

13 October 2003

BELARUS: Authorities check up on Sunday school pupils

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

With last year's religion law criminalising "the attraction of minors to religious organisations and also the teaching of religion to them against their will or without the agreement of their parents or guardians", Forum 18 News Service has learnt that local authorities are demanding that religious organisations supply the names and dates of birth of all their Sunday school children. "We believe this to be a violation of believers' rights," complained Pastor Pavel Firisyuk of Salvation Baptist Church, "as well as of Christ's commandment: 'Let the little children come to me.'" However, State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs vice-chairman Vladimir Lameko defended the move, telling the Baptists only that officials should have explained better why they needed the information.

One of the provisions in the new religion law worrying Baptist pastor Viktor Zdanevich lists "the attraction of minors to religious organisations and also the teaching of religion to them against their will or without the agreement of their parents or guardians" among offences liable to prosecution. During the Soviet period, "some of our pastors were imprisoned for that," he explained to Forum 18 News Service in the south-western city of Brest on 15 September.

Zdanevich's 1000-strong congregation still meets in the church they were permitted to build in 1982. Previously part of a larger community belonging to the unregistered Baptist Council of Churches, he told Forum 18, the church is colloquially known as Fortechnaya Street Baptist Church ("if it were on Lenin Street, we'd be Lenin Street Baptist Church") and has registered - but autonomous - status. The congregation is currently completing an adjacent Sunday school building for 170 children, Zdanevich pointed out to Forum 18, "but we have many more than that". Construction started in 2000, he said, following eight years of negotiation with the local authorities.

Recent experience by communities within the Baptist Union amplify Pastor Zdanevich's cause for concern. On 10 April the pastor of Gethsemane Baptist Church in Minsk region reported a 7 April request from his local council in the village of Machulishchi for a list of children attending the church's Sunday school and the passport details of its teachers. Told that this information was required by Minsk Regional Executive Committee, the pastor maintained that officials refused to put the grounds for the request in writing, so he refused to comply.

Also on 10 April, Pastor Pavel Firisyuk of Salvation Baptist Church, likewise in Minsk region, reported a 4 April request from the secretary of his local village council in Kolodishchi for the full names, addresses, telephone numbers, educational qualifications and passport details of the congregation's pastors and Sunday school teachers, as well as the full names and dates of birth of all Sunday school pupils. Told that this information was required by the Commission for the Affairs of Minors attached to Minsk Regional Executive Committee, Firisyuk wrote that he gave the pastors' details but not those of the Sunday school teachers and pupils. "We believe this to be a violation of believers' rights," he explained, "as well as of Christ's commandment: 'Let the little children come to me.'"

On 14 April the head of Baptist Union churches in Minsk region, Gennadi Brutsky, wrote to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs for clarification of these incidents, which, he noted, had also been reported in other localities. "We consider such actions by some public officials to be an attempt to return our country to its totalitarian past, which is unacceptable for a country in the process of building a democratic society," Brutsky wrote.

Responding to Brutsky almost exactly a month later on 13 May, Committee vice-chairman Vladimir Lameko wrote that the request for information regarding Sunday school teachers and pupils was part of a check-up on the conformation of religious organisations with the religion law. The vice-chairman of Minsk Regional Executive Committee had instructed local authorities to identify cases of religious instruction of minors without the permission of their parents or guardians, he explained, in addition to instances of involvement by foreign citizens in Sunday schools without corresponding authorisation.

Such a check-up is the legal obligation of all local authorities, pointed out Lameko, adding that state departments dealing with the affairs of minors at all levels have the right to demand of organisations such information as is necessary for their work according to a decree issued on 27 May 1967. He also noted, however, that in the Committee's view local authorities should inform the leaders of religious organisations about the reasons for such check-ups, and have accordingly been made aware of "the inadmissibility of not

providing corresponding explanations when conducting similar check-ups in future".

Lameko concludes by remarking to Brutsky that "the Committee cannot agree with your evaluation of the actions of state departments".

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