

Outspoken pastor: Taking a stand in Austria

by [Christa Pongratz-Lippitt](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

When Pastor Gertraud Knoll rose to speak to the crowd in front of the Vienna Opera House last February, she knew her remarks could be hazardous to her career. A few weeks before, a coalition government had been formed that included Austria's far-right Freedom Party, which pandered to voters' xenophobia with such slogans as "Put a stop to too many foreigners" and "Stop asylum abuse." Knoll, superintendent of the Lutheran Church in the eastern province of Burgenland, addressed the quarter-million people who gathered to protest against the Freedom Party's role in the government.

"We are being inundated by a veritable gush of despicable language," Knoll told the crowd, "and it has once again become frighteningly normal to use unacceptable and inexcusable expressions when referring to Jews, blacks and foreigners."

Some Austrians were hesitant to speak out, but "responsibility cannot be delegated," Knoll said. "Peace is not achieved by sleeping a sweet sleep. It is achieved by fighting for what is just and emphatically denouncing those who stir up hatred and say malicious things about others." She recalled the words of German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller, who spoke of how when the Nazis came after various groups—first the communists, then Jews, trade unionists and Catholics—he kept silent because he was none of those. But "when they came for me, there was no longer anyone left to protest."

Knoll's public stance was not new for her. The first woman superintendent in the Austrian Lutheran Church, Knoll spoke out against racism and xenophobia in 1992 when she appeared on a prime-time news show and called the tightening of an Austrian asylum law "cowardly." She then took into her home six Afghan orphans who were in danger of being deported. In 1995, when four Romanie, or gypsy, men were killed by a pipe bomb in her diocese, she touched the emotions of millions who were watching the funeral service on television by declaring that the hour had come for Austrians to wake up. Knoll quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "He who does not cry out

with the victims has no right to sing Gregorian chant.”

In 1998 she took a leave of absence from her church position and ran for president of Austria. She made it plain she was running as a citizen, not as a church official, and did not conduct any church services during the campaign. She polled 13.5 percent of the votes, coming in a respectable second to the winner, Thomas Klestil. Some Lutherans in Burgenland objected to her candidacy and proposed that she be removed as superintendent, a motion that was defeated by the other superintendents. The head of the opposition group was Leopold Schöggl, a member of parliament from the Freedom Party.

Following her February speech against the new government, the Independent Platform of Lutheran Christians in the Burgenland was formed with the aim of forcing Knoll to step down. Spokesman Klaus Fischl said the group was collecting signatures calling for a vote on the issue. Knoll’s participation in the demonstration against the Freedom Party had “put the tin lid on it,” he emphasized. The Freedom Party was said to be behind the move, though the Independent Platform denied any link with the party or with Schöggl’s original group.

Three days before the Vienna demonstration, Bishop Herwig Sturm, leader of the Lutheran Church in Austria, had stated that the Lutheran Church was not one of the organizers of the demonstration, and that individual Christians could take part or not according to their own convictions. He acknowledged that Lutherans were deeply divided over both the Freedom Party’s participation in government and over whether Lutheran officials should speak out at quasi-political demonstrations.

After Knoll’s speech, Edouard Nicka, a Freedom Party representative in the provincial Burgenland parliament, published an open letter addressed to Knoll, Sturm and the Lutheran Church’s assembly of superintendents, accusing Knoll of abusing her office and splitting the church. Sturm and *Oberkirchenrat* Michael Bünker responded with their own open letters. Bünker accused Nicka of deliberately misinterpreting Knoll’s denunciation of racism and xenophobia, and said that Nicka, as a politician, had no right to interfere in church affairs. Sturm contended that the Independent Platform of Lutheran Christians, which by now had collected over 2,000 signatures, had acted “outside the order of our church.” The petition, Sturm said, would have no effect on church decisions. All the Lutheran superintendents declared their solidarity with Knoll.

Meanwhile, Knoll was receiving anonymous hate mail as well as official letters of protests. Many of the letters targeted Knoll as a woman. As Knoll pointed out, there was no protest against Michael Chaloupka, the other prominent Lutheran who spoke out at the demonstration.

The anti-Knoll forces distanced themselves from the hate mail, but in April the threats against her and her three small children became so severe that Knoll decided to take a leave and go into hiding. Sturm asked the Burgenland group to stop collecting signatures. He also stressed that Knoll's leave of absence was not a resignation. It would be "a bad sign indeed," he said, if the church were to give in to pressure.

Gertraud Knoll has since returned to work, bolstered by messages of support from an ecumenical group from all over the world, including a missionary in the Sudan who wrote, "That's how it is—resistance is no picnic!"