mekane Yesus is one of the two largest Lutheran churches in Africa and one of the fastest-growing Lutheran church bodies in the world.²¹ Although Western missionaries imported and introduced Lutheranism to its communities, Ethiopia was never a colonized territory. Ethiopia's national pride as an un-colonized nation manifests a theological and ecclesiological independence within Mekane Yesus. In fact, in a 1972 letter to the Lutheran World Federation, Ethiopian Lutheran leaders articulated their unique approach to church-society relations.²² Unlike some Lutheran churches in Africa that maintain a strict, rigid European approach to worship, Mekane Yesus has "made worship our own." It has claimed and reconfigured worship by incorporat-

¹⁹Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, "Church Rejects Homosexuality," May 2010, at http://commonconfession.blogspot.com/2010_05_01_archive.html.

²⁰Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, "When the History of EECMY Inspires Christians in Denmark," September 4, 2013, at <http://www.eecmy.org/?page=1news&article=169> (accessed January 23, 2013).

²¹"LWF Member Churches Continue Steady Growth Globally," *Lutheran World Federation*, February 18, 2011, at <http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/index.php/member-churches-continue-steady-growth.html>.

²²The letter was titled "Interrelation between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development." See, for example: "Interrelation Between Gospel Proclamation and Human Development Discussed at LWF Consultation," *Lutheran World Federation News*, October 19, 2008, at <http://193.73.242.125/News/LWI/EN/2290.EN.html> (accessed January 23, 2014).

ing traditional song and dance, integrating Ethiopian traditional expressions, and weaving a “lively charisma” into their liturgy: “Some parts of worship are very procedural, very formal. But out of that everything becomes charismatic. Everything changes. We are worshiping, shouting, clapping, jumping, speaking in tongues.” It is likely that this deeply rooted independence enabled and inspired Mekane Yesus to assert itself against the ELCA when the issue of homosexuality arose.

Second, Ethiopia joins many of its neighboring countries in widely rejecting homosexuality through its laws, policies, religious institutions, and cultural expectations. Mekane Yesus is clearly aligned with its nation’s antihomosexual norms and policies. Similar to other parts of Africa, introducing the very concept of homosexuality in Ethiopia requires vivid description, because it is not part of common Amharic vernacular. Homosexual activity is an illegal offense,²³ and recently proposed legislation would make it punishable by death.²⁴ LGBT Ethiopians experience severe social stigma, discrimination, and violence.²⁵ Leaders across religious institutions (including Mekane Yesus) share this rejection of homosexuality. The leader of Ethiopia’s prominent Orthodox Church accused homosexuals of being “dumb, stupid like animals.” Ethiopian Christian and Muslim religious leaders have joined together to support a constitutional ban on homosexuality, to adopt a resolution that rejects homosexuality (which they called “the pinnacle of immorality”), and to blame homosexuality for social ills in Ethiopia. One NGO leader said homosexuality is “unacceptable, it is immoral. Every religious leader said in one voice that it is the pinnacle of immorality.”²⁶ In a 2010 statement, Mekane Yesus decried homosexuality and the proposal that some LWF member churches would condone same-sex marriage:

The EECMY affirms that homosexual or same sex marriage...is a disastrous sin that was a cause for the wiping out of the tribe of Benjamin from its land...

The decision of same sex marriage is against God’s order given to man and woman to produce offspring through proper holy marriage, Genesis: 1:28; 9:7. Thus, only a male-female sexual relationship can produce and create the type of family that God envisages with the father, mother and children. All other forms of sexual relationships are abnormal, unnatural and sin...

[W]e are extremely disturbed and deeply regret of the recent development tak-

²³Lucas Paoli Itaborahy and Jingshu Zhu, “State-Sponsored Homophobia: A World Survey of Laws: Criminalisation, Protection and Recognition of Same-sex Love,” International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association, 2013, at http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2013.pdf.

²⁴Sara C. Nelson, “Ethiopian Evangelists ‘Pushing for Death Penalty for Homosexuals,’” *Huffington Post UK*, March 5, 2013, at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/05/03/ethiopian-evangelists-death-penalty-homosexuals_n_3208972.html (accessed January 23, 2014).

²⁵“Secretive Lives for Gays in Conservative Ethiopia,” *Google News*, May 18, 2009, at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hVTzJxtUsXZq47EEy41lgRCFxssa> (accessed January 23, 2014).

