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RUSSIA: Methodist church building to be stolen?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

A Methodist church may lose its church building after the local Moscow city justice department allowed outsiders to change the building's ownership without the church's knowledge, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Guards loyal to the new "owners" have seized the building, though the pastor and church officials remain inside. The local Moscow justice department has declined to explain to Forum 18 why it allowed the "ownership change" to happen without the church's knowledge. However, Maksim Zubov, of the federal Justice Ministry has pointed out to Forum 18 that "no-one has the right to change the founding document of a religious organisation without its knowledge." Church officials suspect that the reason may be local city corruption, and Bishop Ruediger Minor, head of the United Methodist Church in Russia, has told Forum 18 that "the whole thing could only happen because of some (at least silent) support from administrative and other structures."

A Korean Methodist church in Moscow fears it may lose its church building after the city's justice department allowed outsiders to change the building's ownership last year without its knowledge. On 9 December, just three days after the prosecutor's office dropped its investigation into the disputed transfer, guards loyal to the new "owners" seized the building, though the pastor and some church officials remain holed up inside. "We are staying here round the clock to try to prevent the illegal seizure," church administrator Svetlana Kim told Forum 18 News Service from inside the church on 15 December. "But we know they won't pay any attention to us."

Galina Skakun, the inspector at the Moscow justice department who has been dealing with the church's complaint, declined to explain why her department had allowed the transfer to go ahead without the church's knowledge. "I can't reply to this by telephone," she told Forum 18 on 15 December. "You will have to make a written application." She then put the phone down.

However, Maksim Zubov, an official of the federal Justice Ministry department dealing with religious organisations, said he was not familiar with the Methodist case but promised that his office would follow up the issue with the Moscow city justice department. "No-one has the right to change the founding document of a religious organisation without its knowledge," he told Forum 18 from Moscow on 15 December.

The Kwan Lim (Kvanrim in Russian) United Methodist Church was founded and registered in 1991 and gained re-registration with the Moscow justice department in December 1999. The congregation, which Kim said has some 180 members, built its own church in northern Moscow in 1995 with financial support from Methodists in South Korea. Services are held in Russian and Korean.

Bishop Ruediger Minor, head of the United Methodist Church in Russia and other countries of Eurasia, confirmed to Forum 18 on 14 December that the church is a member of his Russia United Methodist Church, which is registered at federal level as a centralised religious organisation.

Kim, who signed the original founding document, told Forum 18 that problems began when the church belatedly discovered that another group unconnected with the congregation managed to change the founding document after holding a meeting at a nearby stadium in April or May 2002. "They did not meet in the church, claimed to have changed all the leaders and had no connection with us, but even so the justice department accepted the new founding document," she complained. "No-one from the justice department even checked up with us." The new "owners" then sold on the building to others.

Church members suspect that corruption might have been involved. "We think officials at the justice department knew there was something suspicious - they issued the new document at record speed (they're normally very slow) and didn't even check," Kim declared. She points out that this is not the first time religious communities have faced such problems over ownership of buildings, though the problem is more acute in the business sphere.

The first attempt by the rival "owners" to seize the church came in September 2002, but the attempt failed. Kim said the church had appealed to the prosecutor's office, but without success. "They kept handing the case to new investigators, and the last one finally closed the case last week." The church's attempt to challenge the Moscow justice department's recognition of the new founding document in the Krasnopresnensky district court got nowhere. "We lodged our appeal there in September 2002 and it still hasn't been considered," she told Forum 18.

Kim reported that about twenty guards arrived on 9 December, breaking the lock and smashing a door to gain access. She said the police came but failed to intervene. "They decided it was a simple property spat and nothing to do with them. They said it was a matter for the courts to resolve."

Since the 9 December seizure, guards representing the new "owner" have the building under their control. Kim said the church was able to hold its Sunday service on 14 December, but only because it persuaded the guards to allow in church members on a list they provided. "We don't know if next Wednesday's service will go ahead." She said some thirty church members remain "under siege" in the building.

"This is a problem that deeply disturbs the Methodist community in Moscow," Bishop Minor told Forum 18. "Though it seems to be one of the 'usual' business quarrels, it has some religious undertones. Propaganda against 'this Korean sect' and other invectives are used. And, in my judgment, the whole thing could only happen because of some (at least silent) support from administrative and other structures."

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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