

Russian Orthodox uneasy with Protestant trends: Troubled over women clergy

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

In October, Lutheran Bishop Margot Kässman of Hanover, Germany, was elected as the first woman and, at 51, the youngest cleric to head the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), an umbrella body of Protestant churches with 24 million members. She is known for her frank views and books about faith in daily life, including a book published in September recounting her diagnosis with breast cancer and subsequent divorce. The mother of four daughters was elected to chair the EKD Council for a six-year term.

In November, a cold wind from Moscow blew over the EKD decision.

Russian Orthodox Archbishop Hilarion, who directs external relations for that church, said on November 11 that Kässmann's election as chairperson of EKD could terminate the half-century-old dialogue between the two churches.

The 50th anniversary of ecumenical discussions on November 30 "will be come simultaneously the end of this dialogue because I don't see the possibility of it continuing now in those forms in which it existed," said Hilarion at a media conference reported by Ecumenical News International.

"And one of the reasons for this is that a woman has become the head of this church," said the archbishop. Hilarion said the Russian Orthodox Church does not recognize women's ordination or female bishops, although it continued dialogue "even though this wave of ordination of women existed in the Lutheran Church in recent years."

Hilarion said "there will be a certain reexamination" of inter-Christian relations in light of Kässmann's election and other unnamed "processes that are taking place, in particular in Protestant churches."

Moscow-based Sergei Chapnin, who is in charge of the official newspaper and magazine for the Russian Orthodox Church, told the Century by e-mail: "I can only say that our dialogue with different Protestant denominations is a subject for growing disappointment for . . . thousands of members of the Russian Orthodox Church."

Researcher Alexey D. Krindatch, who analyzes Eastern Orthodox trends, called Hilarion's threat to end relations with the German church "one more indication of the increasing conservative sentiments and forces within the Russian Orthodox Church." The growing conservative camp within the Moscow Patriarchate expresses "its desire to decrease ROC's ecumenical involvement in general," Krindatch said in an interview.

The election of a woman to chair EKD's council, a "rather loose union of 22 independent regional church bodies," he said, "is simply a convenient pretext rather than a substantial reason to break ties with EKD." Krindatch is research director of the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, an affiliate of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

The only specific problems raised by Kässmann's election were matters of protocol, according to Hilarion, who asked: "How will the Patriarch address her and meet with her? Will he congratulate her on holidays? Will he address her as bishop, or how?"

German church officials reacted with "surprise and incomprehension" to the "inappropriate" statements by the Russian archbishop.

Kässmann and another bishop said in a letter to Patriarch Kirill I that they wished to continue theological dialogue on "central Christian issues," noting that women in ministry had not been a barrier in the past. There is also, they said, "a Christian imperative for mutual respect in the way that we deal with each other."

No reports indicated that Kässmann's divorce was an issue. In her book, *In der Mitte des Lebens* (In the Middle of Life), she wrote that after being diagnosed with breast cancer in August 2006 she received wide sympathy and support. When she announced in June 2007 that she did not have the strength "to keep up the façade" of a 26-year marriage, she said her church and synod stood by her but she faced an avalanche of hate letters.

Mixed signals also have appeared on the Russian Orthodox horizon regarding ecumenical priorities. Hilarion's critical remarks occurred at a news conference called to present a new biography he wrote about Patriarch Kirill based on the patriarch's statements, sermons and writings.

In the book, according to ENI, Kirill blames a crisis in ecumenism on the Protestant churches. But Kirill is also highly critical of Orthodox conservatives in Russia who want to stop all ecumenical dialogue and leave the World Council of Churches.

Russian Orthodox leaders often identify more closely with the Roman Catholic hierarchy and its conservative values—despite sporadic accusations by the Moscow Patriarchate that Catholic parishes in Russia engage in sheep-stealing, a charge the Vatican denies.

But Hilarion, according to Russia's Interfax news agency, said at his November 11 news conference that relations with Rome had now improved enough that "we are moving toward the moment where it will be possible to start preparing a meeting between the pope of Rome and the patriarch of Moscow."