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BELARUS: Charismatic pastor warned for "illegal" worship

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

"If the law doesn't allow believers to pray and serve God, then we will sooner obey God than a person or law restricting our rights," Dmitri Podlobko, the pastor of a charismatic church in Belarus, has insisted to Forum 18 News Service. Pastor Podlobko was speaking after he was given an official warning to stop "illegal" religious activity by a district Public Prosecutor in the south-eastern regional centre of Gomel. The warning followed an attempt by local state officials to prevent Sunday worship by the 100-strong Living Faith Church at private premises on 30 September. State officials stated that the worship was illegal as it broke the restrictive Religion Law, under which "services, religious rites, rituals and ceremonies" taking place outside designated houses of worship must have advance permission from the state. Offences may be punished with a warning, a fine of up to 30 times the minimum wage, or 25 days' imprisonment. Gomel Region's senior religious affairs official, Mikhail Zhukevich, declined to answer Forum 18's questions.

"If the law doesn't allow believers to pray and serve God, then we will sooner obey God than a person or law restricting our rights," the pastor of a charismatic church told to stop "illegal" religious activity has insisted to Forum 18 News Service. Pastor Dmitri Podlobko was given the official warning on 9 October, by Soviet District Public Prosecutor in the south-eastern regional centre of Gomel [Homyel].

The warning follows an attempt by local state officials to prevent Sunday worship by Pastor Podlobko's 100-strong Living Faith Church at private premises on 30 September. Speaking to Forum 18 shortly after his 9 October public prosecutor visit, Podlobko told Forum 18 he had encountered open hostility from officials there: "One said, 'I'm Orthodox, we know you Protestants. You get all your money from Uncle Sam.'"

Pastor Podlobko was given the warning for leading services at a free-standing building containing a meeting hall and two smaller rooms which is his own private property. Such worship is considered a violation of Article 25 of the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, under which "services, religious rites, rituals and ceremonies" taking place outside designated houses of worship must have advance permission from the local state authorities. Offences may be charged under Article 23, Part 34 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes violation of regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass events with a warning, a fine of up to 30 times the minimum wage, or 25 days' imprisonment.

Gomel Region's senior religious affairs official, Mikhail Zhukevich, declined to answer Forum 18's questions on 10 October.

Pastor Podlobko told Forum 18 that he argued against the warning and intends to appeal to Gomel Regional Public Prosecutor. "It is our God-given right to pray together," he remarked, "especially as it's in my own house, and we are already registered there." The pastor also maintained that Living Faith Church does not conduct "rituals and ceremonies" as such. "We're not that type of church. We come together to pray and read the Bible as part of our everyday life. If we were to meet outdoors or in private flats we would still do it. We can't not."

A police officer, representatives of both the district and regional authorities and several plain-clothes officials who did not introduce themselves arrived a few minutes before Sunday worship on 30 September and pronounced the gathering illegal, according to Pastor Podlobko. Explaining that he did not have time to respond properly to or to consult a lawyer about a document they flashed before him, the pastor told the state representatives to return later that day. While they did not, during the following week he received a telephone call from the regional authorities threatening "big problems", Pastor Podlobko told Forum 18. He was subsequently summoned to Soviet District Public Prosecutor.

While rejecting the need to do so, Pastor Podlobko did try to obtain the local authorities' permission to hold worship at his private house some two years ago, he told Forum 18. "But conditions were set – that no more than 20 people could attend regular worship at residential premises. I don't want to deceive anyone by saying we're 20 people when we're not."

There is in fact no legal limit on the number of people who may attend home worship meetings approved by the state authorities, an official at the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in the capital, Minsk, repeatedly insisted to Forum 18 on 10 October. However, Aleksandr Kalinov defended the warning handed down to Living Faith Church on the basis of Article 25 of

the 2002 Religion Law. "I think there were also complaints from neighbours about loud music playing," he added. Kalinov stressed that the situation had been – and would continue to be – dealt with at the regional level.

According to Pastor Podlobko, Living Faith Church has been meeting at the same premises for six years without incident. Affiliated to the charismatic Full Gospel Association, he found the warning particularly "incomprehensible" in the light of the recent unprecedented Minsk consultation between Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets and religious representatives. These included the Association's head, Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko, who "said he found the meeting constructive and positive," Pastor Podlobko told Forum 18 (see F18News 1 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1027).

Pastor Podlobko also pointed out that many Protestant churches in Belarus – being largely without designated houses of worship – are in a similar position to Living Faith. "We didn't want to be outside the law, but we just can't fulfil it 100 per cent. I could transfer ownership of our building to the church tomorrow, but it wouldn't change a thing. We would still need to get the property transferred from housing stock in order for it to receive the designation of a house of worship. And I've never heard of anyone managing to do that."

Forum 18 has found that getting property formally redesignated for non-residential use is indeed almost impossible for many Protestant communities (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966). Even state registration has not spared some from being fined or having their leaders detained if they meet for worship at residential premises without specific state permission (see most recently F18News 5 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=969). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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

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