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RUSSIA: Urals Protestants kept out of sight?

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

Urals region Protestants sometimes encounter local state obstruction of evangelism, along with local state support of the Orthodox, but one local pastor told Forum 18 News Service that local authorities are, in the cases of Protestants who own their own buildings, "happy for us to do what we like in our own buildings." Local personal relationships have a key influence on the religious freedom situation, pastors in two areas telling Forum 18 that building and keeping church property was helped by their having good personal relationships with the authorities. Although local Orthodox opposition to local Protestants is strong, leading to media attacks, and in some cases physical attacks, one local commentator told Forum 18 that, "when people started to see the so-called 'sects' being helpful, their [negative] media image began to break down." Local Protestants have also found that negative campaigning by Orthodox has backfired, leading to the Orthodox gaining a negative public image.

Although Protestants in the Urals region sometimes encounter local state obstruction of evangelism (See F18News 2 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=383), one local pastor commented to Forum 18 News Service on 22 July that the local authorities are "happy for us to do what we like in our own buildings."

Pastor Leonid Brodovsky added, however, that this has been the only option available to Protestant churches in Tyumen city (approximately 1,500km or 930 miles east of Moscow) since 1999, when ongoing rental contracts for worship services in state-owned cultural centres and cinemas were no longer permitted. Speaking to Forum 18 in Tyumen on 21 July, Pavel and Marina Gailans of "Greater Grace" Evangelical Church further commented that, while venues closed to religious organisations are cheap to rent, those available are prohibitively expensive. After their congregation was told in 1999 to leave the school premises which it had used for services outside class time, they said, it met in flats for 18 months until this became impractical. "Greater Grace" now meets at Brodovsky's Tyumen City Church, the Gailanses told Forum 18, as do several other Protestant churches without their own places of worship.

According to Brodovsky, those Protestant churches which do have their own buildings in Tyumen city acquired them in the 1990s, while no Protestant request for authorisation to construct a church building in the city centre has been approved in recent years. "The authorities say there is no space, or that a church can't have land in the centre as it has been here for fewer than ten years," he explained to Forum 18.

Asked about the allocation of city land to Protestant churches on 23 July, Aleksandr Gradusov, Tyumen region's religious affairs official told Forum 18 that the New Apostolic Church had completed a building in the city in 2003. A Jehovah's Witness congregation had also built Kingdom Hall in Tyumen, remarked Gradusov: "No one is looking to ban them here."

Forum 18 News Service also noted a new-looking Adventist church directly opposite the Orthodox Holy Trinity Monastery in Tyumen city centre.

Highlighting the key significance of local personal relationships for the religious freedom situation (See F18News 2 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=383), on 21 July Pastor Aleksandr Lepyokhin of "Word of Life" Baptist church in Tobolsk (200km or 125 miles north-east of Tyumen) said that his church had had no particular difficulty in building its prominent red-brick prayer house from 1994-98, while good relations with a public art institute allowed the congregation to use its premises prior to its completion. In the asbestos-mining town of Asbest (55km or 20 miles north-east of Yekaterinburg), Pastor Andrei Berdishchev similarly told Forum 18 on 18 July that, when local Orthodox queried why his "Love of Christ" Pentecostal Church had been allowed to occupy a former furniture shop in the town centre, the municipal authorities simply responded that it had been a lawful private sale.

All the Protestant representatives with whom Forum 18 spoke reported vocal Orthodox opposition to their activity. Pastor Aleksandr Lepyokhin, for example, described Orthodox demonstrating with anti-sect placards at Baptist showings of the "Jesus film," the advertising posters for which were often defaced with similar slogans. In 2001, a series of articles by an Orthodox journalist, in the "Vecherny Asbest" local newspaper, accused the "Love of Christ" Pentecostal Church of being a "totalitarian sect", purporting to have municipal status by displaying a sign describing itself as "Asbest City Church." Soon afterwards, Pastor Berdishchev told Forum 18, two local deputies and two Orthodox priests came and removed the sign from the church door (it has since been

reinstated). In a separate incident, he added, "hooligans" smashed the windows of the church and beat up two of its members, saying during the attack that they had read about the "sectarians" in the local press.

Sverdlovsk regional religious affairs official until early 2004 and now head of the "Centre for Open Society" NGO, Tatyana Tagiyeva accused the local state authorities of passivity in the face of such opposition. "If a placard saying 'Sectarians out of Russia!' is not inciting religious hatred then what is? If you kill them?" she remarked to Forum 18 in Yekaterinburg on 18 July.

Protestant representatives also maintained to Forum 18 that the local authorities give preferential treatment to the Orthodox Church. In Tyumen, Pastor Leonid Brodovsky described how the Protestants' social service is never covered by the local state media, while "there are constant reports about the consecration of new Orthodox churches, or bells being hung up." When members of his Pentecostal church visit hospitals or prisons, he said, the administrations of these institutions often refuse to work with them, saying that they already have a contract with Tobolsk and Tyumen Orthodox diocese.

Tyumen regional religious affairs official Aleksandr Gradusov told Forum 18 that religious organisations "do their own thing" in the social sphere, and maintained that the Tyumen regional authorities do not have any official agreements with religious organisations in that area, "unfortunately." In the May edition of Tobolsk and Tyumen diocesan newspaper, however, Archbishop Dimitri (Kapalin) outlines recent examples of Orthodox collaboration with the local authorities while castigating "a new crusade against Russia by numerous sectarians, financed by foreign centres" in his address to President Vladimir Putin and representatives of Russia's Northern Territories at the latter's April 2004 congress. The newspaper states that it is partially published with financial support from Tyumen regional administration.

In Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg) region, the local media broadcasts Orthodox bulletins almost daily, while a 19 May 2004 regional decree transferred the remaining building cost of the Church-on-the-Blood (a 60-metre-high Orthodox cathedral completed in 2003 on the site of the 1918 martyrdom of the Russian royal family at a cost of almost 368 million roubles [85,511,053 Norwegian Kroner, 10,256,704 Euros, or 12,581,612 US Dollars]) onto the region's state public accounts.

Despite this state of affairs, Tatyana Tagiyeva referred Forum 18 to recent indications of a slight change in public attitudes towards Protestant churches. "When people started to see the so-called 'sects' being helpful, their [negative] media image began to break down." The "Love of Christ" Pentecostal Church is indeed finding that its projects to help street children, alcoholics and drug addicts are "opening doors," Pastor Andrei Berdishchev told Forum 18, citing several examples when local state representatives who have either had relatives assisted by the projects or who work in the social sphere came round to support the church's activity.

Berdishchev also noted changes in the town's attitude towards Orthodox activity, such as: complaints by readers "simply bored" by a series of 'anti-sect' articles in 2001 in the now-defunct "Vecherny Asbest" newspaper; the frustration of Asbest's mayor's office and of the passport department at numerous refusals by local Orthodox to accept an individual taxpayer's number and new passports; and Orthodox criticism of Protestants as enjoying generous foreign support appearing hollow, after a local Orthodox parish advertised a substantial donation to its new roof.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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