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BELARUS: Charismatic Pastor charged with organising "illegal" worship

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

Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church is again facing prosecution for organising meetings for worship without state permission, he has told Forum 18 News Service. The 600-strong congregation of New Life Church has been worshipping at a disused cowshed ever since being barred from public facilities. The head of Minsk city administration religious affairs department, Alla Ryabitseva, challenged by Forum 18 why it was impossible to change the use of a cowshed, Ryabitseva replied, "read our laws". Asked which particular law forbade the conversion of cowsheds, she claimed only to deal with the religion law. "Read Article 25 – that says exactly where you can pray and where you can't." Told that it did not mention cowsheds, she retorted: "It doesn't say you can't pray in casinos either, but people don't pray in casinos!" Questioned about a disused railway carriage close to New Life used by an Orthodox community, Ryabitseva maintained that the parish was not meeting for worship in the carriage but had four years earlier acquired land at the site "in the proper manner."

Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church is again facing prosecution for organising religious meetings without state permission, he told Forum 18 News Service from the Belarusian capital on 16 February. Following their inspection of the Sunday meeting for worship on 23 January, local police announced the charges on 25 January, and an initial district court hearing took place on 10 February. A second hearing is set for 1 March.

Identical charges brought against the pastor in late 2004 no longer stand because the legal time limit for their pursuit has elapsed, Goncharenko explained to Forum 18. The latest charges are feared to be part of official moves to close down the church under Belarusian law (see F18News 25 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=498).

New Life administrator Vasily Yurevich was fined 3,600,000 Belarusian roubles (10,059 Norwegian kroner, 1,215 Euros or 1,654 US dollars) on 28 December for similarly organising "illegal" meetings for worship. Yurevich lodged a formal protest when the public procuracy refused to take up an appeal against the fine, which is approximately 150 times the monthly minimum wage (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480). While members of New Life's 600-strong congregation argue that no one can be considered the organiser of their meetings since "each person attends of their own initiative and free will," the procuracy maintains that there are "no grounds" to doubt the testimonies of three police officers that resulted in Yurevich's prosecution.

As a last resort, New Life Church has been worshipping at a disused cowshed in Minsk's Moscow district ever since being barred from renting a public "house of culture" in September 2004. As Yurevich told procuracy officials in December, the church was earlier refused requests to rent public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk. The 2002 religion law requires state permission for religious gatherings in premises not specially designed for worship.

After New Life bought the disused cowshed in 2002, all official agencies approved requests to change the designated land usage to that of a church except for the religious affairs department of Minsk city administration. Without this necessary approval, New Life Church was refused re-registration at the address of the cowshed as soon as the religion law's 16 November 2004 deadline for compulsory re-registration expired. On 30 December the church received a first official warning based upon Yurevich's prosecution. Under the 2002 religion law, a second warning would be sufficient to ban the church.

According to Pastor Goncharenko, a land use commission conducted a survey of the former cowshed on 16 February with a view to proving that the church's renovation work had altered the purpose of the building. On 3 February, he told Forum 18, special police attempted to seal the building, but were prevented by church members. At a meeting with head of Moscow district Yevgeni Dukor on 7 February, said Goncharenko, Dukor refused to look at correspondence between the church and Minsk city administration, insisting that only the latter could grant permission for meetings for worship at the cowshed. On 10 February church members sent a letter to Minsk city administration demanding permission to use the cowshed as a church and to reconstruct it, as well as re-registration at its address.

According to a New Life Church report, on 31 January Pastor Goncharenko met the head of Minsk city administration's religious

affairs department, Alla Ryabitseva, who said that the church could re-register at its previous address but would have to obtain permission from Moscow district administration to hold meetings for worship at the cowshed. Told that the church had not managed to do this in over five months, she reportedly recommended pursuing the issue via an expert council.

Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 that, while Minsk city administration indeed had an expert council qualified to resolve general issues, after four years' negative experience of the city administration the church believed the latest proposal to be "just another excuse to deprive us of what we have - they wouldn't let you have snow in winter". The church's previous legal address, a workshop, was technically no different from the cowshed in not being specially designed for worship, Goncharenko pointed out, adding that the church's situation should be easy to solve. "Many buildings in Minsk change usage without any fuss – a cafeteria becomes a casino overnight."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 17 February, head of Minsk city administration religious affairs department maintained that there were two reasons why it was impossible to obtain permission to change the use of the cowshed. Firstly, said Alla Ryabitseva, plans to build a suburb on the area newly incorporated into Moscow district would mean that the building would be taken down. "So what if it's their property? They knew what they were buying and should never have bought it."

Secondly, she argued, the building was intended to be a cowshed and "you can only keep cows in a cowshed". When Forum 18 asked why it was impossible to change the building's usage, she maintained that this was due to the plans for a new suburb. When Forum 18 confessed not to understand how these were connected, she replied: "Well, write that then, that you don't understand."

Again asked why it was impossible to change the use of a cowshed, Ryabitseva replied, "read our laws". Asked which particular law forbade the conversion of cowsheds, she claimed only to deal with the religion law. "Read Article 25 – that says exactly where you can pray and where you can't." Told that it did not mention cowsheds, she retorted: "It doesn't say you can't pray in casinos either, but people don't pray in casinos!"

A disused railway carriage is located 500 metres (yards) away from New Life's building and this has been used from January 2001 by a Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) community, without the regime raising any questions about the railway carriage's legal status or use as a place of worship. In November 2004 police by mistake visited the Orthodox Church thinking it was New Life Church. Questioned about this, Ryabitseva insisted that the Orthodox parish was not meeting for worship in the carriage but had in 2001 acquired land at the site "in the proper manner" where an Orthodox church would be built as part of the new suburb. There was nothing unusual about Belarusian planning regulations, she claimed. "I've been to Norway twice – you can't grow bushes higher than 60 centimetres there."

Forum 18 therefore asked whether New Life would be given compensation and an alternative site once plans for the new suburb went ahead. The church would be compensated for the 70 per cent of the cowshed that, in her view, remained in its original state, said Ryabitseva, as well as the land. "Although if they carry on behaving in the way they have been we can take the land away from them too." (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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