

28 February 2008

RUSSIA: State investigates Methodists at Orthodox bishop's request

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

At the request of a Russian Orthodox bishop, the regional Public Prosecutor's Office, Organised Crime Police, Department for the Affairs of Minors, Education Department and ordinary police in Smolensk have made a series of check-ups on a local Methodist church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. They also forced the church to remove missionary college plans from its website. Bishop Ignati (Punin) of Vyazma claimed the college "aims not to bring about the rebirth of the spiritual-moral foundations of the life of our people, but its spiritual destruction." He then asked the Regional Public Prosecutor "to take the measures necessary in this situation to defend the inhabitants of our city, particularly youth, from this pseudo-religious organisation." Even though the Bishop's appeal contained no legal argument, the Public Prosecutor's Office explained to Forum 18 that it reacted because: "Any citizen or organisation may appeal to us." If a citizen suggests an organisation is harmful, but not in breach of the law, "we'll check the legality of its activity," Forum 18 was told. Methodist Pastor Aleksandr Vtorov has filed suit for moral damages against Bishop Ignati. Intimidated by the unprecedented wave of check-ups, only five Methodists attended last Sunday's worship service, instead of the usual 36.

At the request of a Russian Orthodox bishop, government departments in the western city of Smolensk have conducted a series of check-ups on a local Methodist church and forced it to remove plans for a missionary college from its website, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "I may not like Orthodoxy, but I don't send complaints to the Public Prosecutor," Pastor Aleksandr Vtorov of Smolensk United Methodist Church remarked to Forum 18 on 26 February. "There should be an anti-monopoly commission for religion, like there is in the economic sphere!"

Disfavoured religious minorities often suspect that the Russian Orthodox Church is behind government moves against them, but documented confirmation is rare (see most recently F18News 22 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=917).

In an 18 February summons inviting Pastor Vtorov for a 22 February "chat", however, Smolensk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office explains that its check-up is in response to an appeal from Bishop Ignati (Punin) of Vyazma, as does the same Office's 22 February report of its investigation into Smolensk United Methodist Church. Forum 18 has seen copies of both documents.

At the 22 February meeting, Prosecutor Yelena Sudarenkova allowed Pastor Vtorov to copy – but only by hand - Bishop Ignati's 22 January appeal to her Office. As recorded by the pastor, the bishop writes that information on the Internet about the opening in Smolensk of Jung Song Pak Missionary College "immediately aroused great displeasure among the inhabitants of the city." The college maintains its aim is "the rebirth of Christianity in Russia during a period of great decline in morality among Russians," continues the bishop, "which cannot but arouse perplexity and indignation. It is quite obvious that the activity of this Methodist College aims not to bring about the rebirth of the spiritual-moral foundations of the life of our people, but its spiritual destruction."

Bishop Ignati therefore requests Regional Public Prosecutor Yuri Verkhovtsev "to take the measures necessary in this situation to defend the inhabitants of our city, particularly youth, from this pseudo-religious organisation," noted Pastor Vtorov. He also copied Verkhovtsev's handwritten instructions to his staff on the document: "Comrade Losev – organise check-up by your staff. Inform me of the results by 25.1.08. Comrade Mednikov – organise check-up. Report by 25.1.08. Ye. S. Sudarenkova – to be reviewed. Double-check by 29.1.08."

Yelena Sudarenkova confirmed to Forum 18 on 28 February that her Office had acted in response to Bishop Ignati's appeal. "But we didn't do anything against the Methodist Church. We checked to see whether the organisation was in compliance with the law." Forum 18 pointed out that Bishop Ignati's appeal did not contain any legal argument, but requested measures be taken against the Methodist College due to what, in his view, is its spiritually destructive influence. So why did the Public Prosecutor's Office take any notice of it? "Any citizen or organisation may appeal to us," Sudarenkova replied. And if any citizen or organisation suggests that another organisation is harmful in some sense, but not specifically in breach of the law? "Then we'll check the legality of its activity," she told Forum 18.

Bishop Ignati is currently away on a business trip and unavailable for comment, his secretary told Forum 18 on 28 February. She added that only he could confirm whether he had asked the Regional Public Prosecutor and other state departments to take measures against Jung Song Pak Missionary College as a "pseudo-religious organisation". Bishop Ignati is the auxiliary bishop in Smolensk and Kaliningrad Diocese, headed by the second-most influential Russian Orthodox hierarch, Metropolitan Kirill (Gundyayev).

