

World Council of Churches to seek new chief after Kobia declines second term: Sudden criticism of the general secretary

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The World Council of Churches, suddenly faced with criticisms of its general secretary, Samuel Kobia, who decided not to seek another five-year term, is searching for a new executive to take over the world's largest ecumenical body next year.

Kobia, a Methodist minister from Kenya, announced his decision February 18 after a closed-door meeting lasting nearly nine hours at the WCC central committee meeting in Geneva. The eight-day conference ended February 20.

Kobia did not publicly explain his "personal reasons" for not seeking a second term. The decision, however, followed some strongly critical comments about the direction of the WCC from German Protestant bishop Martin Hein of Kassel in an interview with EPD, the German Protestant news agency.

Hein said that the WCC had been unable to develop "visions and perspectives that are able to be communicated," and that Kobia was traveling too much outside Geneva. The 60-year-old council has 349 member churches, with a constituency of 560 million Christians worldwide. Kobia was the first African elected to the post.

The news agency also had published an article about an invalid doctorate that Kobia had received in 2004 from now-defunct Fairfax University in Louisiana, which lost its accreditation while Kobia was enrolled. WCC spokesperson Mark Beach said that Kobia pursued his doctoral studies through Fairfax from 2000 to 2003 and was awarded the degree in 2004. Sixty percent of the cost of his studies were covered by the WCC, as provided for by WCC policy, Beach said.

Hein rejected the idea that Kobia's decision was linked to criticism from Western churches, and particularly from those in Germany. "Mr. Kobia said expressly that he took this far-reaching step for personal reasons, and we ourselves were surprised by it," said Hein.

Kobia has "our full support to carry on his duties until the end of his term" at the end of December, said the WCC moderator, Walter Altmann. Kobia received a standing ovation after he gave a farewell speech at the close of the central committee meeting, in which he said, "My commitment to the WCC and to the ecumenical movement remains total."

Altmann said an acting general secretary would be named to take over for Kobia at the start of 2009 and serve until a successor is in place. The central committee will elect a new general secretary at its September meeting next year.

Hein dismissed as "pure speculation" media reports describing Mvume Dandala, a South African cleric who is general secretary of the Nairobi-based All Africa Conference of Churches, as a possible successor. But departing delegates said a new general secretary might come from Africa or Asia to reflect Christianity's growth in those continents.

The composition of the 149-member central committee and other governing bodies of the WCC is based on a complex formula to ensure representation of women and men, of young people, and of the council's mainly Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican church traditions.

The WCC, founded in 1948, had five general secretaries before Kobia—W. A. Visser 't Hooft of the Netherlands; Eugene Carson Blake of the United States; Philip Potter of Dominica, West Indies; Emilio Castro of Uruguay; and Konrad Raiser of Germany. – *Ecumenical News International*