

## Dartmouth's Folly and the Struggle for LGBTQ Rights in Africa

Earlier this summer an offer was made to the Rt. Rev. James Tengatenga, Anglican Bishop of Southern Malawi, to become the next Virginia Rice Kelsey '61s Dean of the William Jewett Tucker Foundation at Dartmouth College, an organization charged with educating students and the Dartmouth community into "lives of purpose and ethical leadership, rooted in service, spirituality, and social justice." Tengatenga accepted, announced his resignation as Bishop of Southern Malawi, made plans to come to Dartmouth in early 2014, and news of the appointment was made public on July 16. With a swiftness that hardly seemed possible, even in this age of electronic communication, messages started to circulate on blogs and over email, as were letters of protest sent to the College's top administrators, charging the Bishop with homophobia. On July 22 the Dartmouth College Chapter of the NAACP sent a letter protesting the appointment to the president, provost, and members of the search committee.

Much of this communication was vague. Some of it, however, was quite specific, citing comments made by Tengatenga on matters related to human sexuality within the context of the Anglican Communion. Despite issuing a statement declaring his unequivocal support for marriage equality and the sanctity of human rights for all individuals appearing on the official "Dartmouth Now" site, Tengatenga continued to be criticized. One month after his appointment was announced, the President of the College, Philip J. Hanlon, released a statement saying that the appointment had been rescinded.

The President's decision brought applause from some in the Dartmouth community. Others were appalled, as are we. The action represents a gross injustice to an individual who would have made an ideal person to provide moral and ethical leadership at the College. It casts serious doubts on what is being learned in American universities when members of those communities fail to distinguish between public positions of institutions and the views of individuals who participate in those institutions. It reflects badly on western human rights advocates who consciously or unconsciously engage in forms of cultural imperialism that undermine their own success and credibility by demanding proofs identical to their own kind and, in this instance, by also ignoring the voices of Africans and church leaders who have known and worked with Tengatenga in some cases for decades.

African rights activists have constantly opposed the Western framing of LGBTQ issues because, even if they are well-intentioned, they create problems for local LGBTQ rights defenders. Indeed, ignoring local voices on LGBTQ rights only worsens the situation for sexual minorities. It is one thing to speak about "men who have sex with men" or "women who have sex with women" in America and quite another in Africa, where cultural knowledge would include the realization that sexuality of any kind is rarely discussed openly. To take the most obvious example—and one that was severely misunderstood in the Dartmouth controversy—gay activists in southern Africa have essentially dropped the word "gay." The phrase used on the ground in Malawi is "human rights for all Malawians," because to speak about "LGBTQ rights" as such would be to add fuel to the flames of opponents for whom gay rights are "special

rights,” and therefore indefensible.

The fact that James Tengatenga did not leave behind a record of press releases or public pronouncements—Western forms of activism—does not mean that he was only recently converted to the cause nor that he has not been a loyal and helpful ally to gay activists. Rather, it means that he has been using the methods of the place in which he was trying to make a difference. Unless Africa does not matter to Dartmouth, African human rights defenders should have been recognized as the best judges of Tengatenga’s views, past actions, and likely future contributions. On this score, many—including spokespersons for President Joyce Banda, celebrated as a model leader for LGBTQ rights advancement in Africa--spoke loudly and in large numbers to the Dartmouth President. Why have these assessments been ignored?

The only public statements that did seem to count for individuals at Dartmouth claiming to support gay rights were two issued by James Tengatenga in the complicated institutional and historical contexts of the Anglican Communion’s evolving position on homosexuality (one in response to the elevation of openly gay and partnered V. Gene Robinson to Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 and one on the eve of an official visit to Africa of then Anglican primate, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in 2011). There is little public record, in contrast, of Tengatenga’s 2005 stand against the arch-conservative and intimidatory Bishop Nolbert Kunonga of Harare and in favor of the election as Bishop of Lake Malawi of The Rev. Dr. Nicholas Henderson, General Secretary of “Modern Church,” a theological society which takes an open and sympathetic view towards gay people.

