

PCUSA's Kirkpatrick will not seek new term: Will continue with World Alliance of Reformed Churches

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Clifton Kirkpatrick, the top official who has led the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) through seemingly interminable social-theological disputes over homosexuality, scripture and church law since 1996, has announced that he will not run for a fourth term as stated clerk in June.

“This has been the best job I ever had” but one that also comes with “stresses and strains,” said Kirkpatrick, 62, who has served three four-year terms in the key post of the 3-million-member denomination based in Louisville, Kentucky.

Long-term membership drops have been accompanied by reduced donations to Louisville from churches unhappy with efforts to permit same-sex blessings and ordination of gay clergy. Some congregations have transferred their affiliation to smaller, conservative Presbyterian bodies in recent years.

Kirkpatrick said in a statement: “It has been a tremendous privilege to give voice to the witness of our church to the gospel and to justice and peace in the world, to be a leader in the ecumenical movement, to guide the church (even in our contentions) toward unity in diversity . . . and to pioneer new ways to express old truth.”

Kirkpatrick said he looks forward to devoting more time to his family and his presidency of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

He was elected president of WARC in 2004. The Geneva-based general secretary of the alliance, Setri Nyomi, praised the American in a September 11 letter for his “vision, courage and leadership skills” that benefit not only the Reformed tradition but “the ecumenical movement as a whole.”

Kirkpatrick’s decision did not come as a surprise to some members of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, a group advocating full acceptance of gay and lesbian church members within denominational leadership.

Deborah Block, pastor of a Milwaukee Presbyterian congregation and a board member of the Covenant Network, said that while Kirkpatrick handled himself “conscientiously and courageously” in PCUSA crises, “his involvement in the larger church now beckons with new urgency.”

Kirkpatrick said he announced his decision in September to give a nominating committee enough time to prepare for the next stated clerk election at the 2008 General Assembly at San Jose, California.

Conservative critics of Kirkpatrick reacted variously.

“This announcement is a kindness,” said James D. Berkley, the Presbyterian action director for the Institute on Religion and Democracy, who commended Kirkpatrick’s “characteristic graciousness” in a statement from Washington.

“By pulling the plug on any potential incumbency now,” Berkley added, “Kirkpatrick is allowing other able leaders to step up to guide this denomination once again into greater biblical fidelity and increased effectiveness as a Christian body.”

Craig M. Kibler, executive editor of The Layman Online, said that Kirkpatrick's tenure "has been marked by controversy," church constitution arguments over gay blessings and ordinations, and "a 13.85 [percent] decline in the denomination's membership," among other issues. —*John Dart*