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RUSSIA: Will Baptist prayer house closure threat be carried out?

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

The authorities in Lipetsk have threatened to close a Baptist prayer house, if it is not approved fit for use by today, 22 February, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "It's been built legally – why won't they give us more time to get it fit for use?" Pastor Vladimir Boyev of Holy Trinity Baptist Church commented to Forum 18. He thinks that the threat is connected with the fact that another congregation from the same Baptist church meets for worship at an Orthodox church building elsewhere in Lipetsk. Pastor Boyev does not oppose transferring that building to the local Orthodox diocese, but does want a replacement. The prayer house under threat, which has been built by the Baptists, is incomplete due to the high cost of building work. But despite this, it is used by its congregation. Police first demanded that the prayer house be closed in November 2006, and then the local construction inspectorate imposed a fine and warned that the building would be closed down. Forum 18 notes that similar situations have tended to drag on beyond deadlines, and similar threats of closure or demolition have recently become more apparent.

The authorities in the city of Lipetsk (approximately 500km [300 miles] south east of Moscow) have threatened to close a Baptist prayer house if it is not approved fit for use by today, 22 February, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "It's been built legally – why won't they give us more time to get it fit for use?" Pastor Vladimir Boyev of Holy Trinity Baptist Church remarked to Forum 18 on 15 February. "And where are we supposed to go? 'A good master doesn't make his dog go outside in winter,' as we say in Russia."

According to Pastor Boyev, police first visited the prayer house to demand that it be closed in November 2006. Then, in late January, the local construction inspectorate imposed a fine of 10,000 Roubles [2,360 Norwegian Kroner, 290 Euros, or 380 US Dollars] and warned that the building would be closed down if not declared fit for use [sdano v ekspluatatsiyu] by 22 February.

Forum 18 notes that similar situations - such as the threatened demolition of Mosque No. 34 in the southern city of Astrakhan - have tended to drag on beyond deadlines (see most recently F18News 8 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908).

Speaking after a 15 February local arbitration court hearing at which the church appealed against the fine, Pastor Boyev said that he has so far refused to pay. "We're not a commercial organisation – our students and pensioners can't afford it." He added that no further demand has been made, however, as the judge noted that the fine was incorrectly addressed to the church organisation rather than "Good Shepherd", the Baptist mission that is the building's legal owner.

Pastor Boyev admitted to Forum 18 that while in "a good state", the prayer house is technically unfinished, as it has no gas, electricity or running water. He pointed out, however, that in winter his 200-strong congregation uses only the ground floor – where a temporary generator provides heat and light – and that these amenities are not required in summer, when the upper floors are also used. Members of the church – which is affiliated to Russia's main Baptist Union - carry their own water supplies to the building, he added. A photograph of the prayer house may be viewed at <http://baptistyouth.ru/news/detail.php?ID=3361>.

Explaining why the prayer house is not yet finished, Pastor Boyev told Forum 18 that gas installation alone has been quoted at four million roubles [936,220 Norwegian Kroner, 116,164 Euros or 152,600 US Dollars]: "It is all very expensive for us and so we are doing it gradually." The Baptist pastor also pointed out that many Orthodox churches in Lipetsk region do not meet the standards demanded of the prayer house, "but no one shuts them down." While the state sometimes even publicises its support for new Orthodox construction (see, for example, F18News 22 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=346), he remarked, "no one does the same for us. Why? We're also Russian citizens, we were born here, we breathe the same air."

In Pastor Boyev's view, the current pressure on the Baptists is connected with the fact that another congregation from the same Baptist church meets for worship at an Orthodox church building elsewhere in the city, allocated by the Soviet authorities in 1989. While not opposed to transferring this building to the local Orthodox diocese, he said, "we want a replacement – we're not asking for something with golden domes or of a western standard, but what the authorities have offered us so far is in a very bad state."

When Forum 18 began to ask about the Baptist church in Lipetsk on 16 February, the region's main religious affairs official interrupted with the retort that "it's not Baptist, it's an Orthodox church which was given to the Baptists due to the ignorance of an earlier administration." Told that the threatened closure of the Baptists' new prayer house was in fact Forum 18's main concern, Olga

Fyodorova asked for time to examine relevant documentation.

Contacted again as requested on 20 February, she explained that the Baptists' renovation and use of the historically Orthodox church building in accordance with an August 1989 decision by the state authorities was the cause of the current problems. Once President Boris Yeltsin's 23 April 1993 decree ordered the transfer of objects of religious significance to religious organisations, she continued, local Orthodox began to demand that the church be returned to them. According to Fyodorova, the Baptists at that time agreed to vacate the building once they had completed a new prayer house on a different site, and were accordingly granted a plot of land by the city authorities in June 1993.

While the regional religious affairs official told Forum 18 that a "beautiful, modern" prayer house has been built and is in use, she maintained that the Baptists have refused to leave the Orthodox church building despite being offered replacement premises. When Forum 18 asked why this should be the case, since any building would be a bonus to the Baptists if all they had been offered in compensation was the land they received in 1993, Fyodorova responded with the Russian proverb, "an appetite comes with eating" ["the more you have, the more you want"]. Asked why the authorities have not declared the new prayer house fit for use if this would oblige the Baptists to move out of the Orthodox church building, she maintained that she was unaware of the situation regarding the prayer house's incompletion. The regional religious affairs official pointed out, however, that the Baptists had had since 1993 to finish construction.

Forum 18 notes that similar threats of demolition or closure have become more apparent in recent months (see F18News 8 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908). In one case, Glorification Pentecostal Church in Abakan (Khakassia Republic, approximately 3,800 km [2,375 miles] east of Moscow) has been ordered to demolish its church building and vacate the plot of land beneath it by 1 April 2007. In the latest hearing of the church's appeal against this ruling, Khakassia Arbitration Court on 8 February ordered that the case be re-examined, assistant pastor and administrator Aleksandr Prus told Forum 18 on 9 February. The first hearing is slated for 1 March 2007.

In a separate religious property development, assistant mayor of Moscow Valeri Vinogradov on 13 February insisted to "Moskovsky Komsomolets" newspaper that the Society for Krishna Consciousness has not been denied the possibility of building a temple in the Russian capital. "We have met with the community several times and have found a solution," he maintained, adding that documentation for a plot of land was being drawn up "today – a decree allocating land is on the point of being issued." The Moscow authorities suddenly withdrew permission for a new Hare Krishna temple on 7 October 2005 following strong criticism from the Russian Orthodox Church (see F18News 20 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=746).

"We've also heard that the authorities are preparing to do something," Hare Krishna spokesman Sergei Zuyev (Radkha Damodar) commented to Forum 18 on 16 February. He added that his community has yet to receive any corresponding official document, however, "and in both Soviet and capitalist/not-clear-what Russia we've learnt that until you have a document, you can't say that anything has happened."

The telephone of Konstantin Blazhenov of Moscow's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations went unanswered on 16, 19, 20 and 21 February. (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

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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