

PBS won't let stations air new religious programs; current shows stay

WASHINGTON – The board of directors of Public Broadcasting Service voted June 16 to stop its member stations from airing new religious programming, though existing programs on PBS affiliate stations will continue to be broadcast.

“Interpretive” religious programming, such as concerts and journalistic programs, also will be permitted to air.

The decision marks a compromise between PBS and some of its affiliate stations. The board had been considering an outright ban on “straight” religious programming in accordance with a 1985 policy mandating “noncommercial, nonpolitical and nonsectarian” programming on member stations.

PBS conducted the policy review in conjunction with its preparations for the switch from analog to digital television.

Currently, fewer than five of the 356 PBS member stations air sectarian programming. Among those stations, three broadcast a Mass for shut-ins.

While the board’s decision permits the broadcasts of Mass to continue, Washington-area Catholics accustomed to viewing Mass on PBS affiliate WHUT will be forced to look elsewhere. In February, the station told the Archdiocese of Washington that it will stop airing the Mass for shut-ins after July 23.

WHUT attempted to reverse its decision after the announcement of the board’s vote,

but the archdiocese has already agreed to a broadcasting contract with the CW network affiliate.

Susan Gibbs, spokeswoman for the archdiocese, said WHUT made it “very clear” in February that Mass would not be allowed to air on the network.

The Mass for Washington-area shut ins will air on television station WCDW after July 23.

Broadcasts of Mass for shut-ins will continue on WLAE in New Orleans and KBDI in Denver.

Gibbs told Catholic News Service June 17 that while she was happy that the existing religious programs will remain on PBS stations, the board’s decision is ultimately a disappointment. “Going forward,” she said, “religion is being pushed to the side.”