In the wake of Bishop Ignati's appeal, the Regional Organised Crime Police detained Pastor Vtorov for approximately three hours on 30 January. "Their first question was: 'Why aren't you Orthodox?'" the pastor told Forum 18. As well as enquiring about the church's development plans, officers took copies of church documentation, he said. "When I asked why it was happening, they replied that they weren't authorised to tell me."

While he was away being questioned by the Regional Organised Crime Police, Pastor Vtorov continued, representatives of the Regional Department for the Affairs of Minors arrived at his church and tried to obtain the addresses of parishioners' children from his wife. She refused to give them, however. The Vtorovs could not understand this sudden intrusion into their affairs, said the pastor, especially as the church successfully passed an annual Department of Justice check-up as recently as November 2007.

An independent Methodist congregation during the 1990s, Smolensk United Methodist Church joined the Moscow-based Russian United Methodist Church, headed by Bishop Hans Vaxby from Finland, in 2001. In 2002 the church bought a worship building in Smolensk with the financial assistance of the late Jung Song Pak, originally from South Korea and at that time elder pastor for the Russian United Methodist Church in St Petersburg.

The first indication of the reason for the sudden state scrutiny came on 31 January 2008, when a local police officer mentioned a complaint from the Orthodox Church. Visiting Smolensk United Methodist Church and taking further copies of its official documentation, the officer nevertheless maintained that his questions about the pastor's views on religion and the parish's activities were part of a routine check-up, Pastor Vtorov told Forum 18.

At the church's 3 February Sunday worship service, a female parishioner reported that the Organised Crime Police had telephoned her on 31 January and requested she come and testify about her membership of the church. On hearing that she could not do so due to poor health, Pastor Vtorov told Forum 18, she was read a list of the church's founding members and asked if she knew them.

A check-up by the Regional Education Department followed on 4 February. Pastor Vtorov was asked about the material advertising Jung Song Pak Missionary College on his church's website and told it would require a licence, he said.

On 11 February, ordinary regional police officers collected Pastor Vtorov for further questioning. Mistakenly believing the church to have members from the North Caucasus, they maintained that this check-up was linked with routine anti-terrorist measures ahead of the 2 March presidential elections, the pastor told Forum 18.

On 15 February a Regional Public Prosecutor representative visited Smolensk United Methodist Church and photocopied lists of Sunday school attendees, textbooks, notebooks and other documentation. It was only at the Regional Public Prosecutor's Office on 22 February, however, that Pastor Vtorov was informed that Bishop Ignati had written appeals to the state departments conducting the check-ups, he told Forum 18.

In a 22 February investigation report presented to Pastor Vtorov, First Assistant Public Prosecutor Viktor Losev demands the removal from Smolensk United Methodist Church's website of information about the opening on 1 September 2008 of Jung Song Pak Missionary College, including its entry conditions, study facilities and application procedure. Under the 1992 Education Law and the 1997 Religion Law, argues Losev, such an institution requires an education licence.

Pastor Vtorov disagrees with this legal interpretation. Stressing that the plans are simply "our vision", he maintains that the college would be a purely internal, non-professional structure permitted by the church's registered charter, and so would not require a licence. He has nevertheless removed the information from the church's website <http://www.methodist.boom.ru>.

Confusion persists over what type of religious educational activity requires a state licence. Moscow-based religious rights lawyer Vladimir Ryakhovsky has maintained to Forum 18 that only professional educational institutions require licences for educational activity, a view broadly supported by Viktor Korolev of the Federal Registration Service (see F18News 15 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1048).

However, FSB security service officers broke up an informal Pentecostal Bible school graduation ceremony in the Volga city of Tolyatti on Sunday 20 January 2008, insisting that it requires a licence (see F18News 14 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1087). A similar Bible school in the Volga republic of Chuvashia was dissolved for being unlicensed in September 2007 (see F18News 15 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1048).

A charismatic Bible college in the Pacific region of Primorsky Krai was likewise shut down in 2003 (see F18News 21 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=35).

On 22 February 2008, Pastor Vtorov filed suit for moral damages against Bishop Ignati in Smolensk's Industrial District Court. "The church is in shock," he explained to Forum 18. "Some of the older parishioners are reminded of 1937." Intimidated by the unprecedented wave of check-ups, only five parishioners attended last Sunday's worship service on 24 February instead of the usual 36, he added.

Particularly since the Federal Registration Service was allocated wider monitoring powers in 2004, religious communities complain of a marked increase in state scrutiny and bureaucracy. In the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva, for example, the local authorities tried to dissolve a Pentecostal church in 2005 because it failed to notify them of a change of address and because a visit by its pastor to a neighbouring church was not covered by its registered charter activity (see F18News 18 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=609) (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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