
13 March 2003

RUSSIA: Moscow Baptists barred from renting public buildings

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

A 300-strong unregistered Baptist community is searching for a new place to worship after being informed that they can no longer rent premises at a public library near Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery where they have met after opening hours for the past six years. In January, the library's administration unexpectedly informed the Baptists that they could no longer use the premises and returned an advance rental payment. Pastor Aleksei Kalyashin told Forum 18 News Service that "pressure from above" was the only explanation given for the termination of the congregation's verbal rental agreement, about which the library's administrator would not elaborate. A city official has confirmed to Forum 18 that only legal entities can rent public facilities for religious services.

A 300-strong unregistered Baptist community is currently searching for a new place to worship after being informed that they can no longer rent premises at a public library near Moscow's world-famous Tretyakov Gallery.

For the past six years the congregation has been holding several meetings a week after opening hours at the Ushinsky Public Library, Pastor Aleksei Kalyashin told Forum 18 News Service in Moscow. In mid-January, however, the library's administration unexpectedly informed the Baptists that they could no longer use the premises and returned an advance rental payment for the first quarter of 2003.

Kalyashin does not believe the library administration to be behind the move. "They were always very well-disposed towards us," he commented to Forum 18 at his home on 19 February, pointing out that the Baptists had not experienced interference of any kind there previously. "Pressure from above" was the only explanation given for the termination of the congregation's verbal rental agreement, he said, about which the library's administrator would not elaborate.

On 12 January Forum 18 observed what turned out to be one of the Baptists' last meetings at the library, where there was standing room only for two visiting Dutch preachers. It was due to lack of space, said Kalyashin, that a decision was made to divide the congregation into two in the year 2000. The 100-strong sub-group soon began to experience difficulties not encountered by those at the Ushinsky Library, however. "Pressure from above" was similarly cited by library administrators when the sub-group had rental agreements terminated three times in the course of the subsequent two years, he said.

Kalyashin supposes that the Baptists were expelled due to the fact that, as an unregistered religious group, they do not have the status of a legal person according to Russia's 1997 law on religion. The congregation is a member of the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which broke away from the mainstream Baptist Union over issues of co-operation with the atheist Soviet state in 1961. The Union continues to adhere to a rigid principle of separation of church and state, according to which none of its current 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union are registered.

Wherever they now turn, maintains Kalyashin, the Moscow Baptists are being told that public premises may be rented only to legal persons according to an unspecified municipal decree. As in the early days of perestroika in the late 1980s, he says, the congregation is currently forced to meet at up to seven different private flats at a time.

Turning to Russia's 1997 law on religion, which supersedes local legislation, Kalyashin argued that a religious group may rent property through the physical person of an individual group member. Article 7, Part 1 of the law states that "premises and property necessary for the activities of a religious group are to be provided for the use of the group by its participants." The official commentary to this provision determines that such premises may be either the property of a member or be rented or used by them on a temporary basis on other grounds: "... an organisation where a participant works may be made available to them, for example."

Without confirming the existence of municipal legislation prohibiting physical persons from renting public property, the press relations officer at Moscow City Council's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations stated on 21 February that such a practice was indeed followed. Konstantin Blazhenov similarly referred Forum 18 to Article 7, Part 1 of Russia's 1997 law, according to which, he maintained, members of a religious group may make available for its worship only such property that is at their personal disposal. He also pointed out that "plenty of religious organisations" rented cinemas and other public premises in Moscow without hindrance.

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