

18 December 2008

RUSSIA: Chill begins to bite for Moscow Pentecostals

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

As the temperature in Moscow dips below zero, one of the city's largest Pentecostal churches meets for worship in a marquee on a rough patch of land in an outlying suburb. "We've nowhere else to go," Bakur Azaryan, Emmanuel Church's assistant pastor, explained to Forum 18 News Service. The land is tied to a former workers' club bought by Emmanuel seven years ago. But as the local authorities have still not drawn up the Church's land rights, it cannot use or reconstruct the building, gutted in a suspected arson attack in 2007. In April 2008, Emmanuel lost access to rented premises apparently due to state pressure – a familiar complaint by Moscow Protestant communities. A local official maintained to Forum 18 that Emmanuel may in fact use or reconstruct its building, but this was countered by a more senior Moscow official. Konstantin Blazhenov also insisted to Forum 18 that the land rights issue is being resolved but is just taking "a long time". Without stable premises, Emmanuel cannot licence its seminary, which the Justice Ministry this month tried to dissolve for being unlicensed.

Barred from their adjacent building, members of Moscow's Emmanuel Pentecostal Church braved subzero temperatures last Sunday, 14 December, as they packed away the blue-and-yellow-striped marquee, benches, portable heaters and electricity generators now required for their weekly worship. A recent Justice Ministry attempt to dissolve their seminary is just the latest offensive in the authorities' long-running campaign against the Church, Assistant Pastor Bakur Azaryan pointed out as Forum 18 News Service looked on.

Ever since it bought a two-storey former workers' club at the heart of the crumbling 1970s apartment blocks of the Solntsevo housing estate on the outskirts of Moscow in January 2002, local officials have refused to allot the Church the plot of land associated with it. And without the right to own, rent or use this land, Emmanuel cannot worship inside the building – gutted by a suspected arson attack in March 2007 – or reconstruct it.

The Church is also therefore unable to licence its seminary, Pastor Azaryan explained to Forum 18. The seminary is one of 22 religious organisations on a Justice Ministry list made public in September whose liquidation the Ministry had sought through the courts (see F18News 18 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1231).

The Solntsevo local authorities also oppose Emmanuel's services in front of their building, attended by up to 700 people. After police drew up charges against Pastor Azaryan for organising worship there in late August 2008, he was twice summoned to Solntsevo Public Prosecutor's Office for questioning, but no court case followed. One September Saturday evening, some 20 police officers surrounded the area in front of the church's building to prevent the erection of the marquee the following morning, he said, "but we just put out the benches as usual and had the service without it." On 5 October, police charged another of Emmanuel's pastors, Yuri Popov, with violating the procedure for organising and holding public events (Article 3.1 of Moscow's Administrative Violations Code). A local administrative court fined him 2,000 roubles (492 Norwegian Kroner, 52 Euros or 73 US Dollars) on 27 November. The Church is in the process of appealing.

As the plot of land associated with Emmanuel's building has not been allotted to the church, services taking place there constitute public meetings, the head of Solntsevo Administration, Aleksei Bashayev, argues in a 14 October letter – seen by Forum 18 - to Emmanuel's main pastor, Aleksandr Purshaga. While arrangements for such meetings are subject to advance approval by the local state authorities under the 2004 Demonstrations Law, Solntsevo Administration "is not legally authorised to permit public worship," Bashayev concludes.

Emmanuel Church insists that religious worship does not qualify as a public demonstration. "It is our building and we should be able to meet there," Pastor Azaryan remarked to Forum 18. Even though Moscow's Architecture and Town-Planning Committee confirmed as recently as August 2007 that the plot of land associated with the church building extends some 150 square metres beyond the approximately 600 square metres occupied by the building itself, more junior officials have declined to formalise Emmanuel's rights to any of it.

In a 15 April 2008 document seen by Forum 18, the branch of Moscow's Land Resources Department in the city's Western Administrative District - which includes Solntsevo - decided on 12 February that it is prepared to approve the Church's rights only to the land directly beneath its building. Confirming this decision in a 10 November letter to Pastor Purshaga, Konstantin Baranov, first

vice-prefect of the Western Administrative District, also notes that the land beneath the building is "directly alongside a nature reserve complex, a park zone for the rest and leisure of district residents." This is not subject to privatisation, he maintains.

Situated between the area currently used for worship immediately in front of Emmanuel's building and the street, Forum 18 found this approximately 100 square metres (120 square yards) of disputed land to be a flat patch of unkempt grass crossed by cracked concrete paths. Since the congregation began worshipping outside its building in May, the local authorities have set up several miniature fairground rides on the patch of grass in an apparent attempt to reinforce their claim to the plot, Pastor Azaryan noted with amusement.

