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Caption: Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON The Most Rev. Emmanuel Mbona Kolini, archbishop of the Province of the Anglican Church of Rwanda, speaks about his faith journey Sunday evening at St. Andrew's Church in Little Rock.

Rwandan archbishop sees crisis of faith, leadership in the West

BY HEATHER HAHN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The Most Rev. Emmanuel Mbona Kolini has ministered under two brutal dictatorships and in the shadow of the Rwandan genocide.

Now, the archbishop of the Province of the Anglican Church of Rwanda is a leader of conservatives who believe many Western Anglican leaders - particularly in the Episcopal Church - are abandoning traditional Christian teachings. In the dispute over the future of the worldwide Anglican Communion, he sees perils as grave as those he faced under totalitarian regimes.

But this time, he said, it's souls, not lives, that are in grave danger.

"Physically, nobody is dying, but how does it affect their relationship [with God]? Faith is about relationship," he said. "There is a crisis of faith and a crisis of leadership. The two need to be addressed."

Kolini, 63, was in Little Rock this past week to work with FamilyLife, a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ that organizes marriage conferences. During his visit, he also shared his story at St. Andrew's Church, which is under Kolini's oversight as part of the Anglican Mission in the Americas.

Launched by the Rwandan church province in 1998, the mission oversees more than 130 congregations in North America. St. Andrew's was its first outpost in the United States.

The archbishop has had a far more dangerous life than most American Christians. Kolini was born a Tutsi in what became the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a largely Christian country then under Belgian rule.

As a youngster he was baptized a Catholic, but he said he really found God among the Baptists. In 1962, Mobutu Sese Seko seized power and began a reign of ethnic strife. At one point, his regime began rounding up Tutsis, and Kolini spent a month in prison before finally escaping into a refugee camp in Uganda.

There, Kolini met Freda, his wife of 40 years, and he discovered the Anglican Church, which operated the only Protestant congregation in the camp.

Kolini decided to become a priest because he wanted to share his faith with others, which he did even after the repressive dictator Idi Amin took power in Uganda. But under the Muslim Amin, Kolini said, the church grew even stronger.

"I think economically it was more difficult than spiritually," he said. "But that is what drew people to church."

Kolini returned, for a time, to the Congo (then known as Zaire) where he served as a bishop.

He said he felt most imperiled when he first became a bishop in Rwanda in 1997, three years after the ruling Hutus massacred more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Now, he said, the country is working toward reconciliation and it is safer to walk in the Rwandan capital of Kigali than other major African cities.

More than 90 percent of Rwandans are Christians, according to the CIA World Factbook. But Kolini said that at the time of the genocide the people suffered from "spiritual emptiness."

He said he is now on a mission to warn of a similar spiritual decline in the West.

The archbishop visited the United States at a time of deepening divisions between conservatives and liberals within the 77 million-member Anglican Communion.

Episcopal bishops about five weeks ago voted to remove Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh from ministry, saying the leading conservative had abandoned the communion of the Episcopal Church. Among those voting to oust Duncan was the Right Rev. Larry Benfield, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas.

Soon after the vote, leaders of the Pittsburgh Diocese voted overwhelmingly to break from the U.S. church. The diocese will align with the Anglican Province of the Southern Cone in South America, which has already admitted California's Diocese of San Joaquin. Meanwhile, lawsuits concerning church property and funds have been filed from California to Virginia.

The Global Anglican Future Conference - a gathering of conservative Anglicans in Jerusalem this summer - called for the formation of a separate North American province to oversee those unhappy with the Episcopal Church.

Benfield of Arkansas said that would go against church tradition as interpreted by the communion, a coalition of regional churches that traces its roots to the Reformation and the Church of England.

While thousands of conservatives have opted to leave the Episcopal Church and join with foreign bishops, the vast majority of U.S. Anglicans remain in the Episcopal Church, which claims 2.1 million members nationwide.

The Rwandan archbishop, who attended the Jerusalem conference, said that a separate province should be formed only as a last resort.

"We are waiting for the Archbishop of Canterbury to use his wisdom to reconcile the two churches," Kolini said. "If he does not, then some people will take that responsibility."

Tensions have long simmered among Anglicans over issues of biblical authority. But the rift deepened in 2003 when the Episcopal Church approved the election of the Right Rev. Gene Robinson - a gay priest - as bishop of

New Hampshire.

Kolini said he believes that many Western Christians are ignoring a "third of Scripture." Specifically, he criticizes Western church leaders for not lifting up Jesus' name as the only way to salvation.

Benfield said that priests in the Episcopal Church still teach that Jesus "is the way, the truth and the life."

"We think people do find the fullness of their salvation and their wholeness in the story of Jesus Christ crucified, dead and resurrected," he said. "What I am not willing to do is to try to get into the mind of God to tell God what God will do with God's creation. All I can do as a Christian and bishop is proclaim God's good news."

Kolini also said that for far too long, Anglicans in the world's poorer southern regions have felt either neglected or condescended to by Anglicans who live in the old colonial superpowers. He said European and U.S. leaders were silent when genocide overtook Rwanda in 1994, and even now, he said, some in the West view the African church as "primitive."

"They forget how North Africa shaped the mind of Europe," he said. "The first monasteries were in North Africa. You can't limit God. God uses people everywhere. To say Africans are primitive in their thinking is to be narrow-minded and arrogant."

Benfield said that greater respect and cooperation are important. While many conservatives opted not to go, Benfield was one of more than 800 Anglican bishops from around the world to attend the communion's once-a-decade Lambeth Conference.

"What we discovered is that we are all dedicated to the Gospel but the way we have to live out the Gospel in everyday life varies tremendously from country to country and continent [to] continent," Benfield said. "I have to realize the situation is very different in Africa and Southeast Asia, and bishops in Africa and Southeast Asia have to realize the context for ministry is very different in the West."

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