

Methodist leader says firing was over style, differences of vision: Larry D. Pickens dismissed

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The recently dismissed head of the United Methodist Church's main ecumenical and interreligious agency says his forced departure was due to disagreements over the body's future direction.

"They didn't agree with my vision or my ability to bring it forward," Larry D. Pickens said of his December 5 dismissal as chief executive of the denomination's General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, a post he had held since 2004.

Pickens, 49, described the decision as "absolutely disappointing." He said in an interview December 11 that the action stemmed in part from disagreements between him and some commission members over his support for what he called the "social justice dimension" of ecumenical work.

He said the commission often dealt with doctrinal and theological issues. "But in my mind, there has to be a social justice aspect for ecumenism to have a real impact," added Pickens, the first African American to lead the United Methodist commission.

Pickens also said there were disagreements about his style of leadership, a style he described as grounded in the church's prophetic tradition. "It became [in part] a style issue," Pickens said.

He acknowledged that, in retrospect, he should have been more "consultative" in his leadership style. "I don't think I was wrong, but I could have been more attentive," he said.

"I want to be clear: I learned a lesson here," noted Pickens, who said he will continue as a member of the key governing bodies of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, its central and executive committees.

Nonetheless, Pickens said some issues that he raised as head of the UMC agency will not disappear—issues such as how best to be a global church in a changing international environment, the need for further dialogue with other faiths, particularly Islam, and the need to face issues surrounding race and the conservative-liberal split within the United Methodist Church.

“This is not your father’s ecumenical movement any more,” said Pickens.

In announcing Pickens’s dismissal, the United Methodist commission said it “expressed its deep gratitude for the service Dr. Larry Pickens has given to the commission, the United Methodist Church and the ecumenical and interfaith community.”

It added: “The board of directors of the commission spent three and a half hours in intensive conversation regarding the future leadership needs of the commission. . . . Conversation was frank, passionate and included significant differences of viewpoint.”

Bishop Ann Sherer, who serves as the commission’s president, said its directors “finally determined we needed to thank Dr. Pickens and seek new leadership,” the United Methodist News Service reported.

Sherer told ENI that because the commission’s action dealt with a personnel issue in executive session, she could not say anything beyond the agency’s official statement.

(The Methodist news agency also reported that the full commission did not vote on whether to reelect Pickens but were presented with a motion to elect Albert F. Mutti, a retired bishop who was the commission president from 2000-2004, as its interim leader.

(AME bishop E. Earl McCloud Jr., one of three representatives of historic black Methodist denominations on the commission, told the United Methodist News Service that the 21-19 vote to elect Mutti reflected the divisions on the commission. “It did not seem very fair,” McCloud said, adding that he thought Pickens was not given due process.) -Chris Herlinger, *Ecumenical News International*