

Kässmann quits post as German Protestant leader after drinking offense: Apprehended for drunk driving

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The first woman elected to lead Germany's 24 million Protestants in the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Bishop Margot Kässmann, resigned the post days after she was apprehended for a drunk-driving offense.

She said February 24 that she will immediately give up her posts as a bishop and as head of the EKD but will continue as a pastor.

Kässmann, 51, the Lutheran bishop of Hanover since 1999 and chairperson of the EKD, the umbrella organization of Germany's Protestants, was caught driving under the influence on the evening of February 20 in Hanover. She allegedly drove through a red traffic light and her blood alcohol level was found to be three times over the legal limit.

"I am shocked at myself, that I could have committed such a terrible mistake," Kässmann told EPD news agency, the news service of the Evangelical Church in Germany. She could face a fine equivalent to one month's salary and loss of her driver's license for up to 12 months, EPD reported.

Flanked by her four daughters at a press conference in Hanover, Kässmann expressed "deep regret" and said she would resign because her effectiveness as EKD chair would be diminished by her mistake.

Her decision to resign was met with regret by the vice-chairperson of the EKD, Nikolaus Schneider, and vice-speaker of the German Bundestag, Katrin Göring-Eckardt.

"The Evangelical Church in Germany will miss her straightforwardness and clarity in her theological, sociopolitical and societal positions," they said in a joint statement. "Her resignation is a heavy blow for German Protestantism."

Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who also is president of the Lutheran World Federation, said he learned "with great sadness" of Kässmann's resignation. Hanson described her as "a gifted theologian, an outstanding global religious leader, a prophetic voice for justice and peace, and a colleague."

Her resignation is "a great loss" for Lutherans and the EKD, he said. "We will continue to pray that God will give her strength and opportunities for continued witness and service," he said in a statement issued at the ELCA headquarters in Chicago.

In addition to being the first woman to head the loose coalition of Protestant church bodies, Kässmann was the youngest person elected to the post at the synod meeting October 28. Her election prompted objections from the Moscow-based Russian Orthodox Church. Arch bishop Hilarion, who directs external affairs for the Russian patriarchate, said he saw protocol difficulties in future ecumenical dialogues with a woman bishop.

Kässmann, who candidly talked about her divorce before being elected to head the Protestant group, also said in a published interview in late December that that Germany's participation in the war in Afghanistan cannot be justified and "must be ended as soon as possible." Surveys in Germany were showing about 70 percent against the German army's role in the war.

Elected for a six-year term to head the Protestant umbrella organization, Kässmann succeeded Bishop Wolfgang Huber, who retired at the end of 2009 at age 67. With 22 regional Lutheran, United and Reformed churches as members of the EKD, the coalition's constituency accounts for most of the country's Protestants. —*Ecumenical News International*