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RUSSIA: Pacific island keeps Protestants in check

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

A recent regional press campaign of "sensational and accusative" articles targeting the Sakhalin-based Victory Chapel Pentecostal church was spearheaded by the local Orthodox bishop Daniil (Dorovskikh), the church's pastor, Paris Dominguez, a United States citizen, told Forum 18 News Service. Journalist Anna Bilega, who published an article criticising the church, claimed to Forum 18 that a great many foreign missionaries were trying to foist their ideology onto Sakhalin residents and speculated that they might be working for foreign intelligence agencies, but the local authorities "don't do anything, as usual". One local official denied that the authorities shared any views the bishop might have about "sects", yet a regional justice official refused to tell Forum 18 why the Victory Chapel congregation – a member of a registered Pentecostal Union – is among Protestant churches refused registration.

A recent regional press campaign targeting the Sakhalin-based Victory Chapel Pentecostal church was spearheaded by the local Orthodox bishop, believes that church's pastor, Paris Dominguez, a United States citizen. Following publication of "sensational and accusative" articles last summer, Dominguez and a colleague were told by two Sakhalin newspaper editors that they were acting at the bidding of Bishop Daniil (Dorovskikh) of Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands, the pastor told Forum 18 News Service on 11 March.

While not mentioning any individual church, a two-column commentary by Bishop Daniil incorporated into an article in Telemir local newspaper identifies the proliferation in Russia of "sects" – Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals and evangelical Christians are named – as a "state problem". The local authorities should deal with increasing numbers of Protestants "trying to turn Sakhalin into a spiritual rubbish dump," urges the Orthodox bishop. "Together we must cleanse Sakhalin from every kind of sect."

In the main article, journalist Anna Bilega suggests that Victory Chapel engages in destructive practices, such as hypnotism, estranging church members from their families and getting them to give away their money. Typical is her account of how, when she visited the church posing as an interested member of the public, Pastor Dominguez asked anyone present with rich relatives to raise their hand: "A rather common psychological trick."

Pastor Dominguez insisted to Forum 18 that this enquiry about rich relatives had been taken out of context. "Obviously no one on Sakhalin has rich relatives! It was to make a point - how you would feel if you suddenly found out that you had a rich relative who had bequeathed you a lot of money? I was preaching about our inheritance in Christ - riches that neither moths nor rust can corrupt."

Asked by Forum 18 on 12 March why she had written the article, Bilega said that Telemir had received letters of concern from parents whose children had "got caught up in this sect". There were currently a great many foreign missionaries trying to foist their ideology onto Sakhalin residents, she remarked, and "turn us against the traditional Russian Orthodox Church". While these missionaries might be working for foreign intelligence agencies, she speculated, the local authorities "don't do anything, as usual".

Since moved to Yaroslavl region in European Russia, Pastor Dominguez says that he is not concerned so much about the allegations against himself, as about "the infringement of the constitutional rights of our church". Victory Chapel is affiliated to a local Pentecostal union which invited Dominguez and his wife to Sakhalin in summer 2000. This Sakhalin union is itself a member of Russia's largest Pentecostal union, whose leader, Sergei Ryakhovsky, sits on the Kremlin's Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations. This all should make registration a mere formality, but Victory Chapel has been refused religious organisation status four times since 2001. According to Dominguez, reasons cited have included his foreign citizenship and aspects of the church's charter – even though this is a carbon copy of the Pentecostal charter for union member churches.

Defined only as a "religious group" according to Russia's 1997 law on religion, Victory Chapel does not therefore enjoy the full rights of a legal personality, such as producing religious literature or visiting prisons and hospitals.

Under registration rules for legal personalities adopted last year, adds Dominguez, each registration application costs 2000 roubles (470 Norwegian kroner, 60 Euros or 64 US dollars), while each signature (a minimum of ten per application) must be notarised at a cost apiece of 100 roubles (24 Norwegian kroner, 3 Euros or 3 US dollars). He does not believe the motivation for the refusals to be financial, however. When a registered local Presbyterian church recently tried to set up a satellite church on Sakhalin they were refused by the island's department of justice, Dominguez told Forum 18: "They were told that [Bishop] Daniil had said that there were to be no more churches registered on Sakhalin."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 12 March, Natalya Oreshkova of the public relations department at Sakhalin regional administration claimed that she had not read the Telemir articles. Quoted Bishop Daniil's comments about Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and evangelicals, she said that her administration did not regard these groups as sects: "That is just the opinion of the bishop". Victory Chapel is "just an unregistered church as far as we are concerned," she said, and recommended contacting the department of justice for further information regarding the status of its registration application.

Despite this recommendation, on 13 March a Sakhalin department of justice official refused to give Forum 18 any information by telephone concerning Victory Chapel other than the church had submitted documents for registration and been refused.

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