A secretary at Solntsevo District Administration recommended that Forum 18 contact its Organisational Department about the situation on 16 December. There, an official who declined to be named insisted that Emmanuel's lack of land rights does not prevent the Church from using, repairing or even carrying out major reconstruction to its building. She did not know why the rights to the land have still not been allotted, but maintained that this was a matter for Moscow City Government, not Solntsevo District Administration nor even the Western Administrative District.

The Solntsevo official also told Forum 18 that it was up to the courts to determine whether Emmanuel has the right to hold services on the land in front of the church building. She presumed, however, that a violation must have taken place for police to bring charges, but was unaware of their outcome. Remarking, "We've no right to ban anything," she also pointed out that Solntsevo Administration has received many complaints from local residents about the church holding services next to a playground, playing music at weekends and setting up the marquee.

Konstantin Blazhenov, the official dealing with non-Orthodox confessions at Moscow City Government's Committee for Relations for Religious Organisations, stated on 17 December that Emmanuel may not use or reconstruct its Solntsevo building until the rights to the associated land are drawn up. When Forum 18 pointed out that the Church has been waiting seven years for this to happen, he remarked that the process "takes a long time" and would hopefully be completed soon, but declined to speculate further. Blazhenov also confirmed that the responsibility for drawing up the Church's land rights lies at the level of Moscow City Government. Told that more junior officials are seeking to limit those rights to the land directly beneath the Church's building, he retorted: "All the more reason to wait for the final decision!"

Initially commenting that it was "a legally complex question," Blazhenov confirmed to Forum 18 that Emmanuel should provide the local authorities with advance notification for its marquee services.

Emmanuel worships outside its building because "we've nowhere else to go," Pastor Azaryan told Forum 18. The Church was forced out of rented premises – a cultural centre attached to an academic institute – at the end of April 2008, and "no one wants to give us a place." The cultural centre's administration told the Church that representatives of the FSB state security service had ordered its removal, he said.

Both in and outside Moscow, Protestant communities – usually without their own worship buildings – have reported ongoing problems renting premises, the majority of which are still state-controlled (see F18News 19 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=633).

In one recent case, Pastor Andrei Blinkov of the Pentecostal Revival Christian Centre in the Moscow suburb of Khimki told Forum 18 that its rental agreement of more than five years' standing with a local cultural centre was curtailed within days of the state authorities learning about it. After Pastor Blinkov made an enquiry to local officials about a building application for his church, someone telephoned his home in late September 2008 to ask how to join and was invited to its next worship service at the cultural centre. The next day, the pastor told Forum 18, the centre's administrator was told by a state official not to rent the premises to the church. Pastor Blinkov does not know who in the local administration is responsible, however: "Clearly there is someone there against so-called cults (..) but there is no document, no recourse to the law."

In 2005, several Emmanuel members were detained for what the Moscow authorities claimed were unapproved protests outside Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's office. The situation attracted widespread media coverage, and the Church received assurances from senior officials that its problems would be quickly resolved (see F18News 13 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=583). The Church continues to hold weekly protests outside Luzhkov's office, now unobstructed.

Originally, Emmanuel tried to build a church in the Russian capital. After the Church obtained the necessary approval from all relevant state departments for construction on a plot of land allocated to it in 1996, the local district assembly in Moscow's Vernadsky Prospekt District suddenly rejected the plans in November 2000. Quoted in the 11 December 2001 issue of Russian religious affairs publication NG-Religii, Vernadsky Prospekt district newspaper explained that the assembly had decided not to support the project because representatives of Emmanuel Church were "exerting psychological pressure upon local officials and misleading local residents as to their true intentions." This phraseology is strikingly similar to that of a 6 March 2001 letter to the head of Vernadsky Prospekt district assembly from the Department for the Study of Sects at the Russian Orthodox Church's St Tikhon Theological Institute. Quoted in the English-language Moscow Times on 10 June 2005, however, the chief spokesman for

then Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II maintained that Emmanuel's problems were "by no means connected to the Orthodox Church."

Without stable premises, Emmanuel cannot licence its seminary, which the Justice Ministry this month (December 2008) tried to dissolve for being unlicensed. The seminary is one of a few religious organisations recently announced as slated for liquidation which is not defunct or otherwise obsolete (see F18News 18 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1231). (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 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=1196.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY