

28 November 2008

RUSSIA: "Soon there won't be a single Baptist church in Lipetsk!"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Baptists in the town of Lipetsk south-east of Moscow complain that the authorities are using "a bureaucratic way" to restrict their activity. Two of their local congregations have lost legal status for failing to file tax returns on time, a claim Pastor Vladimir Boyev vigorously rejected to Forum 18 News Service. The tax office refused to speak to Forum 18. One of the congregations has been using a former Orthodox church for nearly twenty years and without legal status cannot now defend its interests in court as the Orthodox diocese wants the building back. The third has lost its rented place of worship it has used for nearly twenty years amid redevelopment plans. The court claimed it had invited the congregation to attend a hearing to set compensation, but the Baptists complain they never received an invitation. Lipetsk's regional religious affairs official, Olga Fyodorova, told Forum 18 the Baptists are deliberately rejecting possible solutions "in order to aggravate the situation". Asked how the Baptists would defend themselves in court after losing their legal status, she responded: "That's their problem!"

In what they believe is deliberate state action against them, two Baptist congregations in the regional centre of Lipetsk (approximately 400km south-east of Moscow) have lost their legal status and a third has lost its rented prayer house. "There's been nothing like this in Lipetsk for 20 years," Vladimir Boyev, pastor of one of the congregations, exclaimed to Forum 18 News Service on 25 November. "They're taking the last of what we have!"

The state's methods may not be those of the Soviet period, when religious believers could end up in prison, Pastor Boyev admitted. "But they have found a different way – a bureaucratic way – to put our Church in a terrible position," he pointed out to Forum 18. "We are defenceless!"

Lipetsk's regional religious affairs official, Olga Fyodorova, defended the state's recent treatment of the Baptists to Forum 18 on 26 November. They have been offered a number of solutions to their situation over the past decade, she claimed, "but they refuse to accept them on purpose, in order to aggravate the situation."

Currently, Lipetsk's 200-strong first Baptist congregation is still able to meet at the former Orthodox church it was allocated by the local authorities in 1989. "But the situation is very tense right now," Pastor Boyev told Forum 18. Vandals broke 28 of the building's windows in the wake of this year's 4 November National Unity Day celebrations, he pointed out.

Introduced in 2005, National Unity Day is a state holiday commemorating Russia's 1612 expulsion of invading Polish-Lithuanian forces. It has become a focus for public demonstrations by nationalist and far-right activists.

Lipetsk Regional Arbitration Court has begun hearing a suit for control of the former Orthodox church, filed three months ago by the Orthodox diocese of Lipetsk and Yelets, added Pastor Boyev. The Baptists are quite prepared to vacate the building, he stressed to Forum 18, but want another as compensation for their substantial renovation work. Instead, the local authorities have offered what Pastor Boyev described as "semi-ruins" and respond to the Baptists' objections with "Let the Americans help you!", he said. The church has no wealthy foreign sponsors, however, Pastor Boyev told Forum 18: "We're Russian people, just like them!"

The Baptist congregation worshipping at the former Orthodox church is now without legal status. The tax authorities removed it from the Single State Register of Legal Personalities in June 2007 for failing to file its annual tax return on time, Pastor Boyev told Forum 18. Under Article 21.1 of the 2001 Law on the State Registration of Legal Personalities and Individual Entrepreneurs, an organisation may be removed from the State Register without any court proceedings if it fails to file a tax return or use its bank account in the course of a year.

A Baptist church in the Black Sea port of Tuapse managed to overturn a similar decision in May 2008 on the grounds that it did not take into account the fact that the aims and functions of a religious organisation differ from commercial legal personalities (see F18News 10 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1185).

In Lipetsk, meanwhile, the case to determine who has use of the former Orthodox church was adjourned when the judge realised that the Baptist congregation has no legal personality, Pastor Boyev told Forum 18. The Baptists responded by filing a separate suit with the same court in an attempt to restore their legal status and so continue their defence. The latest hearing in this case took place on

26 November.

Asked about the pressure on the Baptist congregation at the former Orthodox church, Olga Fyodorova, the religious affairs official, maintained to Forum 18 that they were "sitting there, doing nothing" while the building had "essentially" already been given to an Orthodox parish. She then admitted that she did not know whether a court had in fact decided the issue, however. Fyodorova also said she did not know how the Baptists would defend themselves in court after losing their legal status: "That's their problem!" Asked about compensation, she maintained they "could find another place, or build using donations."

