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RUSSIA: Methodist church dissolved for having Sunday school

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

Because a United Methodist congregation in the western city of Smolensk has a Sunday school, which is attended by four children, the Regional Court dissolved the Church on 24 March, the church's pastor Aleksandr Vtorov told Forum 18 News Service. The court agreed with the Regional Organised Crime Police that the Methodists were breaking the law by conducting "educational activity in a Sunday school without a corresponding licence". Investigation into the congregation began after a complaint from local Russian Orthodox bishop Ignati (Punin). It originally focused on a planned missionary college, before switching to the Sunday school. Vladimir Ryakhovsky of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice fears the Methodist congregation's liquidation increases the threat to other religious education. "Almost every religious organisation has a Sunday school," he told Forum 18. "I don't know of one that has a separate education licence. Do they intend to liquidate them all?" Elsewhere, adult religious education without a licence has already led to raids and enforced closures.

The unprecedented court liquidation of a Methodist church because it has a Sunday school could affect thousands of religious organisations across Russia, the church's lawyer has told Forum 18 News Service. "Almost every religious organisation has a Sunday school," Vladimir Ryakhovsky of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice remarked on 26 March. "I don't know of one that has a separate education licence. Do they intend to liquidate them all?"

Smolensk Regional Court dissolved Smolensk United Methodist Church on 24 March in response to a suit filed by the Regional Public Prosecutor's Office, the church's pastor Aleksandr Vtorov and Ryakhovsky told Forum 18. The telephone of Yelena Sudarenkova, the prosecutor dealing with the case, went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 26 March.

While court liquidation means loss of legal personality status rather than a complete ban, it does bar the Methodists from maintaining or developing any form of public profile as an organisation, such as through missionary work.

At the request of Smolensk's auxiliary Orthodox bishop, government departments in the western Russian region began a series of check-ups on the Methodist church on 30 January. Arguing that such an institution requires an education licence, the Regional Public Prosecutor's Office forced the church to remove plans for a missionary college from its website (see F18News 28 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1095).

While the sudden state scrutiny shocked the 36-strong congregation, "We are Methodists and we don't want to and will not become Orthodox, no matter how hard they try to scare us," Pastor Vtorov told Forum 18. In a further surprise development, however, the case against the church abruptly switched focus from the planned missionary college to its functioning Sunday school.

During their investigation, Smolensk Regional Organised Crime Police established that the Methodists were breaking the law by conducting "educational activity [obrazovatel'naya deyatel'nost'] in a Sunday school without a corresponding licence," Sergei Sekirov, Senior Counsellor of Justice at Smolensk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office, wrote to Pastor Vtorov on 6 March.

Viewed by Forum 18, the Office's six-page, 28 February suit against the Methodists – based on a 62-page report – makes no mention of their missionary college plans. Instead, it also equates the Sunday school classes with "educational activity".

"The church's Sunday school - Our Little Hearts - is attended by four children under the age of 14," the Public Prosecutor's Office states in its evidence against the Methodists. "Every pupil has his or her own file, kept on church premises, containing study material and documents attesting the results of assimilation of religious knowledge received in lessons." This is graded from two to five points, it continues, "although these are presented to the children in the form of sea creature symbols (five points – whale or starfish, four points – dolphin or octopus, three points – fish, two points – shark)."

In their 45-minute lessons every Sunday – "planned approximately a month in advance" – the children spend 35 minutes on practical activities such as singing, drawing and crafts and a further ten studying Gilbert Beers' "The Bible in Pictures", finds the Public Prosecutor's Office. This and another work, "The Book of Life", contain no information "about who recommended them and whether they have been approved for use as textbooks in the educational process," the Office complains.

According to the 1992 Education Law, the right to conduct educational activity requires a state licence, the Office notes. In a 13 March 2008 complaint to Smolensk Regional Court, however, Pastor Vtorov maintains that the Sunday school is "not a professional religious institution for the preparation of clergy and religious personnel, but serves as an instrument for the teaching [obucheniye] of religion to and the religious upbringing [vospitaniye] of our followers."

The 1997 Religion Law states that religious organisations have the right to found educational [obrazovatel'nyye] institutions (Article 5, Part 3) and institutions of professional religious education for the preparation of clergy and religious personnel (Article 19, Part 1). These must be licensed. However, the law distinguishes between education [obrazovaniye] and teaching [obucheniye] by stating that "religious groups have the right to engage in the teaching [obucheniye] of religion to and religious upbringing [vospitaniye] of their followers" (Article 7, Part 3). As religious groups are unregistered, it follows that this activity does not require a licence.

Viktor Korolev, the official in charge of religious organisations at the Federal Registration Service, recently made the same distinction to Forum 18 (see F18News 15 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1048). But while Smolensk United Methodist Church's registered charter describes its Sunday school in terms of teaching [obucheniye], Smolensk Public Prosecutor's Office still cites the document as evidence that the church is conducting educational activity.

Previously, confusion over what type of religious educational activity requires a state licence centred on relatively organised adult Bible courses (see F18News 15 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1048). In recent years several religious organisations have been raided or dissolved for conducting such activity without an education licence (see most recently F18News 14 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1087).

In those cases, the lawyer Ryakhovsky pointed out to Forum 18, "at least the Public Prosecutor had a real position. But this is just stupidity." Our Little Hearts is not even a Sunday school as commonly understood, he maintained, "but four children taken care of for 45 minutes so that they don't bother the congregation during the sermon."

As an educational institution, however, argues the Regional Public Prosecutor's Office, Our Little Hearts' timetable, teaching methods, technical equipment, furniture and textbooks must conform to relevant health and safety regulations. Instead, it notes, classes take place in a private house heated by an independent gas boiler, where there is ordinary furniture, no running water and an outside toilet.

Forum 18 notes that such conditions are common in provincial Russia.

The two children of Natalya Kuzmenkova, who now attend Our Little Hearts, went to an Orthodox Sunday school in Smolensk several years ago, she told Forum 18 on 26 March. There is "no difference whatsoever" in the study conditions at the two schools, she maintained. While the premises at the Orthodox Sunday school had cold – but not hot – running water and an inside toilet, said Kuzmenkova, this was used by many classes as well as adult workers at the church and its bakery. The Orthodox Sunday school did not have an education licence, she told Forum 18.

The liquidation of Smolensk United Methodist Church legally prevents its 22 February suit against Orthodox Bishop Ignati (Punin) of Vyazma from being heard, Ryakhovsky told Forum 18. It was Bishop Ignati who asked Smolensk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office to take measures "to defend the inhabitants of our city, particularly youth, from this pseudo-religious organisation" – Smolensk United Methodist Church.

On 29 February Belgorod Regional Court dissolved a functioning Methodist church merely for failing to file a report about its annual activities on time (see F18News 10 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1098). (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of <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=947.

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>

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