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Orthodox Church Fires Chancellor, Orders Probe

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Facing allegations of financial mismanagement, the Orthodox Church in America has fired its longtime chancellor and brought in an independent law firm to conduct a full investigation, church officials said yesterday.

The 400,000-member denomination, an offshoot of the Russian Orthodox Church, has been in turmoil since its former treasurer alleged in October that top officials diverted millions of dollars in donations.

Senior clergy and lay leaders across the country had demanded an investigation, and eight Orthodox Christian lawyers wrote a letter last week warning church leaders that they could face legal consequences if they did not act soon. But the sudden dismissal of Chancellor Robert S. Kondratick, the church's chief administrative officer for the past 17 years, surprised even insiders at the denomination's headquarters in Syosset, N.Y.

"Father Kondratick . . . is too stunned by his dismissal to comment," the chancellor's aide, the Rev. Joseph Fester, said in an e-mail. "He is also too busy fielding calls, e-mails and faxes of support from around the world."

Church officials emphasized that Kondratick's ouster does not mean he has been found guilty of any financial impropriety. They said the church's primate, or presiding bishop, who is known as Metropolitan Herman, hired the New York law firm of Proskauer Rose LLP to investigate the charges by former treasurer Eric A. Wheeler.

In an Oct. 17 letter to church leaders, Wheeler alleged that millions of dollars in donations from agribusiness titan Dwayne Andreas were diverted into unaudited "discretionary accounts" in the 1990s by Kondratick and Herman's predecessor, Metropolitan Theodosius, who retired in 2002.

Andreas, whose Archer Daniels Midland Co. was trying to get a foothold in the Russian market, gave the money to renovate a church and build a conference center in Moscow. But Wheeler said the conference center was never built. He also said that Kondratick and Theodosius dipped into funds that were donated by U.S. parishioners for missionaries, seminaries and other causes.

Wheeler said some of the money went for legitimate purposes. But he alleged that funds also were diverted to "safeguard the church from scandal, cover embarrassing credit card debts . . . provide family members who leached off their relatives with a steady stream of assistance, pay blackmail requests" and entertain visitors.

The Holy Synod, a governing body of 10 bishops, met March 1 to consider the calls for an investigation but was unable to reach a consensus, said the Rev. Paul Kucynda, the church's acting treasurer.

To break the impasse, Metropolitan Herman called an emergency meeting Thursday of an administrative committee of clergy and lay people.

"Finally the metropolitan came to a point where he realized, 'I have exhausted all of my possibilities, people are beginning to say that I am incompetent, that I should be deposed,' and so he decided to act," Kucynda said.

Wheeler called it "a sad day for everyone."

"When something like this happens, there are so many emotions -- of friendship, of compassion for someone who has spent his life in the church," he said. "At the same time, people need to be responsible for their actions."