

20 May 2003

RUSSIA: Supreme Court upholds Bible college closure

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

Today (20 May) Russia's Supreme Court ruled that the Vladivostok-based charismatic "Faith in Action" Bible College should be closed down for conducting religious education without a state licence. Afterwards, the defence lawyer told Forum 18 News Service that the college's parent church, the Church of the Living God, could now be pressurised by the regional authorities for conducting unlicensed professional education activity.

Today, 20 May, Russia's Supreme Court upheld a 21 March ruling by Primorsky Krai regional court to liquidate the Vladivostok-based charismatic "Faith in Action" Bible College. Regional public prosecutor Valeri Vasilenko had brought the case, accusing the College of conducting religious education without a state licence. (See F18News 21 April 2003)

At the appeal hearing in the Russian capital attended by Forum 18, Vladimir Ryakhovsky of the Moscow-based Slavic Legal Centre argued that, according to Article 6 of Russia's 1997 religion law, a basic feature of a religious association is "the teaching of religion and the religious upbringing of its followers". It was this that the Bible College had been engaged in, he said, and not "professional religious education for preparing clergy and religious personnel", which is indeed subject to state licensing under Article 19 of the same law.

Russia's 1992 education law considers activity to be "educational" only if students receive a qualification and a certificate of education at the end of their study. Ryakhovsky maintained that the regional court had not provided sufficient evidence of this, such as leaving certificates. He also claimed that there had been no investigation into whether the disputed activity was being conducted by the Bible College rather than the institution's parent church, the Church of the Living God, which is situated at the same legal address. Citing the key participation in the regional court case of representatives of the local FSB (former KGB) and state department for religious affairs, Ryakhovsky remarked "What sort of witnesses are these? This isn't 1981!" and asked the three Supreme Court judges to overturn the verdict.

The main judge interrupted to clarify whether the defence was claiming that the Bible College did not need a licence to engage in the activity it had been conducting. On being told that this was so, and that "no one received an education" according to the definition in Russia's education law, he remarked: "Well, they can't have been working very effectively if no one was taught anything!"

In a brief statement, a representative from the public prosecutor's office said that letters by the director of the Bible College, Pastor Aleksei Mishchenko, obtained during a check-up on the church following several complaints by local citizens, proved that educational activity as defined by the law was indeed being conducted. After several minutes in recess, the three judges announced their ruling that the Primorsky Krai verdict was to remain in force.

Following the hearing, Vladimir Ryakhovsky commented to Forum 18 that he did not see much prospect in filing for a re-hearing at the Supreme Court, or in referring the case to the European Court, since the issue at stake rested upon a disputed evaluation of evidence. The effect of the verdict was primarily only psychological, in his view, since the church should be able to continue seminars and lectures under its own auspices. However, he acknowledged that the Primorsky Krai authorities could begin to pressurise the Church of the Living God by accusing it of conducting unlicensed professional education activity: "But that would be a separate dispute".

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