

21 April 2003

RUSSIA: Court closes down Bible College

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

On 21 March Primorsky Krai regional court in Russia's Far East ruled to close down the charismatic Faith in Action Bible College in Vladivostok. Speaking to Forum 18 News Service, the public prosecutor's representative in the case, Nina Saiko, defended the court-ordered closure, arguing that the college was conducting "educational activity" without a licence in violation of the education law. The college's lawyer Aleksei Kolupayev insisted to Forum 18 that it was not conducting educational activity "but simple study for religious believers, a right guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Russian Constitution." Others claim that the FSB (former KGB) has been harassing the college and looking for excuses to close it down.

The authorities in the Pacific region of Primorsky Krai have closed down a Bible college on the outskirts of the regional capital, Vladivostok. On 21 March Primorsky Krai regional court ruled in favour of regional public prosecutor Valeri Vasilenko's suit against the charismatic Faith in Action Bible College. Speaking to Forum 18 News Service from Vladivostok on 21 April, the public prosecutor's representative in the case, Nina Saiko, defended the court-ordered closure, arguing that the college was conducting "educational activity" without a licence in violation of the law.

The college is registered as a local religious organisation under the auspices of the Centre of the Living God, a centralised religious organisation embracing approximately 40 charismatic churches throughout Primorsky Krai, Svetlana Mishchenko told Forum 18 from Vladivostok on 17 April. Mishchenko's husband, Aleksei, is pastor of the organisation's parent church, the Church of the Living God, which is situated alongside the Bible College in a Vladivostok suburb.

Prior to its closure, 11 senior and 19 junior students were resident at the college. While some study is continuing in the form of seminars at the adjacent church, said Mishchenko, these students are no longer able to stay at on-site residential premises.

The defence lawyer to the college, Aleksei Kolupayev, told Forum 18 on 17 April that the public prosecutor had accused the Bible College of conducting religious instruction without a licence. According to Article 33 of Russia's 1992 education law, an institution must be in possession of a licence in order to conduct "educational activity".

In this case, however, "the organisation was not conducting educational activity," Kolupayev declared, "but simple study for religious believers, a right guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Russian Constitution." Russia's education law considers activity to be educational only if students receive a qualification and a certificate of education at the end of it, he pointed out, while not a single Bible College student has received such a document.

However, Saiko insisted that the college was providing more than simple study for religious believers. Students at the college constantly follow special programmes for which they are given grades, recommendations and diplomas, she maintained. While she had not seen any diplomas since the college "refused to show them to us," Saiko said she had seen a document recommending a student for a church post on the basis of their study. It was for all these reasons, she said, that the public prosecutor had decided that the college was conducting educational activity.

A foreign church worker who has assisted the Church of the Living God for several years maintains that the local authorities are bent on closing down the Bible College. Noel Morris told Forum 18 from New Zealand that FSB (former KGB) officers and officials from Primorsky Krai regional department for religious affairs first visited the Bible College in early February. "Week after week they kept coming for several hours each day. They had copies of e-mails and faxes that had been intercepted. They were looking for any small excuse [to close down the college]."

Pressure is also being exerted on the Bible College in the form of impossibly burdensome demands by the local Fire and Sanitation Departments, Morris maintained. In an April message received by Forum 18, Svetlana Mishchenko says that the college must install a fire alarm costing 1,400 US dollars (10,090 Norwegian kroner or 1,285 Euros), while "to do a minimum of what they ask in the kitchen" would cost 2,000 US dollars.

In order to have an appeal case at Russia's Supreme Court in Moscow, the college must now find a further 2,000 US dollars, wrote Mishchenko. The appeal, to be fought on behalf of the college by the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, was lodged

on 31 March, but no date for it has yet been announced.

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