A second Lipetsk Baptist organisation – Good Shepherd Mission – was also removed from the State Register in September 2007 for failing to file its tax return on time and correctly. Pastor Boyev insisted to Forum 18 that both organisations filed their tax returns on time as in earlier years and had never had problems with the tax authorities previously. "We supposedly needed more documents for the Good Shepherd Mission, but they didn't warn us – they should have explained to us what they wanted," he argued. "They told us we should have looked on the internet, or in some journal or other, but we're God's people, not a business, we don't know how to do this."

Forum 18 reached an official in the relevant tax office on 28 November, but she categorically refused to give any information by telephone.

The authorities also took issue with the de-registered Baptist organisations because neither kept a bank account, said Pastor Boyev. "But we spend any money as soon as it comes in," on church activities, bills and building materials, he explained.

Olga Fyodorova maintained to Forum 18 that the Baptists had been de-registered because they "didn't pay tax - not a single kopeck - and you know how every state in the world is scrupulous about tax." They claim not to have any income as a cover for not paying tax, she suggested.

Led by Pastor Boyev, Lipetsk's second 200-strong Baptist congregation, Holy Trinity, retains its legal status, but the land and building where it worships come under Good Shepherd Mission, he told Forum 18.

The Lipetsk authorities closed the Good Shepherd Mission building for several months in early 2007 on the grounds that it had not been formally declared fit for use, and also fined Pastor Boyev (see F18News 22 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=917).

A third Baptist congregation, 60-strong Golgotha, has rented a traditional wooden house in central Lipetsk since 1989 and carried out substantial repairs to the building, Pastor Boyev told Forum 18. The city authorities are gradually replacing such living accommodation and the owner was recently allocated a new flat as compensation, he said. On 11 September, the state's confiscation of the building was upheld when no one representing Golgotha appeared at Lipetsk's Soviet District Court. "They said they sent us a summons," Pastor Boyev told Forum 18. "But we didn't get one."

Fyodorova directed all further questions to Larisa Loshkareva, a regional official dealing specifically with the Baptists' situation. On 27 November Loshkareva asked Forum 18 to seek permission for this from her departmental director on 28 November. His telephone went unanswered, however.

In another long-running struggle by Protestants to retain control of their worship premises, Pastor Albert Ratkin told Forum 18 on 26 November that for the past six months the local authorities have not troubled his Pentecostal Word of Life Church in Kaluga (150km south-west of Moscow). The current financial crisis "probably means they aren't getting round to dealing with us," he joked.

Word of Life Church has come under pressure from Kaluga's municipal authorities – including numerous bureaucratic check-ups and threats to cut off its power supplies - because the building and land it bought for worship in 2002 are now situated in the middle of a shopping mall construction site (see most recently F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040).

Various Russian Protestant websites highlighted a 15 October 2008 public hearing in Kaluga's municipal Architecture and Town-planning Department which discussed a possible change of use for land owned by Word of Life Church. At the meeting, a local representative of the Swedish firm behind the shopping mall development reportedly suggested that sales of alcohol from the mall might result in drunken violence against church members if the Pentecostals remained at their current site.

Protestants in particular – but also Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims – point to an apparently inordinate level of state interest in the fire safety and other technical aspects of worship buildings in recent years, resulting in fines, temporary closures or demolition threats (see F18News 18 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=783, 15 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908 and 15 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=932). Glorification Pentecostal Church in the southern Siberian city of Abakan (Khakassia Republic) was forced to demolish its prayer hall in 2007 (see F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040).

The Justice Ministry has also latterly begun to initiate the court liquidation of various religious organisations, claiming that they failed to file annual accounts correctly or that they conduct professional religious education without a licence (see most recently F18News 12 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1216). Most have either managed to retain their legal personality status by providing missing documents or were defunct.

Several, however - such as the Pentecostal Bible Centre of Chuvashia - have challenged such action as a deliberate attempt to limit their religious freedom (see F18News 15 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1048 and 30 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1151) (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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