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RUSSIA: Local restrictions on mission in Khabarovsk region

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

In the Far Eastern Russian region of Khabarovsk, religious believers can encounter state restrictions in sharing their faith, but to a lesser extent than in neighbouring Sakhalin region, Forum 18 News Service has found. Pentecostals, for example, have told Forum 18 of restrictions on missionary activity beyond the location where their church is registered, whilst Baptists have spoken of having to obtain permission for street evangelism concerts. Interviewed by Forum 18 about access to prisons and hospitals, the regional state religious affairs official commented that religious activity in state institutions is determined by each individual institution, which by now is well aware whether or not the religious representatives coming to them are "sound".

Local religious believers in the Far Eastern Russian region of Khabarovsk sometimes encounter state restrictions in sharing their faith, albeit to a lesser extent than in neighbouring Sakhalin region (see F18News 1 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=331), Forum 18 News Service has found.

On 28 April Pastor Aleksandr Pankratov of Khabarovsk's Revival Pentecostal church maintained to Forum 18 that a local law on missionary activity is in force in Khabarovsk region: "Officials refer to it but they don't show it to you." He presumed that this local law was responsible for one state practice – that of insisting that the term "local" featured in the title of a church applying for registration. "Otherwise they won't register you – it means that [the church's] activity is permitted only within the territorial limits of the place where it is registered."

Questioned on this issue by Forum 18 on 29 April, Khabarovsk's regional official dealing with religious affairs, Mikhail Svishchev, confirmed that there had been a regional law on missionary activity, "but it was scrapped as soon as the federal one was adopted." However, he maintained that under the federal law, "a legal personality operates on the territory where it is registered - if a religious organisation is registered in a particular town, it can't operate elsewhere."

Similarly to Sakhalin, the pastor of Khabarovsk's third Baptist church, Gennadi Degtyarov, reported that it was necessary to obtain permission from Khabarovsk's city administration to hold annual street evangelisation concerts in the neighbourhood of his church. Speaking to Forum 18 on 27 April, he remarked that this had been "granted every time," however, possibly because the church is located on the very outskirts of the city.

Nearer to the city centre, New Apostolic Church evangelist Vladimir Lukashenko told Forum 18 on the same day that in 2002 Khabarovsk region's Philarmonic Orchestra had performed three recitals of religious organ music at his church "with standing room only," but was then forbidden from continuing. He was unable to provide further details. Other than this, said Lukashenko, the church had not encountered any particular obstacles to evangelisation, and had organised missionary trips to New Apostolic communities without pastors in Russia's Far East District.

Mikhail Svishchev, from Khabarovsk's regional administration, insisted to Forum 18 that religious organisations are legally obliged only to inform the local authorities if they wished to hold an open air meeting, "but we have very few of that sort." He remarked that it was "unclear" why the concerts of religious music were curtailed at the New Apostolic church: "Who would stop them from having concerts in their own building? They blamed [Viktor] Nikulnikov [Svishchev's predecessor], but he didn't even know the events were on."

Addressing a 23 April conference held at Sakhalin regional administration, "The Role of Orthodoxy and the Revival of the Spiritual Identity of the Population in the Far East Region," Khabarovsk parish priest Fr Nikanor (Lepeshev) outlined youth work in his Orthodox diocese. One of the areas of activity of a group called Grad Kitezh, he said, was anti-sectarian, and he cited some of its recent successes in this regard, such as preventing a festival of Vedic culture from taking place in the city.

Interviewed by Forum 18 in Khabarovsk on 30 April, Pavel Belykh of Grad Kitezh said that the group, which is represented on Khabarovsk's municipal Council for Relations with the Public, aims to warn people about the activity of "sects who don't give any real indication of what they are doing." Lamenting that the local authorities did not take sufficient action to restrict the activity of

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such groups, he maintained that the Hare Krishnas, for instance, claimed that they were simply an Eastern philosophy club, and failed to get permission to hold street events. Earlier the same day, Forum 18 News encountered a local Hare Krishna missionary on Khabarovsk's main street who confirmed that he had never been prevented from distributing literature by police.

Pastor Aleksandr Pankratov told Forum 18 that it was difficult for members of his church to gain access to prisons in Khabarovsk region. On one occasion, the church had agreed to rent an officers' club – also used by an Orthodox group – for a religious event, he said, "but an army general returned our money saying, 'it isn't our faith'." Church members are allowed to visit hospitals, he added, "but with certain conditions – we are restricted in praying for the sick."

While a Protestant pastor was reportedly informed by the assistant head of one prison that he needed the permission of local Orthodox Bishop Mark (Tuzhikov) of Khabarovsk and Priamurye in order to visit inmates, Baptist chaplain Boris Bukhtoyarov told Forum 18 by telephone from Komsomolsk-on-Amur on 30 April that a variety of religious organisations, including Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, are normally able to carry out pastoral work in Khabarovsk region's prisons. When prison administrations receive a request from inmates for visits, corresponding religious representatives are invited and issued with the necessary documentation, he said.

Regarding the parallel situation in hospitals, Orthodox priest Fr Nikanor (Lepeshev) told Forum 18 that his hospital church had been established by agreement with the hospital administration. While the Orthodox are allowed to distribute Bibles to the sick, representatives of other confessions are not allowed to preach, he said. "So yes, we do have privileges here – but we are the state-forming religion and most people here are Orthodox." Fr Nikanor said that if he sees that patients have been given "sectarian brochures" he explains what they are, "but I don't take them away from people."

State religious affairs official Mikhail Svishchev commented to Forum 18 that the Khabarovsk regional authorities have no formal agreement with the Orthodox diocese governing activity in state institutions such as hospitals, prisons or the army: "We're a bit behind in that area." Normally, he said, religious activity in this sphere is determined by each individual institution, which by now is well aware whether or not the religious representatives coming to them are "sound".

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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