

Influential Orthodox leader Leonid Kishkovsky dies at 78

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(Photo courtesy of the Orthodox Church in America)

Leonid Kishkovsky, who came to the United States as a childhood refugee from war-torn Poland and later became a leader in cross-church cooperation and the first Eastern Orthodox president of the National Council of Churches, has died. He was 78.

Kishkovsky died of a heart attack on August 3, according to the Orthodox Church in America, where he served as director of external affairs and interchurch relations. He had long been in high-level administration at the OCA's offices while also serving as a parish priest for a nearby church.

Much of Kishkovsky's work involved relations with those outside the denomination, including representatives of other Eastern Orthodox churches, Protestant and Catholic churches, and other religions.

In 1989 he was elected as the first Orthodox president of the NCC after decades of Protestant leadership. The ecumenical body, while comprising both Protestant and Orthodox communions, was often seen as a project of liberal Protestantism, and Kishkovsky sought to bridge divides not only between denominations but between ideologies.

"There are people of deep Christian faith who hold liberal commitments and also those who hold conservative commitments," he told the New York Times at the time. "My dream is that the differing communities of religious discourse could be in fruitful conversation and debate with one another."

He was decorated by the NCC in 2020 with its President's Award for Excellence in Faithful Leadership. The council said in a statement that Kishkovsky "held fast to Orthodoxy, yet he was open to the faiths of others. He was their friend, and with them he enjoyed intense conversation, shared keen observations, and gave in to hearty laughter."

Kishkovsky also served in various roles with other ecumenical and interfaith groups, including the World Council of Churches, Church World Service, and Religions for Peace USA. —Associated Press