

Archbishop Iakovos, pioneer Orthodox ecumenist, dies at 93: Introduced Greek Orthodox church to civil rights landscape

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Archbishop Iakovos, the spiritual leader of Greek Orthodox Christians in the Americas who introduced the immigrant church to the ecumenical, interfaith and civil rights landscape of the late 20th century, died April 10 of a pulmonary ailment in a Stamford, Connecticut, hospital. He was 93.

A native of Turkey, Iakovos earned a degree from Harvard in 1945, became a U.S. citizen in 1950 and was ordained in 1954. After serving four years as the personal representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul to the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, he was named primate of the Greek Orthodox Church for both North and South America.

Iakovos's leadership out of the archdiocese's New York headquarters lasted 37 years—from 1959 to 1996— partly because his requests to retire at a customary age were turned down by the ecumenical patriarch. He was highly valued for his diplomacy in religious and public affairs.

“He was a champion of ecumenism,” said Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold of the Episcopal Church, “as well as standing always for human rights and the dignity of every human being.”

Shortly after his enthronement, Iakovos met Pope John XXIII, marking the first time a Greek Orthodox archbishop had conferred with a Catholic pope in 350 years. He also met with Pope John Paul II more than once. He made the cover of *Life* magazine when he joined Martin Luther King Jr. in a 1965 civil rights march in Selma, Alabama.

The white-bearded archbishop also “carried his witness into the oval offices of nine U.S. presidents,” noted Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches. “All who knew him were gratified when he received the nation’s highest civilian honor in 1980 when President Jimmy Carter bestowed upon him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.”

Iakovos served nine years as president of the World Council of Churches. “A visionary Christian leader, he became known as a prophetic voice on issues of social justice at a time when much of the Orthodox world was silenced,” said Samuel Kobia, the WCC’s top executive, recalling his civil rights witness.

Shortly after Iakovos’s retirement, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America was divided into three archdioceses, which now have a combined total of more than 1 million members.