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BELARUS: Obstacles to obtaining new or old worship buildings

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Religious communities often face difficulties building new places of worship or recovering those confiscated during the Soviet period, Forum 18 News Service has learnt as part of an extensive investigation into how religious communities function under restrictive laws and regulations. With ten Full Gospel churches unable to meet for worship in the capital Minsk, church leader Aleksandr Sakovich planned to build a social centre where services could also be held. "But in May 2002 – at the very last minute – we were refused permission," he told Forum 18 News Service. The 20,000 US dollars the church had spent on plans were not returned. Greek Catholics in Brest were forced to build a church as a private house, only turning it into a church as it was finished. "If we had proceeded according to the law, we wouldn't have got anywhere," Fr Igor Kondrasev told Forum 18.

If meeting at home, outdoors or renting premises is ruled out, religious believers in Belarus have a fourth option for joint worship – building their own premises or claiming those which historically belonged to their confession. Forum 18 News Service has found that this is frequently fraught with difficulty, however.

"After building applications are rejected two or three times we stop counting," Pentecostal assistant bishop of Grodno region Naum Sakhanchuk told Forum 18 on 17 September. Petty reasons for refusal are routinely given, such as the wrong type of doors, he said. According to Sakhanchuk, five out of 36 registered Pentecostal churches in Grodno region have managed to build or are building their own prayer houses. In the case of his own Grace Church in Grodno city, the local authorities reconsidered their decision to allocate land in 1996, he said, "but we built the first storey in ten weeks so that they couldn't take it back".

Now that the Full Gospel Association's ten communities of some 5,000 members in the city of Minsk are refused rental, they are unable to meet as entire congregations, head of the organisation Aleksandr Sakovich told Forum 18 on 19 September. In 2000, therefore, Sakovich began to plan the construction on Partisan Prospect of a social and charitable centre where services could also be held, he said. "But in May 2002 – at the very last minute – we were refused permission." Sakovich added that this was after the Association had already spent 20,000 US dollars on architectural plans and planning approval, none of which will be returned from the state.

According to Dina Shavtsova, a Minsk-based lawyer specialising in religious freedom issues, another Full Gospel congregation attempted to avoid this situation by purchasing a two-storey brick building in the village of Borovlyany, just outside the capital. Shavtsova told Forum 18 on 19 September that, following petitions against the Church of Jesus Christ by some villagers, Minsk Regional Executive Committee on 30 September 2002 ruled against allowing the congregation to be sited at the address it had purchased "in order to avoid conflicts between believers of different confessions".

Some Protestants do appear to be building successfully, however. On 23 September the official in charge of religious affairs in Vitebsk region, Nikolai Stepanenko, told Forum 18 that the Baptists were building 11 and the Pentecostals six churches in the region. Local Pentecostal bishop Arkadi Supronenko maintained to Forum 18 on 22 September that his church was in fact building four new prayer houses in Vitebsk, Novolukoml, Ruba and Zaslonovo. The main problem with building anew was cost, he maintained.

Belarusian Greek Catholics have found a different solution to building problems. Fr Igor Kondrasev (Igor Kandrazjeu) started building a private house on the outskirts of Brest and turned it into a church during the final stages, he told Forum 18 on 15 September. "Just like they would anywhere in the world," the local authorities subsequently took him to court and fined him, but have taken no further action in the last two years, he said. Fr Igor explained to Forum 18 that he took the step consciously: "If we had proceeded according to the law, we wouldn't have got anywhere."

The head of the parish council of St Paraskeva Greek Catholic Church in Polotsk, Vitebsk region, told Forum 18 a similar story. Since the land for construction allocated by the local authorities was marshy, explained Mikola Sharakh on 24 September, the parish started to build without official permission on a different plot bought on the outskirts of the town: "We decided to legalise it later." The Greek Catholic parish in Minsk is being allowed to build a parish centre and not a church, said Sharakh: "The difference is that it is not identifiably a church from the outside - inside you can have what you like."

The Muslim community has just started construction of a mosque in Minsk with financial support from Saudi Arabia, Ismail Aleksandrovich, who heads the Religious Association of Muslims in Belarus, told Forum 18 on 20 September. While the 150-year-old Ivey mosque - the only historical mosque of 19 in Belarus which is still standing – was returned to local believers in 1996, he said, while another was allowed to collapse during the Soviet period and is currently in storage in a dismantled state.

Restitution of church buildings confiscated during the Soviet period appears to be particularly difficult for Lutherans and Calvinists. On 21 September, member of Minsk Reformed Church Aleksei Frolov (Alaksiej Fralou) told Forum 18 that in 1992 a Calvinist community led by Pastor Lyavon Lipen unsuccessfully requested a sixteenth-century Calvinist church building in Zaslavl, 20 kilometres (12 miles) north-west of Minsk. At that time a museum, it has since become the Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration. Some 60 kilometres south-west of Minsk in Uzda district, said Fralou, a local Calvinist community similarly failed to obtain a historically Calvinist church building which is now gradually being destroyed by an electricity generator within its walls.

Forum 18 noted buildings which were obviously built as Lutheran churches in the centres of Brest and Polotsk. Speaking from Grodno on 22 September, the secretary of the consistory of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Belarus, Vitali Sozinov, said that for several years two unregistered Lutheran communities had been taking shape in Brest and Novopolotsk (a new town joined to Polotsk). If the Brest group obtained registration there would be some chance of it recovering the historical Lutheran church in the city, he told Forum 18, since this building currently contains workshops.

Despite positive contact with local officials, the situation is more difficult in Polotsk, he added. The former Lutheran church there houses a regional museum, Sozinov explained, and according to Article 30 of the new law on religion, religious organisations take priority in property restitution cases unless the disputed historical building currently houses sports or cultural establishment.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 16 September, the official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region denied that there was a Lutheran community in the city. "The Lutheran church isn't a church," Vasili Marchenko remarked. "It looks like one but it isn't one."

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