Likewise, there has been little acknowledgment of Tengatenga’s role in holding together the African Anglican Communion at the same time that he and others were trying to create space for civic dialog on the issue of gay rights. When the then Archbishop of the Church of Central Africa, Bernard Malango, the Diocese of Harare, and the Diocese of Manicaland, wanted to pass a motion to cut links with the U.S. Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Church of England because these Churches supported LGBT clergy, Bishop (and Dean) Tengatenga worked tirelessly to block the motion. After the motion failed, the two dioceses broke away from the Church of Central Africa, citing the fact that Tengatenga was soft on gays issues. Nor did we see any interest at Dartmouth in learning about the 2010 All-African Anglican Bishops' Conference in Uganda, when the Churches of Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda drafted an anti-gay communique which they claimed reflected the united and official view of Anglican Churches in Africa, a memo against which Bishop Tengatenga argued, writing too a counter-statement.

As this limited sampling shows, James Tengatenga has long worked behind the scenes to move conservative people and institutions in the direction of LGBTQ rights in civil and church society. This is not even to mention the vitally important work he has done to fight the scourge of HIV-AIDS and to change the patriarchal attitudes and behaviors that led to the epidemic. To say that his explicit statement of support for gay rights issued this summer—where he used Western rights rhetoric--was a newly founded and instrumentalized view is an insult to him and

to us.

Tengatenga has not only lost the opportunity to lead the Tucker Foundation, he now finds himself facing unemployment and has become a convenient political target in a setting where open support for LGBTQ rights—which he has articulated—can be dangerous. Why do Africans continue to need to learn the language of North Americans, but North Americans don't need to make any effort to understand Africans and how rights activists operate there? Some of us signatory to this letter have had our houses set on fire or been forced into exile because of what we believe in and try to fight for. Tengatenga himself received death threats for exposing government corruption. Are these lives that Dartmouth students, LGBTQ or otherwise, need to be protected from? Or are they examples that can indeed inspire individuals to “lives of purpose and ethical leadership, rooted in service, spirituality, and social justice”?

In an era when the dictator Robert Mugabe can be “reelected” again as President of Zimbabwe and with impunity repeat his attacks on LGBTQ persons during his inauguration speech, can anyone who truly cares about LGBTQ rights afford to refuse to learn how to speak the language of rights activism in southern Africa? We think not.

Signed,

Kapya Kaoma  
Visiting Researcher, Boston University  
Senior Researcher, Political Research Associates

The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu  
Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town  
Anglican Church of Southern Africa

The Reverend Canon MacDonald S Sembereka  
Human Rights Activist and Anglican Clergy (Malawi)

Gift Trapence  
Executive Director  
Centre for the Development of People (Malawi)

Timothy Mtambo  
Acting Executive Director  
Center for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (Malawi)

Victor Mukasa  
Human Rights Defender, Independent Consultant, Researcher and Senior International Advisor  
on the Situation of LGBT Human Rights in Africa

Tarso Ramos  
Executive Director  
Political Research Associates

The Rt. Reverend Ian T. Douglas, Ph.D.  
Bishop of Connecticut  
The Episcopal Church

The Very Rev. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale  
President and Dean  
Episcopal Divinity School  
Cambridge, MA

The Reverend Dr. Nicholas Henderson  
Bishop Elect Diocese of Lake Malawi, 2005 – 2009  
Editor: Anglicanism.org

Rev. Canon Albert J. Ogle  
President  
St. Paul's Foundation for International Reconciliation

Irene Kacandes  
The Dartmouth Professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature  
Chair, Search Committee for Dean of the Tucker Foundation (2012-13)

Randall Balmer  
Chair, Department of Religion  
Mandel Family Professor in the Arts & Sciences, Dartmouth College

Peter VonDoepp  
Director, African Studies Program  
University of Vermont