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GEORGIA: Why can't minority faiths build places of worship?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Latin-rite Catholics, Assyrian Chaldean Catholics, Pentecostals, Yezidis (a uniquely Kurdish ancient faith), True Orthodox, Lutherans, Old Believers, Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have all told Forum 18 News Service that the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate has either caused them problems in or prevented them from acquiring, building or reclaiming places of worship. A leading Yezidi, Agit Mirzoev, told Forum 18 that he had been told by friends of Patriarch Ilya "that it would be an insult for the patriarch to even discuss the subject". However, the Salvation Army, possibly because of its social projects, has not had problems and nor has either the Armenian Apostolic Church, or the Hare Krishna community. The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate itself is currently building many new churches.

Leaders of many faiths have complained to Forum 18 News Service that the dominant position of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate in public religious life means that no other faiths are allowed to build new places of worship. Catholics, Assyrian Chaldean Catholics, Protestants, Yezidis (a uniquely Kurdish ancient faith) and True Orthodox believers said that any plans they prepare to build are always stymied by officials at the behest of the Patriarchate. Leading Yezidi activist Agit Mirzoev told Forum 18 he went to friends of Patriarch Ilya to try to get him to back their plans for a temple in the capital Tbilisi (T'bilisi). "Word came back that it would be an insult for the patriarch to even discuss the subject," Mirzoev reported sadly. "Without his approval no project will get anywhere."

Mirzoev and his colleague Dmitri Pirbari, who is a hereditary pir (one of the two classes of the Yezidi clergy), reported that the Yezidi Kurds do meet for rituals, funerals and festivals, but have to do so in private homes. "This is highly inappropriate for our faith," they told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 7 November. "We're not like Pentecostals who can meet anywhere."

The Yezidis remain determined to build a temple, adding that they do not mind where in the city they build it. "We want to do so on a legal basis, to enjoy our rights that are in the Constitution and in the international agreements Georgia has signed." They began looking to buy a site in 2002, but initial discussions with city officials were not hopeful. "When we started to discuss it we got the feeling that officials don't want it, though no-one would say so openly."

The Catholic Church has had great difficulty trying to recover churches confiscated during the Soviet period and handed over to the Patriarchate in the late 1980s or early 1990s. "There are five churches – in Batumi (Batu'mi), Kutaisi (K'u'taisi), Gori, Ude and Ivliida – that have not been given back," Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto, leader of the Catholic Church in Georgia, told Forum 18 on 4 November. "We are trying all legal means to get them back peacefully. We don't want to make problems – the situation is already very difficult."

He cited several places where the Catholics have been able to build churches in recent years, but said elsewhere it is impossible, including in Kutaisi and in the southern town of Akhaltsikhe (Akhalts'ikhe). "It all depends on the permission of the Orthodox bishop – I know because I've seen it. It's not a written law, but if he doesn't want it you can't build." In Akhaltsikhe the church acquired land but "officials are dragging out the process so that there won't be a Catholic church". Bishop Pasotto said local officials kept finding "problems" in the documentation, while the local Orthodox bishop's opposition played a key role. "The bishop said that if you build a church the people will be against you and there would be a revolution. I decided to wait – to avoid problems."

Given that there is nothing in law that requires Catholics to seek approval from the Orthodox Patriarchate before seeking planning permission for churches, Forum 18 asked Bishop Pasotto why it does so. "Because we're sister Churches," he responded. "We can't just do things on our own, we have to seek the views of others. If this was Europe we would think differently."

Of the 25 or so Latin-rite Catholic parishes, only about half have their own church. Some of the others used to rent premises in schools, though that is now impossible and they all have to meet in private homes.

The priest of the Assyrian Chaldean Catholic parish, Fr Benny Yadgar, told Forum 18 that he has acquired a plot of land in Tbilisi to build a church, but difficulties persist. "No-one directly says no, but they say until the country has a religion law and religious communities get legal status you can't build," he told Forum 18 on 4 November. "You never find out who has responsibility, you are just sent from office to office until you go round in circles." He notes that although they cannot use the site they must pay tax on it

each year of 1,000 US dollars.

The Assyrian community currently meets for worship in the Catholic cathedral, but Fr Yadgar finds the church layout unsuitable for Assyrian worship and believes the community has the right to have its own church.

The Lutheran Church is also unable to get back its old churches, one of which – in Asureti, close to Tbilisi – is partly in the hands of the Patriarchate. Pastor Gari Azikov said the main church in Tbilisi was built in the mid-1990s and officially opened in 1997. "When we got permission the political situation was such that it was to the advantage of the Georgian government to allow it," he told Forum 18 at the church on 4 November. "I don't think we could have built it today, as the Patriarchate now has such weight in the government." The Rustavi (Rust'avi) Lutheran congregation also managed to convert a house into a church in 1998, before such work became impossible. The other congregations have no places of worship.

