

29 May 2007

BELARUS: Rented property still barred to Protestants

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Protestant communities in Belarus who do not own their own property continue to find meeting for worship difficult, Forum 18 News Service has found. Despite being barred from renting premises in Grodno, for example, the charismatic Living Word Church has found that "our brother Catholics in this town are letting us meet in their church." Under the Religion Law, registered religious organisations may rent secular premises, but only with a contract and the approval of the relevant local state authority. A consistent pattern has emerged of those who control premises for rent backing out of contracts with Protestants soon after the authorities are informed. One Protestant in Minsk described this to Forum 18 as being "like a suitcase with a false bottom." Such property problems mainly affect Protestant communities as, unlike other communities, they are much less likely to be in possession of historical worship buildings. These are the main premises within which religious events do not require state permission under the Religion Law.

Protestants who did not manage to obtain their own property during the few years of relative freedom of thought, conscience and belief in the 1990s continue to find meeting for worship a challenge, Forum 18 News Service has found. Barred from renting premises in the western city of Grodno [Hrodna], for example, Pastor Dmitry Malyukevich told Forum 18 that his 90-strong charismatic Living Word Church has found an alternative refuge: "Our brother Catholics in this town are letting us meet in their church."

Grodno region's main religious affairs official maintained to Forum 18 on 28 May that he did not know anything about the problem: "If they're getting refusals then I'm hearing it from you for the first time." Igor Popov also insisted that premises' proprietors are the only ones to regulate rental issues.

Pastor Malyukevich told Forum 18 that when he in fact recently raised the issue with Igor Popov, the regional religious affairs official similarly maintained that proprietors decide rental questions and that the state has no objection to Living Word Church.

A registered religious organisation under the restrictive 2002 Religion Law and member of the Belarusian Full Gospel Association, Living Word has gathered for worship in private homes for 12 years without obstruction, Pastor Malyukevich told Forum 18 on 22 May. "But it isn't that convenient – neighbours might not like it – and we should be able to meet at places available for public social events anyhow." For the past 15 months, however, the church has searched Grodno for such premises without success. On at least five occasions, said Pastor Malyukevich, proprietors refused as soon as they understood that they were dealing with a Protestant congregation. Twice the directors of houses of culture initially agreed to rent their facilities – the 29 November 2006 signature and official stamp of one has been viewed by Forum 18 – but backed out soon after the church approached the local authorities for their consent.

Under the 2002 Religion Law, registered religious organisations may rent secular premises, but only on the basis of a contract and with the approval of the relevant local state authority. Unregistered religious communities may not legally exist and therefore cannot rent premises.

In addition, a 2 October 2002 circular letter from Grodno Regional Executive Committee to local cinema directors, seen by Forum 18, orders them to terminate all contracts related to religious worship in cinemas. The reason given is "in order to broaden and optimise the activity of establishments offering a direct cinematic service to the public" (see F18News 8 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=156).

Explaining Living Word's use of his Our Lady of Ostrobrama Church, parish priest Fr Aleksandr Shemet remarked to the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre in late April: "I think other Christians would support us in the same way if the same thing happened to us." Living Word came out in support of the Catholic parish during its recent hunger strike to demand state permission to build a new church in Grodno (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880 and 20 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=893).

Similar obstacles to the rental of publicly available premises exist in the capital, Minsk. In a practice one local Protestant has described to Forum 18 as "like a suitcase with a false bottom", a landlord typically withdraws from an agreement, citing "pressure

from above", soon after a religious community submits details of the arrangement to the local district administration (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560).

It was after being barred from rented public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk that New Life Church began to meet for worship at its disused barn as a last resort (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477). The pastor of another Full Gospel Association church unable to obtain rented premises in the capital, Boris Chernoglaz, wrote to complain about the situation to the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs late last year. In a 10 November 2006 reply viewed by Forum 18, however, the Plenipotentiary's deputy, Vladimir Lameko, insists that the resolution of issues concerning the rental of premises for worship services "lies within the competency of the rented premises' proprietors".

Also in Minsk, Pastor Antoni Bokun of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church was recently fined 20 times the minimum wage for leading worship at his home without state approval (see F18News 28 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=964). As Pastor Bokun explained to the police who detained him, his congregation was forced to meet in this way having similarly been barred from rented public facilities in the city.

Forum 18 notes that there has been no improvement in the rented property situation for Protestant communities over the past two years (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

In Belarus, property problems mainly affect Protestant communities. Unlike the other major confessions present in the country - Orthodox and Catholic (non-Christians such as Jews and Hare Krishna devotees are present only in small numbers) - they are much less likely to be in possession of historical worship buildings, which are the main premises within which religious events do not require state permission under the 2002 Religion Law. Where Protestant communities do not have designated worship buildings, their congregations are also more likely to be too large to meet discreetly in a private home.

Protestant communities consistently face great obstruction from the authorities in rebuilding churches, getting land and buildings formally redesignated for use for worship buildings, and in meeting together for worship in private homes (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966).

The state tends to regard Protestant communities negatively, because it sees them as ideologically and spiritually threatening (see F18News 8 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=824) and as the major source of religious-political dissent (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880). One recent state TV programme sparked a protest from the Pentecostal Union, because it encouraged intolerance of religious minorities (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966).

Protestant communities have been prominent in a nationwide campaign to petition to change the Religion Law (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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

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