

Russian Orthodox: Female head of German church no reason to end talks: Ecumenical dialogue can continue

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Although two celebrations of 50 years of dialogue between Russian Orthodox and German Protestant churches were canceled suddenly in a dispute over the election of a woman as Germany's senior Protestant leader, a Russian church official says that academic conferences may become a way to continue ecumenical relations.

The meetings planned for November 30 in Berlin and for December 8 in Moscow were canceled after remarks by Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairperson of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations.

Hilarion said November 11 that Bishop Margot Kässmann's election as chairperson of the council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) meant that the 50th anniversary event might mark "the end of dialogue" in its current form between the churches. He stated that this response was for reasons ranging from theology to protocol.

Kässmann, in a letter to Moscow Patriarch Kirill I, expressed "surprise and incomprehension" at Hilarion's remarks. The EKD also said that since Hilarion would not be coming to Berlin, the events scheduled for there would not take place.

"It turns out that the German decision [to cancel] the celebration in Germany led to the cancellation of the celebration in Moscow as well," said Igor Vyzhanov, a priest who is secretary for inter-Christian relations at the Russian church's external relations department.

Vyzhanov said that the Russian Orthodox Church does not regard the situation as a suspension in relations – as were actions taken by the patriarchate after the

Episcopal Church consecrated an openly gay bishop in 2003 and after the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden introduced a service of blessing for same-sex civil partnerships in 2007.

Vyzhanov said that the Moscow Patriarchate recognizes that the structure of the church in Germany is not analogous to the Russian Orthodox Church and that the EKD chairperson is not equivalent to an Orthodox primate. Still, the election of a woman to the post creates protocol problems and “official complications” that make it difficult for Russian church leaders to meet with her as a church leader, he said.

The priest added that the Russian church was sending Yelena Speranskaya, who teaches Protestant theology at the Moscow Theological Academy, to Germany to attend a conference on December 1 on dialogue between the churches.

Such academic conferences might become a platform for dialogue, said Vyzhanov. “Right now new models are being developed,” he said. *–Ecumenical News International*