²⁶“Ethiopian Clerics Seek Constitutional Ban on Homosexuality,” *Google News*, December 22, 2008, at http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5haCdhSHNJA4ys_hSv4RS-5c3PoOA (accessed January 23, 2014).

ing place in some member churches of the Communion who have taken unilateral decision on same sex marriages, disregarding the strong sentiments expressed by other members of the communion. This unilateral action has negatively impacted our life together as a communion, something which could have been avoided.²⁷

Against the backdrop of such widespread condemnation in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa, many Lutheran churches were concerned that the ELCA's decision would compromise their own security, legitimacy, and constituency. To avoid being implicated by the ELCA decisions, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya announced to Kenyans (and especially other Kenyan churches) its stark rejection of the ELCA position:

We...would like the general public, particularly the Church of Christ here in Kenya and elsewhere in the world, to take note...that we condemn in the strongest terms possible this unfortunate and anti-scriptural development in a church body that bears the name of the great reformer, Dr. Martin Luther.²⁸

Mekane Yesus was no exception. This brings me to my final two suggestions.

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Third, Mekane Yesus's rejection of the ELCA could have been intended to signal its shared values to the government of Ethiopia. This may be particularly important in the case of Mekane Yesus, because many Ethiopian Lutheran leaders with whom I spoke perceive that their government holds their church under particular scrutiny. Mekane Yesus members are predominantly ethnically Oromo, which is the single largest ethnicity in Ethiopia and exists in tension with the oft-ruling Amhara group. One Ethiopian church leader explained to me that "Mekane Yesus has historically been perceived as an institution that supports the Oromo struggle. This did not inspire a warm welcome from the government." Another told me that his government scrutinizes Mekane Yesus "under a microscope, because the majority of Mekane Yesus are Oromos" and discriminates against it, denying the Lutheran church resource privileges that it offers to other religious institutions: "We haven't gotten all of our property that was confiscated from the previous state, whereas other churches are getting free land from the government. But [the government] hasn't given us anything." One Mekane Yesus leader ex-

²⁷Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, "EECMY Reaffirms Rejection to Same Sex Marriage," April 14, 2010, at <http://www.eecmy.org/?page=!news&article=39> (accessed January 23, 2014).

²⁸Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya's Statement on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Resolution on Same Sex Marriage," October 1, 2009, at <http://steadfastlutherans.org/?p=7287> (accessed January 23, 2014).

pressed feeling this ongoing pressure even as private citizens: “Even as a free individual, when I say something to critique the state, the whole church shivers.” It is likely that distinguishing itself from the ELCA allowed Mekane Yesus to clearly signal to the government of Ethiopia its commitment to existing antihomosexual norms and to assuage further isolation and suspicion: “Mekane Yesus wants to prove that it is with the government, just like the Orthodox church is.”

Finally, Mekane Yesus must compete in Ethiopia for moral legitimacy and membership with a powerful Orthodox church, a fast-growing evangelical and Pentecostal movement, and a prominent Muslim population.²⁹ Mekane Yesus leaders feel the pressure to compete with these powerful and captivating alternatives to Lutheranism: “The Pentecostal and evangelical churches are very charismatic. They embrace you, they are very engaging, they talk and sing loudly, and people speak in tongues. You have to be charismatic too, or people will leave your church.” It is likely that continuing its relationship with the ELCA might have branded Mekane Yesus as supportive of homosexuality, and compromised its credibility, legitimacy, and constituency at home. Taking a strong stand against homosexuality, on the other hand, arguably strengthens Mekane Yesus’s position as champions of Ethiopian Christian norms.

CONTINUING OUR MUTUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

I return now to the profound confusion and sadness that the current broken relationship between the ELCA and Mekane Yesus has engendered. Many feel a tragic sense of loss, now that carefully cultivated, longstanding, and loving friendships between Ethiopian and American Lutherans have been forced into exile. Some question whether the two church bodies might have—or even *should* have—remained in partnership, agreeing to disagree but prioritizing their reconciliation in Christ over their discrete differences regarding homosexuality.

Regardless of personal sentiment over the schism between the ELCA and Mekane Yesus, the current situation demonstrates that the ELCA’s actions and decisions are played out on a global stage and potentially have global impact and import, as Mekane Yesus’s response to the ELCA’s 2009 decision vividly demonstrates. In this article, I have suggested several ways in which our ELCA actions have unintentionally compromised the positions of Lutherans in Ethiopia and elsewhere, particularly those who occupy tenuous or insecure positions in their own countries. They have been forced to account domestically for positions that are not their own, and have suffered political and social consequences, even when they have very little political capital to spare.

