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PRESS WATCH - This latest Church of England schism has an unexpected source

The [Church of England](#)'s long schism over homosexuality and the Bible has [finally burst into the open](#) with the sudden and unexpected [consecration in Newcastle of a bishop outside](#) the Anglican hierarchy who was until last week a curate in a prosperous evangelical church. This is an open challenge to the Church of England and to the authority of the archbishops. It is impossible to ignore, but has come in a way no one was expecting, **Andrew Brown writes in The Guardian.**

For the last 20 years or more, the received narrative has been that black African churches would supply the “missionary bishops” who are supposed to call the Church of England back from its tolerance of gay people, yoga classes and other unbiblical abominations. The

Rwandan, Kenyan and Nigerian Anglican churches have all mounted similar raids on the Anglican church in the USA, and last month announced they were preparing to do the same in England.

But the consecration in Jesmond, a prosperous suburb of Newcastle, was carried out by representatives of a white South African splinter church that had [backed the apartheid regime to the last](#). It's difficult to understand why they have done this, except to note that conservative evangelicals are enormously reluctant to place themselves under any authority once they have reached the top of their own churches. It appears that the only way to be absolutely certain your bishop is doing God's work is to be that bishop yourself.

The church in Jesmond has been absolutely central to the schism since the early 1980s, when its vicar, David Holloway, was one of the [earliest and noisiest campaigners](#) against homosexuality in the church. He is intelligent, energetic, legalistic, strategic in his thinking; I have always found him personally repulsive. So that's my bias.

He has built his congregation, which attracts a great many students, to a size that would be

envied by most of the church. They now fill three churches, something he ascribes to God's blessing. Sociologists of religion prefer to observe that university students form the core of large, rich, disciplined evangelical parishes in Oxford, Cambridge, London and Durham as well. Outside this milieu they don't tend to flourish at all. It is a niche, but so is traditional parish [Anglicanism](#), and the evangelical niche has a much more stable demographic. Traditional Anglicans are simply dying without transmitting the faith to their children or grandchildren.

It has to be said that strategically the evangelicals have tended for a very long time to out-think the rest of the church. They have grasped that the traditional parish system no longer works, and have adopted great tactical flexibility. This is only now spreading to the wider church, with the use of such techniques as church planting, where a seed congregation takes over a failing building, and the concentration of priests into teams rather than leaving them alone in the countryside trying to cope with ever greater numbers of churches, each with tiny, ageing congregations.

Holloway was – I believe – the inventor of the tactic subsequently employed by all large

conservative evangelical churches, of withholding money from the diocese; he was a founder of Reform, the pressure group that has been the nucleus of this schism since the early 1990s. Reform successfully held up the recognition of women bishops for about 10 years on the grounds that a woman should not have authority over a man, until one of its leaders, [Rod Thomas](#), was himself made a bishop under Justin Welby. Although that happened after the decisive vote, the deal had clearly been made beforehand.

It is in fact a woman, Christine Hardman, the bishop of Newcastle, who must deal with the [immediate legal and organisational problems](#) raised by the fact that one of her clergy now claims to be a bishop in a foreign church with which the Church of England has no legal ties.

Jesmond parish church has practised a kind of inner schism from the wider Church of England for years. Reform now has its own theological colleges, its own flying bishop and its own funding. Now Jesmond has shown the way, the other Anglican conservative groupings must feel they have to appoint their own bishops in England too. This is, most obviously, a schism within the Church of England, but it also shows

that there's no single organisation to replace,
and there never can be.

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