

Tutu's advocacy for LGBTQ rights did not sway most of Africa

By DAVID CRARY December 29, 2021



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FILE - Women in Cape Town, South Africa, protest a sentence given to two men under Malawi's anti-gay legislation on May 20, 2010.

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South African archbishop's campaign against homophobia had limited impact in the rest of Africa. (AP Photo/Schalk van Zuydam, File)

Desmond Tutu is being remembered for his passionate advocacy on behalf of LGBTQ people as well as his fight for racial justice. But the South African archbishop's campaign against homophobia had limited impact in the rest of Africa, where same-sex marriage remains illegal and most countries criminalize gay sex.

Even within his own denomination, the Anglican Communion, there has been no continentwide embrace of LGBTQ rights. Leaders of Ghana's Anglican Church, for example, have joined other religious leaders there in endorsing a bill that would impose prison sentences on people who identify as LGBTQ or support that community.

Before Tutu died Sunday at age 90, most African religious leaders rejected his LGBTQ positions, and those who agreed with him often were cautious, said Kenya-based researcher Yvonne Wamari of Outright Action International, a global LGBTQ-rights organization.

“Most of them are unwilling to offer their contrary views due to fear of reprisal and backlash for not conforming with ‘African values,’” Wamari said via email. “As long as the religious leaders are unwilling to interpret the Bible from the lens of love for all, as Tutu did, homophobia and transphobia will remain a part of our lives.”

Homosexual activity remains outlawed in more than 30 of Africa's 54 countries; in a few, it is punishable by death. Many LGBTQ Africans are subject to stigma and abuse, facing unemployment, homelessness and estrangement from their families.

Stephen Brown, a professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Political Studies, described Tutu as "a moral giant" who held to his convictions — including support for LGBTQ people — no matter how risky or unpopular it could be.

For example, Tutu was mocked in 2013 by Robert Mugabe, then the repressive leader of Zimbabwe.

"Tutu should just step down because he supports gays, something that is evil," Mugabe told a political rally.

That same year, Tutu uttered one of his most memorable comments about LGBTQ inclusion.

"I would not worship a God who is homophobic," he said. "I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I would say, 'Sorry, I would much rather go to the other place.'"

South Africa is the only African country that has legalized same-sex marriage, and its constitution protects against anti-LGBTQ discrimination. Yet even there, violence against LGBTQ people remains common.

In Cape Town, where Tutu was the Anglican archbishop, members of the LGBTQ community reacted to his death with tributes.

Throughout his life, Tutu stuck “to the ideas of promoting absolute love, absolute acceptance and absolute kindness, no matter who you are, no matter your sexuality or race,” activist Saya Pierce-Jones said.

Daniel Jay, who works in the medical industry, said Tutu’s support for LGBTQ people was pivotal in South Africa’s decision to make HIV drugs available at no cost.

“I love him to bits,” Jay said.

Beyond South Africa’s borders, a few recent developments have encouraged LGBTQ-rights supporters.

— In Botswana, the Court of Appeal last month unanimously upheld a 2019 ruling that decriminalized consensual same-sex activities. Previously, gay sex was outlawed and offenders faced up to seven years in prison. A few other African countries also have decriminalized same-sex relationships in recent years, including Angola, Mozambique and the Seychelles.

— In Namibia, the LGBTQ community recently held its biggest Pride event — a weeklong celebration in Windhoek, the capital, that began Nov. 27. During the parade at the end of the week, some marchers urged repeal of a Namibian anti-sodomy law that remains on the books though is not enforced.

The winner of the 2021 Mr. Gay World pageant – Louw Breytenbach of South Africa – was the parade’s grand marshal. He later posted a tribute to Tutu on Facebook: “RIP to one of the most amazing humans to ever walk this earth! A champion for human rights. A warrior for gay rights.”

In many African countries, anti-LGBTQ violence is a persistent threat.

A prominent LGBTQ activist in Tunisia reported that two men, one in a police uniform, beat and kicked him during an assault in October they said was punishment for his attempts to file complaints against officers for previous mistreatment. The attack left Badr Baabou, president of the Tunisian Association for Justice and Equality, with extensive welts and bruises.

Last month, according to Human Rights Watch, a mob in Cameroon beat and sexually assaulted a 27-year-old intersex person. The perpetrators made videos of the prolonged attack that circulated on social media.

At the government level, Senegal and Ghana are under scrutiny from LGBTQ-rights supporters.

In Senegal, 13 opposition legislators recently introduced a bill to toughen penalties against homosexuality, doubling the maximum sentence to 10 years. Parliament members from the governing coalition say such a measure is unnecessary since homosexual acts are already illegal.

In Ghana, parliament members continue to work on a bill that has been condemned by LGBTQ-rights supporters in the West African country and abroad. Among other things, the bill seeks to criminalize the promotion and funding of LGBTQ activities, and disseminating information about LGBTQ people.

Alex Kofi Donkor, director of LGBT+ Rights Ghana, expressed regret that relatively few African faith leaders shared Tutu's outlook.

"A lot of African preachers hold a lot of prejudice, hate and disgust for the LGBTQ community," he said.

Controversy over the Ghana bill has highlighted the challenges facing the global Anglican Communion, which has taken LGBTQ-friendly positions not embraced by many Anglican leaders in Africa.

In October, Justin Welby, the Church of England's archbishop of Canterbury and the symbolic head of Anglicans worldwide, said he was "gravely concerned" about the bill and would discuss the Anglican Church of Ghana's response to the bill with Ghana's archbishop.

He issued a statement reminding Ghana's Anglican leaders that the global body of Anglican leaders had committed itself to opposing anti-LGBTQ discrimination and the criminalization of same-sex activity.

But in mid-November, Welby apologized for failing to speak to the Ghanaian church before issuing his statement of concern.

"I have no authority over the Church of Ghana, nor would I want any," he said.

A few days later, he issued another ambivalent statement, referring to ongoing "private conversations" that would become "useless or harmful" if made public.

The Rev. Susan Russell, who is on the staff of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, recalled a visit by Tutu to the church in 2005, shortly after the Episcopal Church's ordination of its first openly gay bishop, Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, touched off a controversy that still roils the Anglican Communion.

She recalled that Tutu talked about how all people are embraced by God, regardless of gender or race — and when he also included gays and lesbians

in that list, “there really was an audible gasp in the room of amazement and relief and delight.”

“When you’re struggling on the margins, and the powers seem to be galvanizing against you, and you have Desmond Tutu on your side, almost anything seems possible,” she said.

Associated Press writers Sylvia Hui in London; Farai Mutsaka in Harare, Zimbabwe; Wesley Fester in Cape Town, South Africa; Francis Kokutse in Accra, Ghana; Kwasi Asiedu in New York and Peter Smith in Pittsburgh contributed to this report.

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