I further suggest that the current global discord over homosexuality has brought to the surface a much more deeply seeded—yes, colonial—story of power and inequality that still persists today. Here, a woefully truncated history of colo-

²⁹Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*.

nialism will have to suffice. Along with introducing the good news of God's grace, Christian missionaries during the colonial project imposed heterosexual norms upon their African subjects. They defined what it meant to be "modern" and "civilized" around those heterosexual norms that were, at the time, unquestioned in the white world.³⁰

Now, generations later, as churches in the Global North are shifting norms toward more inclusive politics—welcome people of all sexual orientations and identities—we are once again defining what it means to be civilized and, once again (albeit unintentionally, as I believe it to be), exerting Western superiority over the Global South.³¹ The irony of this is not lost on our African partners, who are today far less ignorant of the unequal origins of our global Christian communities than we in the Global North tend to be. Even though the ELCA made clear that it would not impose its decisions upon its global partners,³² Africans have interpreted ELCA moves toward greater LGBT inclusion not only as a betrayal of the Christian norms to which they now subscribe, but also as a new iteration of the "determined imperialism" that undergirded the colonial project that brought our histories together. As we hear from one of the African Anglican churches, who struggle similarly with the inclusive positions taken by the US-based Episcopal Church:³³

Many of us from the two-thirds world feel that the global north still seeks to retain its disproportionate power and influence in our Church just as in the world. It is significant that those dioceses most tempted to indulge themselves with unilateral actions, taken without consulting the wider Communion, seem so often to be among those materially most advantaged and to be in the global north. Should this not occasion reflection? Do we not see here, in the ready assertion of superior wisdom, a new imperialism?³⁴

For many in Africa, this perceived imperialism is all too reminiscent of their painful past as colonized subjects.

My research suggests that in cases such as Mekane Yesus, African churches have prioritized their local contexts over their transnational denominational identities. This appears to have allowed Ethiopian Lutherans to reclaim ownership over their own social norms and to assert their own authenticity, distinct from the churches of the Global North that they believe have "turn[ed] their back on the

³⁰See, for example, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1, *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

³¹See, for example, Sally Engle Merry, "Review Essay: Race, Inequality, and Colonialism in the New World Order," *Law & Society Review* 40 (2006) 1.

³²"Lutheran Church in Ethiopia Severs Relationship."

³³Church of Uganda, "FAQ about Church of Uganda, GAFCON, and the Anglican Communion," at <http://churchofuganda.org/faq/faq-about-church-of-uganda-gafcon-and-the-anglican-communion> (accessed January 23, 2014).

³⁴"Church of Nigeria Cuts Ties with the Diocese of New Westminster," *Anglican Communion News Service*, June 2, 2003, at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2003/6/2/ACNS3455> (accessed January 23, 2014).

faith their grandparents brought to us.”³⁵ Antihomosexual interpretations of Christianity have become the armor that many in Africa now don to fight for their own legitimacy, against what they experience to be new expressions of Western imperialism. These interpretations have allowed African leaders to proclaim: “It’s time Africa preached to the rest of the world, and remind them of God’s word.”³⁶

So where do we go from here? The solution lies no more in rolling back our ELCA vote to welcome LGBT laity and clergy than it does in insisting that our African partners imitate our policies. Instead, we face the important task *and opportunity* of learning and recognizing the story of the stranger, our neighbor. Our friends in the Global South have their own story, and it is an important story for us to hear.

Accompaniment, as a model for global partnerships, is being refined in the deep fires of this controversy, exposing unintended but continually colonial undertones that regrettably persist within our global partnerships. As members of the ELCA, we must listen to the legitimacy of those stories from the Global South, rather than writing off their responses within this homosexuality schism as “misguided” or “reactionary.” We must follow the model set by our ELCA Global Mission leadership, to accompany our Mekane Yesus sisters and brothers and allow them to accompany us. Part of this commitment to accompaniment requires that we work to understand the complex terrains that the Ethiopian Evangelical Lutheran Church Mekane Yesus or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania must themselves navigate within their own communities and nations. This moment challenges us to learn how to reconfigure our walk together, in preparation for the time when “we will again walk together in Christian love...not because of doctrinal agreements or consensus, but because the gospel compels us to do so.”³⁷ We may be separated for a time, as we learn new patterns for our shared sojourn. But our capacity to work together to gradually chip away at our world’s prejudices and injustices—be they homophobia or imperialism—depends upon our ability, now, to listen, accompany, and to do the involved work of learning to understand one another. ⊕

SARAH K. DREIER is a member of the ELCA and a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Washington (Seattle). She previously served as the Director for International Policy for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Washington, D.C. The assertions in this article are exclusively her own and do not purport to reflect the perspectives or sentiments of her colleagues at the ELCA.

³⁵Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 252.

³⁶“Tanzanian Lutheran Leader Backtracks on U.S. Donations,” *Huffington Post*, June 29, 2010, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/29/tanzanian-lutheran-leader_n_628710.html (accessed January 23, 2014).

³⁷“Lutheran Church in Ethiopia Severs Relationship,” quoting Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director for ELCA Global Mission.