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RUSSIA: Growing obstruction to Protestant church property ownership

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Protestant communities wanting to build a place of worship face increasing obstruction from state authorities, they have told Forum 18 News Service. Other religious confessions also encounter such problems. For example, a protracted series of discussions and protests have still not enabled Moscow's Emmanuel Pentecostal Church to either obtain a new construction site or official rights to the land beneath a building it owns. Similar problems have been encountered by Protestant churches elsewhere in Russia. Protestants have often told Forum 18 of their suspicions that local Orthodox clergy are instrumental in blocking Protestant construction plans, through private discussions between state officials and local Orthodox clergy. Unusually, in a letter seen by Forum 18, the Volga city of Saratov refused Word of Life Pentecostal Church permission to put an advertisement on its own outside wall, "on the basis of letter No. 490 dated 19 April 2005 from the Saratov diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church." Protestant communities also often speak of lengthy and energy-consuming battles to retain worship premises they acquire.

Protestant communities seeking to build their own places of worship have told Forum 18 News Service that they increasingly face obstruction by the state authorities, although such obstructions are less frequent than rental restrictions (see F18News 19 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=633). Difficulties acquiring property for worship are also encountered by other religious confessions in Russia (see F18News 30 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=639).

Despite "promises, promises, promises" from the Moscow municipal authorities, the 1000-strong Emmanuel Pentecostal Church has made no progress in obtaining either a new construction site or official rights to the land beneath a building it owns in the city, its pastor Aleksandr Purshaga told Forum 18 on 23 August. Following a series of high-profile demonstrations in the Russian capital earlier this year – for which several church members served brief prison sentences as the authorities claimed that their protest was unapproved (see F18News 13 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=583) – municipal construction department vice-chairman Aleksandr Kosovan met with Purshaga and church administrator Bakur Azaryan in early June. Contacted by Forum 18 soon after that meeting, Azaryan reported that Kosovan had ordered Emmanuel's construction problems – which formed the basis of the church's demonstrations – to be resolved by 30 June.

To date, Aleksandr Purshaga told Forum 18, senior municipal officials have merely promised to find Emmanuel Church a site equal in value to the one that it lost and to grant rights to the plot of land occupied by the building that it subsequently purchased in Moscow's Solntsevo District. The pastor noted, however, that a junior official has recently positioned beer tents around the building – turning it into the scene of frequent drunkenness and fighting - and that Moscow police are continuing to obstruct church members' ongoing protests outside the city's mayor's office.

After Emmanuel Church obtained the necessary approval from all relevant state departments for construction on a plot of land allocated to it in 1996, the local district assembly in Moscow's Vernadsky Prospekt District suddenly rejected the plans in November 2000. Quoted in the 11 December 2001 issue of Russian religious affairs publication NG-Religii, Vernadsky Prospekt district newspaper explained that the assembly had decided not to support the project because representatives of Emmanuel Church were "exerting psychological pressure upon local officials and misleading local residents as to their true intentions". This phraseology is strikingly similar to that of a 6 March 2001 letter to the head of Vernadsky Prospekt district assembly from the department for the study of sects at the Russian Orthodox Church's St Tikhon Theological Institute. Quoted in the English-language Moscow Times on 10 June 2005, however, chief spokesman for Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II Mikhail Moiseyev maintained that Emmanuel's problems were "by no means connected to the Orthodox Church."

Despite a large Protestant demonstration on the southern Russian city of Voronezh's Lenin Square on 4 June 2005, there has similarly been no concrete improvement in the fortunes of two Pentecostal churches barred from acquiring property. Pastor Aleksei Shipovsky told Forum 18 on 22 August that his God's Glory Church and Pastor Andrei Bashmakov's Centre for Spiritual Service each have approximately 150 members and legal personality status, even though their Russia-wide Pentecostal union headed by Ivan Fedotov opposed state registration during the Soviet period.

According to a series of reports posted on Russian religious affairs website Portal-Credo, God's Glory Church first asked the mayor

of Voronezh for land on which to build a church centre for its alcohol and drug abuse rehabilitation programme in the summer of 2002, and was subsequently allocated a site in the city's Komintern District. Its plan rejected as "inexpedient" by the district's officials, however, the church was allocated an alternative construction site in Soviet District, but the authorities there likewise issued a refusal.

The Centre for Spiritual Service won the rights to a plot of land in a run-down industrial part of Voronezh's Left Bank District in early 2002 and spent the rest of the year obtaining approval from the relevant state departments for its plans to build a church there, according to Portal-Credo. Shortly before construction was due to begin in spring 2003, however, the chief architect of Voronezh refused to sign the plans, claiming that the Centre for Spiritual Service had violated legal procedure. While the church attempted to resolve the issue, public opposition to construction began to mount. Local residents claiming not to have been informed about the "sectarians'" plans filed suit in 2004, and Left Bank District Court finally cancelled the church's rights to the plot of land in April 2005.

While Protestants in Voronezh and elsewhere in Russia often suspect local Orthodox clergy to be instrumental in blocking their construction plans, they point out that this often takes the form of Soviet-style "telephone law", or undocumented decisions made in private discussion between state officials and local Orthodox representatives. In an unusually open example of this interplay, however, the Volga city of Saratov's construction committee recently refused Word of Life Pentecostal Church permission to advertise its presence on the outside wall of its own premises. In a letter dated 4 May 2005, a copy of which has been received by Forum 18, chief architect Vladimir Virich writes simply: "On the basis of letter No. 490 dated 19 April 2005 from the Saratov diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Architecture and Construction Committee cannot agree to a canvas banner with an advertisement for local Pentecostal religious organisation 'Word of Life' being placed at 88 Chernyshevsky Street in the October District of Saratov."

Protestant communities also report often lengthy and energy-consuming battles to retain worship property they have managed to acquire. God's Church, a 60-strong Pentecostal congregation in Stavropol region's southern spa town of Mineralnyye Vody, is still unable to use the two-storey former shop it purchased in February 2003, its pastor Igor Nikishin told Forum 18 on 22 August. While the town's mayor initially allocated the church both the building and the plot of land legally bound to it, he issued a decree in October 2003 reducing the land area to that immediately beneath the building (see F18News 7 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=470), meaning that the rest could be sold off. Although the God's Church congregation subsequently succeeded in fighting three arbitration court challenges to this decree and the authorities began to compile documentation granting it the whole area of land in spring 2005, "they are dragging it out as long as possible," Nikishin remarked.

In the wake of a series of vandalism and arson attacks on the newly built Ark Church in Balashikha (Moscow region), a district court ordered that it be razed to the ground at the request of the local administration in June 2004. The church, which belongs to the main Russia-wide Baptist Union, successfully appealed against the decision in December 2004, however. A similar threat against an unregistered Baptist church in Lyubuchany (Moscow region) also appears to have receded, as a court case set to prosecute the owner of its prayer house for ostensibly unlawful construction was cancelled in April 2005 (see F18News 25 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=549).

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For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News 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=509

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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