

Executive perspective: An interview with Clifton Kirkpatrick

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

More than any other mainline Protestant executive in the past dozen years, Clifton Kirkpatrick of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been on the hot seat almost annually over church disputes, usually concerning the ordination of noncelibate gay clergy and the blessing of same-sex unions. In 2004 the PCUSA switched from annual to biennial General Assemblies. Kirkpatrick, 63, announced last fall he would not run for another four-year term as stated clerk, or chief executive, at this month's assembly. He will continue as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches until 2010.

Did you decline to run again as stated clerk because of the toll the job exacts?

That was not really the issue for me. This job is a target when you have a conflicted church, but it's an incredible opportunity to serve. Yet I have now served in leadership levels of the General Assembly for 27 years, and I came to Louisville thinking that I would do two terms directing the world mission. I am deeply committed now to WARC and its union with the Reformed Ecumenical Council. And with the offer from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary to be a half-time visiting professor of ecumenical studies and global ministries, I will have a chance to do some serious reflection and help shape a new generation.

After the 2006 General Assembly approved a task force's proposal to permit ordinations of otherwise qualified gay and lesbian clergy candidates, a new wave of congregations sought to leave the PCUSA. Does this departure of churches and members represent a schism?

In one sense, anytime there is a rupture in an organically connected church it's a schism. It's always been a painful thing, and sometimes it's been personal for me. The church in which I grew up, in Memphis, Tennessee, over the years split up, and part of it went to the Presbyterian Church in America and part of it to the Evangelical

Presbyterian Church.

What is not happening is a split of the church down the middle. There are 25 congregations and 15,000 members that have left, as of this spring, and by the time this is all over, we may lose as many as 50,000 members, but that is all conjecture. That is not an insignificant number, but certainly for the vast majority of Presbyterians this division is not the main factor in their lives.

Are there many people who want a fully inclusive church saying, “Let them go, because now we can finally achieve our goals”?

I’m sure we have some of that. We’ve got so much diversity in this church. In reality it is a tragedy. In times of disagreement we lose people on both sides. Those on the conservative side tend to leave as churches; those on the liberal side tend to leave as individuals. But I think God has called us to be a big tent in the Presbyterian Church. I regret that any of our members feel the need to withdraw.

The U.S. ecumenical scene has a new look this century. Besides the National Council of Churches, a fledgling fellowship, Christian Churches Together, now brings together Catholic and evangelical leaders with those from mainline Protestant and Orthodox church bodies. Can the two organizations coexist?

There is a lot of discussion about that. When we started the work of Christian Churches Together we were at a time of transition and financial crisis at the NCC. There were those who thought that we should look to CCT as a replacement. Now I think there is pretty broad agreement—certainly by the churches in the NCC—that we want to continue a primary commitment to the National Council, but that we also need to be building bridges to Catholics, evangelicals and Pentecostals.

The CCT movement has been pretty clear that it is not going to be setting up a program agency and building a large staff; it will bring us together once a year. It can strengthen the ecumenical movement. One day, if all goes well, that broader fellowship can become a council of churches, but I don’t think we are there yet. It’s very important that both of these movements thrive.

We don’t hear much about the newly launched Global Christian Forum, the international version of the CCT. How is it doing?

It held its first meeting last November near Nairobi, and it continues to plan future forums. Like the CCT, part of its purpose is to build relationships, and I thought it did a marvelous job. There is no sense that the global forum is going away.

Obviously, with the growth of African independent churches, Pentecostal churches, evangelical churches and the Roman Catholic Church—all of which are outside of our usual ecumenical family in the World Council of Churches—we've got to go deeper in the sense of unity in Christ and common witness. If you look at what's happened to the global church since the birth of the modern ecumenical movement, the WCC contains a smaller and smaller proportion of the world's Christians.

After the 2008 presidential election, do you think the moral concerns of mainline and ecumenical leaders will be heard in Washington?

It was an unprecedented situation during the past eight years. There was very little effort by the administration to seek out leaders of mainline churches or be open to invitations for conversation. I hope the next administration, regardless of which party wins, will be more open to dialogue with these church leaders. At a time when faith and politics have become more intertwined in the whole world, it is important that we try to work together for the betterment of society.