

22 April 2004

RUSSIA: Methodists may have fought off church stealing

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

A Korean Methodist church in northern Moscow appears to have fought off an attempt by a commercial firm to steal their church building. A district court ruled against the Moscow justice department on 26 March after the church challenged the justice department's acceptance of fraudulent documents which claimed to have transferred the church to the company. Galina Skakun of the justice department admitted in court the Methodists' claim to the building, and tried to defend her department even though it failed to verify the authenticity of the documents. Church administrator Svetlana Kim said the Methodists believe that coverage of their case by both Forum 18 News Service and Russian news agencies "really helped us".

A Korean Methodist church whose members were evicted from their four-storey building in northern Moscow late last December by security guards representing a commercial firm, which falsely claimed ownership of the premises, looks set to have its right to the property secured. On 28 March, Kwan Lim church administrator Svetlana Kim told Forum 18 News Service that a Moscow district court case brought by the church against the city's department of justice ruled in the Methodists' favour on 26 March. The hearing had been postponed from 17 February, she said, when no representative had turned up for the defence.

The Methodists brought the case against the justice department after persons unknown to the church staged a 24 April 2002 "church meeting" which introduced various amendments to the organisations charter - including a complete change of leadership - that was registered by justice department officials on 23 May 2002, without the knowledge or consent of the church itself. Once this documentation was registered, it was used to create a "Kwan Lim" company, to transfer ownership of the church building to that company and then to sell it on to first one and then another commercial firm at a fraction of its market price, all without the church's knowledge. Security guards arrived to evict the church members on 23 December 2003 (see F18News 5 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=221).

The 26 March 2004 district court ruling - of which Forum 18 has received a copy - proclaims the 24 April 2002 "church meeting", the amendments made to Kwan Lim's charter at that meeting and their subsequent registration by the justice department to be invalid, largely citing the church's arguments as the foundation for its decision.

The court's ruling also states that justice department official Galina Skakun acknowledged the Methodists' claims at the hearing, but Skakun claimed that the application to change the church's charter and leadership had been drawn up entirely in accordance with the demands of the 1997 law on religion. The court ruling also noted, however, that the Methodists' legal representative cited a Ministry of Justice order issued on 16 February 1998, which requires all state registering organs to verify the authenticity of documentation submitted to them.

Svetlana Kim told Forum 18 that a case in Moscow's main arbitration court against the latest commercial firm to be "sold" the church building has yet to be decided. However, no representative for the firm appeared at a preliminary hearing at the court on 15 April, she said, and the case will be decided in the church's favour should this be repeated at a second hearing on 27 April. According to Kim, the Methodists believe that coverage of their case by both Forum 18 News Service and Russian news agencies "really helped us".

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18

Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY