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BELARUS: Protestant property obstacles continue

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The Belarusian religion law's insistence on religious communities being registered at a non-residential address, as well as state approval for religious activities outside purpose-built places of worship, creates obstacles for Protestants in particular, Forum 18 News Service has found. For example, the charismatic New Generation Church's 150-strong congregation in Baranovichi faces long-running problems, caused by the authorities' refusal to allow a warehouse the church owns to be converted into a church. Reasons given vary between multi-storey housing being planned for the site, and that it will be used for a stadium's car park. Another example is the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church, which faces continuing obstruction in using a cowshed for worship. The latest threat, Forum 18 has learnt, is that the city is considering ending the church's right to the land beneath the cowshed. Officials claim that the cowshed can only be used only for its designated purpose – even though animal husbandry is illegal in Minsk city. Forum 18 has found that other Protestant churches throughout Belarus face similar obstructions from officials.

The 2002 Belarusian religion law's strict requirements on places of worship are continuing to restrict Protestant churches in particular, Forum 18 News Service has found. The law insists that religious communities must be registered at non-residential addresses, as well as state approval for religious activities outside specially designed places of worship. Previously, religious communities could be based at private homes and did not have to register with the state.

While most of the charismatic New Generation Church's (which is based in Riga, Latvia) eleven communities in Belarus have managed to re-register under this law, "there are other problems", Pastor Leonid Voronenko told Forum 18 on 13 July. His 150-strong congregation in Baranovichi (Brest region) bought a 443-square-metre [530-square-yard] warehouse in 1997 intending to convert it into a church, he said, but the town authorities are refusing to allow the designated purpose of the building to be changed or give the church full rights over the land beneath it.

In long-running correspondence on the issue between the church and Baranovichi municipal executive committee viewed by Forum 18, the latter's chairman Mikhail Pavlov explains in July 1997 that conversion of the warehouse is "inexpedient" because the town plans to redevelop the area where it is situated with multi-storey housing. While Pavlov later informed the church that the warehouse building would be demolished to make way for the car park of a stadium, his successor Viktor Dichkovsky wrote to Pastor Voronenko in August 2004 that the plot of land beneath the warehouse would after all be used for multi-storey housing. Stating that there was "no basis" to alter the building, Dichkovsky also warned that if the designated usage of the plot of land was not complied with – in this case, storage of goods and products - then the church's right to use it would be terminated in accordance with the Belarusian Land Code.

With the help of public pressure, New Generation Church has so far managed to resist state threats to seal and demolish the building, according to Voronenko. He pointed out, however, that this does not mean that the situation has been resolved, since the church has no legal basis to use the warehouse.

In the capital Minsk, the charismatic New Life Church was informed in 15 July 2005 that the city's executive committee would review at its next session the issue of terminating the church's right to the plot of land beneath the cowshed that it uses for services. Just as in New Generation's case, the Minsk authorities have refused to allow the building's reconstruction, latterly also maintaining that it is to be demolished as part of Minsk's general development plan. A nearby Orthodox community, which uses a disused railway carriage for worship, has not faced similar problems (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516).

Officials maintain that the cowshed – purchased by the church in 2002 - may be used only for its designated purpose and have imposed heavy fines for violations (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480). On New Life's website, church lawyer Sergei Lukanin points out that this is in fact impossible as animal husbandry is illegal in Minsk city: "The church is in an absurd situation - the authorities are following the letter of the law while forgetting about the sense of their actions." Both New Generation and New Life are affiliated to Belarus's charismatic Full Gospel Union.

On 7 June 2005, the Evangelical Belarus news service reported that the local authorities in Ivatsevichi (Brest region) were refusing to allow a local Baptist Union congregation permission to build a new prayer house on the site of their old one on the grounds that it

is situated in a residential area. According to the church's pastor, an alternative site one kilometre [half a mile] outside the town, offered by the local district executive committee, would be inconvenient for elderly church members and be more vulnerable to theft. A similar situation is reportedly faced by another Baptist church in nearby Drogichin [Dragichyn].

Unable to re-register the independent Belarusian Evangelical Church at his Minsk flat under the 2002 law, Pastor Ernst Sabilo has been given two months to find a suitable legal address, he told Forum 18 on 25 July: "If we fail then we would be gathering illegally and be liable to be fined." A Minsk city court judge adjourned an 18 July hearing held to liquidate the church, said Sabilo, when it emerged that the city's executive committee had assisted in the search for alternative premises only by suggesting that the congregation affiliate with the main Baptist Union. While he pointed out to Forum 18 that he was not opposed to this, the Union turned out not to have spare premises for all its own churches, let alone his.

Initially registered in 1993, Sabilo's Belarusian-language church does not have sufficient funds to complete construction of a church building, begun eight years ago in Osipovichi (Mogilev Mahilyow) region). A former prisoner-of-conscience, Sabilo told Forum 18 that while the church unites some 60 people from various Belarusian cities, the 2002 law's requirement that the 20 founders of a religious organisation be resident in one location would not affect its re-registration chances. However, he was concerned by the law's territorial restrictions on religious organisations: "We can't operate in just one place - we must operate wherever people are willing to hear us."

Also encountering problems with worship premises are Belarusian communities of the Kiev (Ukraine) based charismatic Embassy of God Church. On 19 July, the co-ordinator of its 15 congregations in the republic, Natalya Komovskaya, told Forum 18 from Gomel [Homyel'] that seven have managed to re-register, while several others would hopefully register for the first time later this year. Others, however, are unable to meet publicly and/or re-register due to the near impossibility of obtaining worship premises fulfilling the 2002 law's criteria, she said. Thus, congregations in Grodno [Hrodna] and Bolshevik (Gomel region) have been unable to register for five years due to a lack of premises (the 2002 law simply reinforced for religious organisations changes made to the Housing Code in 1999), while three congregations totalling some 160 people in Minsk have been unable to find a place to meet for the past two years. While the 100-strong congregation in Rechitsa [Rechytsa] (Gomel region) does hold registration, she said, it too is currently without worship premises.

Komovskaya suspects that the authorities have a hand in these churches' predicaments: "While officials say they are not opposed to churches registering, they do everything possible to stop them finding premises – every time they find an address, the director of the premises is instructed not to lease or face dismissal." Forum 18 has discovered that several other churches in Minsk have had similar experiences (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560).

Komovskaya also told Forum 18 that congregations are so far able to meet unobstructed in private homes, although the instability of constant moves has led to her own church membership falling from 400 to around 200. However, the Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries, have reported fines for worship in private homes from time to time ever since the adoption of the 2002 law (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463). In the latest case, according to the Baptists, church member Nikolai Dolbun was questioned by a local policeman at his home in Mogilev on 9 July and accused of leading an unregistered religious organisation contrary to the Administrative Violations Code Despite arguing that the charge was "completely baseless and unproven", Dolbun was reportedly fined 127,500 Belarusian roubles (377 Norwegian kroner, 48 Euros or 57 US dollars) by an administrative commission in Mogilev's Lenin District on 12 July. This is roughly half the average monthly wage.

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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