

# Kirkpatrick to lead Reformed alliance: World Alliance of Reformed Churches

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

Clifton Kirkpatrick, reelected recently as the top executive in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), was also the unanimous choice to be president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches for the next seven years. At last month's alliance meeting in Africa, Kirkpatrick said he first questioned whether he should be nominated as delegates crafted a paper condemning "global neoliberal capitalism" and making barely veiled references to America as a dominant "empire."

The alliance links 75 million Christians in 218 Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed and United church bodies—one-third of them in developing countries. He replaced Taiwanese theologian Choan-Seng Song as president.

The "irony" in his selection was "because the driving sources of the growing economic and political and military [divisions] in the world are from the U.S., though not all of them," said Kirkpatrick, quoted in press releases from WARC's 24th general council meeting that ended August 12 in Accra, Ghana.

Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the PCUSA General Assembly since 1996, said his post with the alliance may signify that the 390 delegates recognized that his church is among those in North America that has spoken against economic injustice and the U.S.-led war on Iraq.

His election was the second sign in two years that worldwide Protestant church alliances see some U.S. mainline leaders as well positioned to voice dissenting views to government powers.

The Lutheran World Federation, at its assembly in 2003, elected Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as its president for six years. The LWF represents the common interests of some 66 million Lutherans.

Hanson admitted last year that he had hesitated, as “a northern male religious figure,” to lead the LWF but was persuaded otherwise by overseas leaders.

To be sure, Hanson and Kirkpatrick do not handle everyday duties for the LWF and WARC, both of which are headquartered in Geneva. The top administrators of both church associations are Africans, as is the new secretary general of the World Council of Churches, also based in the Swiss city. (See box.)

Kirkpatrick, 59, is no stranger to international churchmanship. Before becoming stated clerk, he was a leader for 15 years in Presbyterian global ministries. He is also on the World Council of Churches’ executive committee.

“I look forward over these next seven years not only to give leadership but also to visit member churches and offer encouragement, particularly for those in situations of persecution and difficulties,” said Kirkpatrick. He urged that member churches work with each other to promote “justice in the economy and the earth; to be a community that works in our churches all over the world for gender justice [and] for full participation of youth in all our activities.”

Amid heated debate, WARC delegates adopted a stance declaring that the current world order is rooted in an “immoral economic system defended by empire.” The document defined “empire” as “the coming together of economic, political and military domination led by one powerful nation.”

Profit motivations yield little assistance to the poor, the paper argued. “In biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering.”

“We live in a scandalous world that denies God’s call to life for all,” the delegates said, noting that “the annual income of the richest 1 percent [in the world] is equal to that of the poorest 57 percent, and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition.”

Serge Fernerod of Switzerland cautioned fellow delegates that the organization will have to pay a price for uniting behind the statement. “It is obvious there is a gap between us,” he said, “not only between northern and southern churches but obviously inside of our churches.”