

Anglicans, Protestants hail pope's 'courage' in deciding to retire

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue

One week after Justin Welby was confirmed as the next archbishop of Canterbury, a frail Pope Benedict XVI surprised the Christian world February 11 by announcing that he would step down by the end of the month.

Welby praised Benedict, 85, as one who held the papal office since 2005 with insight and courage as “a messenger of hope at a time when Christian faith is being called into question.”

Both Welby, 57, who succeeds Rowan Williams, and David Richardson, Canterbury's representative to the Vatican, pointed to the pope's cordiality and penchant for theological dialogue. Benedict, for instance, in 2010 was the first-ever pontiff to visit Lambeth Palace.

Richardson said that Benedict occasionally hinted that he would retire if his health was not robust enough. Richardson was nonetheless shocked at the news, then reflected that the pope's decision was an act of integrity and courage. “It's a courageous thing because it's so unprecedented,” he said, referring to a 600-year history of popes dying in office.

“Just as archbishops of Canterbury can resign and . . . move back into studious pursuits, why can't popes do it?” he said to Anglican Communion News Service.

Kathryn Lohre, president of the National Council of Churches, commended Benedict for a “wise and graceful exit that shows enormous courage and a deep commitment to the ongoing effectiveness of his ministry” from priest and university professor to pontiff.

Among leaders of worldwide Protestant bodies, Olav Fykse Tviet, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, said he had “deep respect” for how Benedict carried the “burdens of his ministry in his advanced age.” Tviet added that “Pope Benedict knows the WCC well,” referring to the late 1960s and early 1970s when

Ratzinger taught theology at the University of Tübingen and was a member of the WCC Faith and Order Commission.

Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a former president of the Lutheran World Federation, said he was always pleased with the pope's familiarity with Lutherans. Thirty years of theological dialogue continue to bring new understanding of Lutheran-Catholic issues going back to the 16th century, he said.

Setri Nyomi, general secretary of the 80-million-member World Communion of Reformed Churches, sent a message to the Vatican that the WCRC was praying for Benedict's health. "We recognize the concern this unexpected transition will cause Catholics worldwide," said Nyomi, who is a theologian and pastor from Ghana.

Catholics in Africa and others have wondered about the chance of an African being named pope, according to the Associated Press. About 176 million people in Africa are Catholic, according to a 2011 report by the Pew Forum. The growth rate of Christianity in Africa, including Catholics, outstrips that of the Global North—especially compared to lower numbers of Catholics in Europe.

Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, a Nigerian who got a red cap in November from Benedict, is mentioned by many as a papal candidate, as is Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, 64, who was named to head the Vatican's justice and peace office in 2009 and still works in the Holy See.

But an authority on worldwide churches doubts that an African cleric will be elected to the papacy. Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the Reformed Church in America, said the balance of power in the College of Cardinals among the 117 eligible to vote for a new pope remains decisively in the Global North—62 from Europe (about half from Italy) and 14 from North America.

The world's largest number of Catholics is in Latin America, and leaders there think it is time for a Latin American pope.