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Pope Benedict XVI has either unleashed Roman Catholicism's biggest inter-church poaching scheme in centuries or he's taken steps to solve one of the worldwide Anglican Communion's most embarrassing problems.

His plan announced Tuesday to welcome disaffected Anglicans means he will help an estimated half-million members of Christianity's third-largest sect disappear – Anglicans who have stuck to the flanks of their church like the boils of Job, rejecting its stance on issues like ordaining women priests and blessing gay unions but ecclesiastically having nowhere else to call home.

By means of a decree known as an apostolic convention, the Pope has created a new structure allowing Anglicans to join the Catholic Church while maintaining their own liturgy – in particular the historic Book of Common Prayer – and in some cases having their own bishops.

The decree also allows married Anglican clergy to be ordained as Catholic priests – while keeping their wives – in much the same way as Eastern rite Catholic, or Uniate, priests who are in communion with Rome are allowed to be married. Roman Catholic priests are required to be celibate.

However, married Anglican priests could not become Catholic bishops.

The new Catholic structures will be called personal ordinariates. Cardinal William Levada, the Vatican's chief doctrinal official, said they were created in response to requests from many Anglicans for a comfortable path into Roman Catholicism.

Anglicanism's titular head, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, told journalists in London that he did not think the papal action was a “commentary on Anglican problems.” He pointedly spoke at a news conference held jointly with the head of the Catholic Church in Britain, Cardinal Vincent Nichols.

Widespread disaffection began in the 1970s when several national churches of the Anglican Communion started ordaining women.

More recently, the disaffected ranks have been fuelled by liberal branches of the church – in Canada and the United States in particular – moving toward a full acceptance of homosexuals, a trend that has outraged Anglican conservatives in Africa, Asia and South America where the overwhelming majority of the world's estimated 80 million Anglicans live.

Canon Eric Beresford, an Anglican priest and ethics specialist in the church who is president of Halifax's Atlantic School of Theology, said some Anglicans will use the papal decree “aggressively,” but he said he sees no reason to view it negatively.

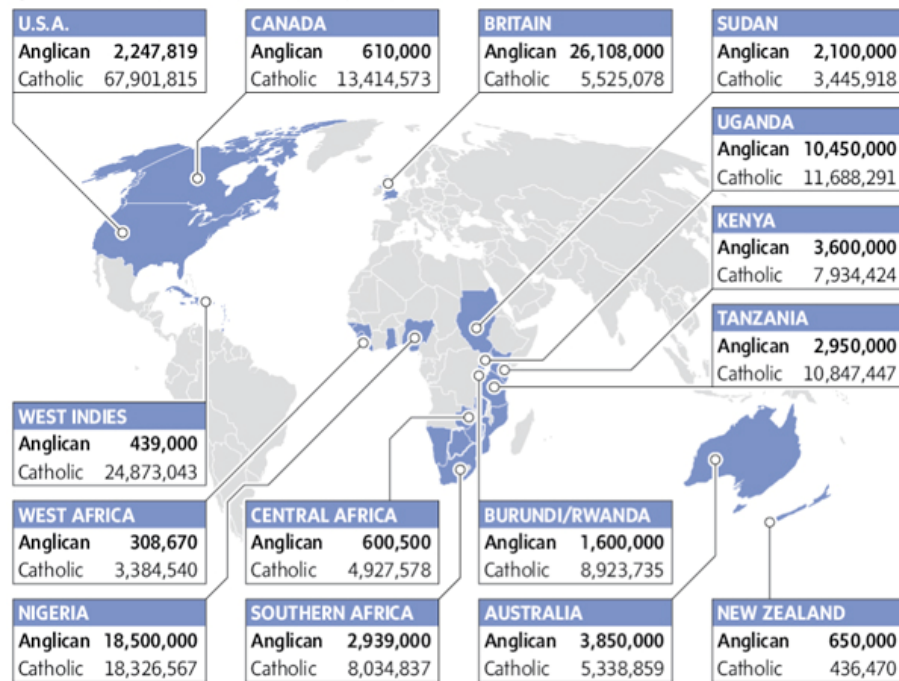
For one thing, he said, “people need to find a home somewhere,” which both the Anglican and Catholic churches are recognizing. For another, he said, the Vatican's unprecedented recognition of Anglican liturgy is a hugely significant step that will impact on continuing talks between the two churches on building closer ties.

Canon Beresford said he thought the appeal of the Pope's action will be limited to disaffected Anglicans in the global North, broadly known as the Continuing Anglican Movement and existing now in de facto schism.

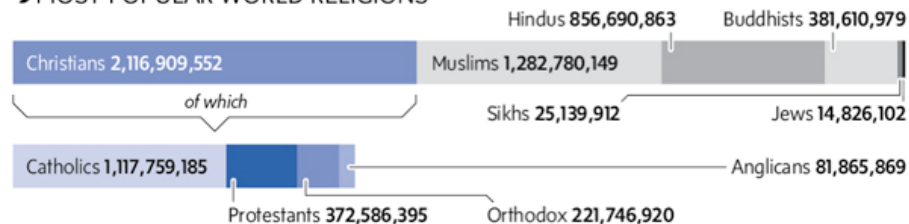
The movement's centre of gravity is in the United States and Britain, but it also has representation in Canada: for example, the Anglican Catholic Church of Canada, with 41 parishes.

Canon Beresford said he would be astonished if disaffected Anglicans in the global South – where the church tends to be evangelical and anti-papist – would have interest.

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ NOTE: 2005 DATA SHOWS ONLY COMMUNITIES WITH AT LEAST 500,000 MEMBERS ■ SOURCES: WORLD CHRISTIAN DATABASE/CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY AT GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY; CIA WORLD FACTBOOK; BBC