

31 October 2003

BELARUS: Calvinists kept quiet

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Although the Reformed Church's history in Belarus goes back to the 16th century, the authors of the 2002 religion law "forgot about the Calvinists", the presbyter of Minsk's present-day Reformed Church has told Forum 18 News Service. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the only Protestant body described as "inseparable from the common history of the people of Belarus" in the 2002 religion law. The Minsk Reformed Church managed to hold an international conference to mark this year's 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Belarus, but faced much official obstruction. Following the conference, the Reformed Church has been told it needs to obtain official permission to hold worship services, but has yet to received any response to requests. Forced to find another location for services, the community has effectively been prevented from advertising them. The presbyter told Forum 18 "We cannot say that this Church exists, preaches Jesus Christ and doesn't bite."

Baptists, Pentecostals, other charismatics and Adventists held a joint service of worship in Minsk on 19 October to mark the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Belarus. While there were "hundreds of Calvinist communities" on Belarusian soil in the sixteenth century, however, the presbyter of Minsk's present-day Calvinist Reformed Church recently maintained to Forum 18 News Service that the authors of the republic's 2002 law on religion "forgot about the Calvinists for some reason." The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the only Protestant body specified as being "inseparable from the common history of the people of Belarus" in the preamble of that law.

Finally registered on 18 June 2001 after a "very long and complicated" two-year process, the 50-strong Minsk Reformed Church chose to mark this year's 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Belarus with an international conference on the subject in early April, Aleksei Frolov (Alaksiej Fralou) told Forum 18 on 21 September. While the event went ahead, he added, it did so only with difficulty.

Three months before the conference, the Church arranged to rent a 350-seater hall at the Central Palace of Veterans in central Minsk. Approximately a month before the event the Calvinists learnt that under current legislation on mass meetings and demonstrations (see F18News 8 October 2003) they were obliged to request the permission of the local Central District administration in order to hold an event at a public venue. Concerned at having received no reply to their request just one week before the conference - which was due to be attended by guests from the Netherlands, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, South Africa and the Czech Republic - the Church again turned to the district authority. The latter refused to allow a religious event in a cultural establishment, said Frolov, "even though the genre of conference is a priori not a religious event."

On subsequently contacting the Minsk city authorities, Frolov maintained that the official in charge of religious affairs in the city, Alla Ryabitseva, told the Calvinists that they had no right to conduct an international conference since their organisation was not a republic-wide religious association. While a local Baptist pastor offered the use of his church for the conference at the last minute, continued Frolov, the Calvinists were unable to advertise the event in the overwhelmingly state-owned press since it took place on an unofficial basis.

Forum 18 has received no response when telephoning Alla Ryabitseva. Article 29 of the 2002 religion law states that religious organisations – which include both communities and associations – have the right to invite foreign citizens to participate in gatherings and other events.

The Reformed Church's difficulties did not end with the conclusion of the conference. While discussing the event's arrangements, municipal religious affairs officials made a note of where the Calvinists worship, said Frolov, and shortly after the conference two of them visited the Church during its Sunday service at the Francysk Skaryna Belarusian Language Centre. The pair reportedly informed the Calvinists that they needed to obtain official permission from the local Partisan District authority in order to hold such meetings. Responding to the Church's request, the district authority at first demanded that it stipulate the precise dates and times of its services "and not just 'on Sundays'," Aleksei Frolov told Forum 18. (Last year New Life Full Gospel Church received the same response from a different Minsk district authority: See F18News 8 October 2003). After receiving no further response – even a written refusal – "we understood that it was useless trying to do anything," Frolov remarked. "They could give us any reason for

refusal, such as insufficient fire precautions."

After state pressure was apparently exerted upon the proprietors of the Francysk Skaryna language centre - where, Frolov noted, social organisations continue to hold meetings unhindered – the Minsk Reformed Church was forced to seek another location for its services. As with its conference, the Church has not been prevented from functioning, he acknowledged to Forum 18, but is now effectively unable to advertise its presence in the Belarusian capital: "We cannot say that this Church exists, preaches Jesus Christ and doesn't bite."

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