Teimuri Chakhava, a member of the Tbilisi parish of the Novozybkov Old Believers led by Bishop Savva, reported that the community had built their church near the city's lake in 1994-5. "It would be impossible to build it now," he told Forum 18. He said their fellow congregation in Gori have land on the edge of town where they would like to build a church. "Administration officials told them to build a modest church that wasn't grandiose so that it wouldn't offend the Patriarchate," he reported. "Officials are afraid of them."

The True Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston has three congregations in Tbilisi, but no churches. "Churches are in homes, with no signs outside to say they are churches," Fr Gela Aroshvili told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. He pointed out that one of these – in Shemokmedi in south-western Georgia – was destroyed completely on the orders of the local Orthodox clergy last year. The community would like to rebuild the Shemokmedi church. "The local governor told us that as long as he was in office he would not allow us to rebuild our church."

Fr Aroshvili showed Forum 18 a scale model of the church centre they have been seeking to build in Tbilisi since 1997. However, as long as the present climate prevails they will never get permission to build it.

An official at Tbilisi's only mosque, which is shared between local Shia and Sunni Muslims, said there are only 40 mosques in the country. "This is not enough, but there is the problem of both money and permission," he told Forum 18 on 3 November.

The Jehovah's Witnesses – one of the larger religious minorities in Georgia – report that they have just one proper Kingdom Hall in the country. "Everywhere else we meet in rooms in private homes," Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimitia told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 7 November. He reported a victory in the town of Chiatura in western Georgia, where the community's purchase of land last year was challenged in court. "The court ruled that the land had been acquired correctly."

Despite this de facto ban on building new places of worship, the country's senior religious affairs official brushes aside any concerns. "Religious communities can build churches," Tamaz Papuashvili, head of the Religion and National Development department at the State Chancellery, claimed to Forum 18 in his office on 6 November. He conceded only that the Catholics had faced obstruction from the mayor's office in Akhaltsikhe, which opposed the building of the Catholic church. "But they appealed through the courts." He added that construction of one mosque in an ethnic Azeri village had been halted because it had been built without planning permission. "It remains half-built."

At the same time as building new places of worship is well-nigh impossible, the difficulties for minority faiths are compounded by the near-impossibility of renting public facilities in many towns and cities. Tbilisi-based Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky told Forum 18 his church has an affiliated congregation in Batumi, the capital of the province of Adjara on the Black Sea. "They used to rent premises, but this was cancelled last year."

Georgi Chitadze, pastor of the Gori congregation of the Word of Life Pentecostal church, said that Orthodox pressure has made renting public facilities in the nearby town of Rustavi impossible for the past decade. "We could rent in Gori, but not in Rustavi," he told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. He said the director of one Rustavi hall was keen to rent, but would not do so without permission from the regional mayor's office. Two years ago he visited Zaza Mebaduri, religious affairs advisor at the mayor's office. "If you become Orthodox you can rent halls," Pastor Chitadze quoted him as saying. "If you don't, there is no chance."

Mamuka Jebisashvili, pastor of the Tbilisi Word of Life congregation, said his church too has been barred from renting in the capital. "We met in a theatre, but the press attacks – first against the director, then against us – were so intense that he said he could no longer defend us," Jebisashvili told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. In the spring they had to leave. For two months they had nowhere to meet until they reached agreement with another Pentecostal church to rent their premises on Saturdays. They cannot therefore meet for Sunday worship.

With building and renting premises all but impossible, those without their own dedicated place of worship have had to resort to meeting in homes. This too is made impossible in many places, as self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes – such as those of the violent Jvari (Cross) organisation in Rustavi – attack religious groups that meet in private homes (see F18News 13 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=182).

Forum 18 has spoken to several religious leaders who decided to go ahead and build offices and places of worship quietly to avoid a Patriarchate veto. They aim to complete and open their buildings without the Patriarchate finding out and being able to raise objections.

One faith that reported no problems opening places of worship or renting premises is the Salvation Army, which has eight congregations in Georgia. "We haven't tried building, but renting has not been a problem," Giorgi Salarishvili, an associate officer, told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 3 November. "We have not faced any pressure not to rent places in the past three years." He believes the respect the Salvation Army has gained because of its social projects may have spared it the problems other groups have faced.

Among faiths that report no need for new places of worship are the Armenian Apostolic Church, which has some 20 parishes, mainly in southern Georgia, and the Hare Krishna community, which has a temple in a private house in Tbilisi.

In stark contrast to the difficulties finding places of worship for minority faiths, the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate is building many new churches. In Tbilisi a massive new cathedral is under construction, as well as many smaller churches. Forum 18 saw a number of new churches recently built or under construction on school or college territory, and heard numerous examples of more. Kalutsky told Forum 18 that at his children's school, the church had been built on the old playground, depriving the children of the opportunity to play outside.

Another Tbilisi resident cited the example of a church built on the playground of the kindergarten in his courtyard. "The kids have nowhere to play," he told Forum 18. He also reported that the city's medical school now has a church on its grounds.

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

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