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RUSSIA: Last of 31 court cases for Komi Baptists?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

For the past six years the local administration of Komi in north-east European Russia has banned completion of both Russia's largest Baptist Church and a nearby centre for the physically disabled. Forum 18 News Service has discovered that the Baptist's problems started after a visit by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II. The latest obstacle placed by authorities in the way of completion of the church is a sales tax demand for three million roubles (approximately 100,000 US dollars, 730,000 Norwegian Kroner or 88,000 Euros) - even though the church has never been sold. Although local authorities are also preventing completion of the centre for the physically disabled, which the Baptists have now decided to give to the local authority, the local religious affairs adviser had high praise for the Baptists' charitable work.

Completion of Russia's largest Baptist church in the capital of the north-eastern European republic of Komi has been banned by the local administration for the past six years. But speaking to Forum 18 News Service on 9 July the church's lawyer, Aleksandr Krivosheyenko, was hopeful that the Baptists would win a local arbitration court case this autumn – the thirty-first that the congregation has fought to retain its place of worship. The red-brick and gold-domed Church of Christ the Saviour, whose spire measures over 50 metres, belongs to the Komi local body of Russia's mainstream Baptist Union.

The legal struggle for the building dates back to 26 June 1997, when then head of the republic of Komi, Yuri Spiridonov, issued a decree to various local state departments calling for check-ups on whether the Baptists were acting in accordance with the Russian Civil Code, tax legislation and their own charter. Construction on the church was halted, pending completion of these check-ups. Forum 18 observed that the main body and exterior of the church building are complete, but the interior worship hall for approximately 1,000 faithful has barely been touched. The current congregation of 250 meets at present in a room beneath this main hall for services.

During most of the local arbitration, higher arbitration, and local federal and supreme federal court cases following the ban on construction, the church stood as plaintiff, Krivosheyenko told Forum 18. This was not by choice, however. When officially informed that tenders would be announced on the building the next day, he said, the church was obliged to rush to file suit on the morning of that day or risk losing ownership of the building: "We couldn't have done otherwise."

The outstanding issue now, added Krivosheyenko, is the local tax inspectorate's demand for more than three million roubles (approximately 100,000 US dollars, 730,000 Norwegian Kroner or 88,000 Euros) tax from the sale of the building. The church argues that since the building was built by its owner and thus never sold, it is not liable for this tax. Until the issue is resolved, the church cannot resume construction.

According to Krivosheyenko, the Komi Baptists now do not have sufficient funds to complete a sister building a few minutes' walk away from the church where construction has also been halted. This similarly large, four-storey complex had been intended as a church-run rehabilitation centre for the physically disabled, but the Baptists have decided to give it to the local state administration in September, he said, "on condition that we are sometimes allowed to preach there and hold events."

This second building had been a particular bone of contention with the authorities. In the text of Spiridonov's 1997 decree, the republic's Ministry of Finance is ordered to examine the funding for it, while the Land Resource and Construction Committee attached to the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Ministry is asked to consider the project's land use, "noting that the plot of land has been allocated for the construction of a rehabilitation centre for the physically disabled and a theological academy is being built alongside it."

Krivosheyenko believes the 1997 decree to be a direct consequence of a visit by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II to Syktyvkar the previous year. Then secretary of the local Orthodox diocese's main St Stefan of Prokopyevsk Brotherhood who has since left to join the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, Yuri Yekishev told Forum 18 on 7 July that his task had been to get the construction of the Baptist church stopped: "[Local Orthodox Bishop] Pitirim told me to go and argue with [Yuri] Spiridonov – if I lost he said he would throw me out."

Forum 18 was unable to speak to either Bishop Pitirim or diocesan secretary Fr Filip (Filippov), as F18News was told that both had had to leave on an "urgent work-related trip." In an interview with Orthodox mrezha.ru website in 1999, Bishop Pitirim states that he does not meet with the pastor of the Baptist church, Pavel Kobzar, because "this person, while having few people, has built an enormous church in opposition to all of Orthodoxy with the aim of recruiting [converts]... that is, sowing conflict."

The secular authorities appear to have had no initial complaints about the Baptists' project. The huge proportions of the church and its prime location site in a former public park in the very centre of Syktyvkar set it apart from other Protestant churches in Russia, which are usually more modest and allocated inconspicuous suburban sites. According to Krivosheyenko, the congregation had originally planned a building half the size, he said, but their plans were rejected as not being large enough for a city centre building by the Municipal Construction Committee. Forum 18 noted that almost all buildings in the centre of Syktyvkar are on a grand scale. While US sponsors provided the majority of funds, according to Krivosheyenko, local firms also helped, including timber and paper complex Syktyvkar LPK, which donated 100,000 dollars. (This company is also listed among 133 local firms thanked for donating to Syktyvkar's new Moscow Patriarchate cathedral of St Stefan of Perm in its promotional booklet, captioned "Believe! Become aware! Donate!")

In an interview with Forum 18 News Service in her office on 8 July, the adviser on religious issues to the assistant head of Komi republic, Galina Gabusheva, claimed that the Baptists could not finish the church building due to "energy and tax debts," which were being "sorted out." While remarking that Kobzar exaggerated the number of his parishioners, Gabusheva suggested that the church's existence was "not bad from a cultural point of view" since it provided "variety." She also had high praise for the Baptists' charitable work.

Other than the deadlock on their place of worship, the Baptists do not report other problems. While two US church workers with Komi Church of Christ – Larry Little and Charles Tharp – had their visas revoked in 2001, Krivosheyenko told Forum 18 that he has been involved in formulating 28 invitations for brief visits by US church workers since last year and has not encountered difficulties. Speaking to Forum 18 on 10 July, Daniil Popov, an elder at Komi Christian Church, an active non-denominational Protestant church which operates predominantly in the Komi language, said that his church had also not encountered problems inviting foreign preachers.

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