

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXXII, Number 20, 18 February 2008 — Panel Examines Lives of Gays in Africa
[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Panel Examines Lives of Gays in Africa

BY SCOTT LEVI

Spectator Staff Writer

Emmanuel Kamau of Nairobi, Kenya began receiving death threats after his church expelled him for publicizing his homosexuality.

As part of a panel at Riverside Church on Sunday afternoon, Kamau and others offered American audience members firsthand accounts highlighting the plight of gay and lesbian Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa. While several of the issues discussed resembled those faced by homosexuals in New York, the panelists stressed the problems unique to post-colonial Africa.

"We are part and parcel of the Church," said Davis Mac-Iyalla of Nigeria, director of Changing Attitude Nigeria. As one of the three who spoke about individual experiences as a devout Christian specifically in Kenya and Nigeria, he criticized the Anglican Church for what he saw as exploitation of the pulpit "to attack the gay community."

Mac-Iyalla and Kamau, the co-coordinator for Other Sheep, an organization that reaches out to homosexual Christians and is lead by Bronx resident Jose Ortiz, described the legislation against gays in their respective homelands. Colonial era laws, still influential in many areas in Nigeria, mandate 14 years in prison for those caught in same-sex relations, and five years for those who "associate, by family or other means" with gays. In Kenya, Kamau explained, certain punishments can last 17 years.

Mac-Iyalla described his attempts to refute allegations that "there are no gay members of the church in Africa." He also spoke about his work with religious LGBT youths who

had been shunned by their churches and lacked resources.

A member of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays NYC, an association that aims to combat the growing number of homeless youths "many of whom self-identify as gay," posed a question about the challenge of staying religious while coping with such negative reactions from the church. "The love that I have, I got from the Anglican Church," Mac-Iyalla responded.

The panelists also discussed the problem of AIDS, the allegedly colonial roots of homophobia in Africa, and divergence between attitudes in Anglophone and Francophone nations. "The homophobic attitude comes from the West," Kamau said, citing several words in native African languages that indicate an acknowledgement of homosexuals in pre-colonial communities.

Spearheaded by Maranatha, an LGBT group now in its 30th year at Riverside Church, joined together a diverse audience in the same way that three panelists have gathered hundreds of LGBT Africans at conferences in a number of cities. "My priest once told me, 'coming out is not an African thing,'" Mac-Iyalla said. Yet while spoken by Mac-Iyalla, both expressed the sentiment that "it's time for the church to start addressing these issues. The church has to face them, head-on collision."

scott.levi@columbiaspectator.com



Daniel Yeow / Staff Photographer

FROM NAIROBI TO NEW YORK ■ Locals gathered at Riverside Church on Sunday afternoon for a panel discussion on the lives of religious gays and lesbians in Sub-Saharan Africa.