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RUSSIA: No non-Orthodox places of worship wanted in Khabarovsk city centre

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

An unofficial "red line" bars non-Russian Orthodox from securing places of worship in the centre of the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, Baptists, Pentecostals and Catholics have told Forum 18 News Service. The local authorities "don't let us anywhere near the city centre," Pentecostal pastor Aleksandr Pankratov complained to Forum 18. One local lawyer says no Protestant church has been allocated a plot of land in central Khabarovsk for four years. The Immaculate Conception Catholic parish is even unable to regain its historical church, confiscated in 1933. "Twelve of our elderly parishioners were baptised and made their first communion in that building," parish priest Fr Joseph McCabe told Forum 18. Admitting the existence of this ban, regional religious affairs official Mikhail Svishchev maintained that "every city tries to preserve its historical part".

Protestant and Catholic representatives in Khabarovsk have maintained to Forum 18 News Service that the centre of the Far East Russian city is circled by an unofficial "red line" within which non-Orthodox are unable to secure worship premises. Khabarovsk's regional religious affairs official confirmed to Forum 18 that this was the case, but argued that all cities take such steps in order to preserve their historical appearance.

Khabarovsk's Catholic parish of the Immaculate Conception has tried to regain its historical church building within this central area for the past ten years without success, its US parish priest, Fr Joseph McCabe, told Forum 18 on 26 April. The parish possesses copies of the original pre-revolutionary documents allocating land for the construction of a two-storey wooden church which was turned into a medical clinic by the Bolsheviks in 1933, he said. "Twelve of our elderly parishioners were baptised and made their first communion in that building." Two other Catholic parishes in Khabarovsk - St Benedict's and Most Holy Trinity - have worship buildings a long distance to the north and south of the city, added Fr Joseph, but while there are many more Catholics in the centre than the 30 regular members of Immaculate Conception parish, "they are afraid to come to mass without a proper church building".

In a typical refusal to one of the parish's more recent requests for the building, Galina Gromova, who chairs Khabarovsk regional property committee, wrote on 21 September 2001 that a 1993 presidential decree concerning restitution of worship buildings and other property to religious organisations relates only to federally-held property, whereas the building claimed by Immaculate Conception parish belongs to the regional authorities. On 29 April 2004, Khabarovsk regional religious affairs official Mikhail Svishchev explained to Forum 18 that the issue had not been resolved because it had not been proven that the building claimed by the Catholics had in fact been a church: "They say it was, but others maintain that it was just a priest's house."

According to local lawyer Igor Bukhtoyarov, no Protestant church has been allocated a plot of land in the central part of Khabarovsk for four years. While the city's main Baptist church does have a large new prayer house within this area, this is located at the site where the congregation constructed its first prayer house in the early 1950s.

Pastor Gennadi Degtyarov of Khabarovsk's third Baptist church told Forum 18 on 27 April that his congregation had found it impossible to get permission to build in the city centre. When the community first requested a plot of land approximately four years ago, it was refused twice, he said. "Then we were told we could only be allocated one on the outskirts of the city." At first the church was also refused the site it finally received - on the edge of a suburb some 25 minutes' drive from the city centre - on the grounds that the community would disturb local residents, continued Degtyarov. However, after 70 per cent of those living nearby signed a petition in favour of construction and the Baptists built a children's playground in the neighbourhood, their application was approved. Work on the site is currently at a standstill due to lack of funds, Degtyarov explained, but the church hopes to extend a preliminary construction period due to expire in July 2004 and then secure final permission from the authorities to finish the prayer house, the main body of which is already complete.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 28 April, Pastor Aleksandr Pankratov of Revival Pentecostal church commented that the local authorities "don't let us anywhere near the city centre". Without its own church building, the congregation rents a hall in a state institution on the outskirts of Khabarovsk (approximately 20 minutes' drive from the city centre) for its three weekly meetings. On 27 April New Apostolic evangelist Vladimir Lukashenko told Forum 18 that his community managed to secure a plot of land on which to build a new church on a long-term lease back in 1997. He added that the congregation had previously turned down the municipal authorities'

offer of the site of a former Orthodox cemetery - upon which garages were later built - closer to the city centre. "We didn't like that idea."

Regional religious affairs official Mikhail Svishchev confirmed to Forum 18 that there was an area "about 20 minutes' walk in each direction" from the very centre of Khabarovsk within which "only churches which existed earlier" could be located. The New Apostolic church lay just outside this area, he said, while inside it - like the Baptists - the Jewish community was currently completing a new building at the site of their historical one. Otherwise, the only worship buildings within the central district are one Orthodox church which survived the Soviet period and two new Orthodox cathedrals, he confirmed (see forthcoming F18News article). Svishchev maintained that this policy existed because "every city tries to preserve its historical part".

Forum 18 noted, however, that while Khabarovsk's main thoroughfare and adjacent side streets indeed contain numerous pre-revolutionary buildings recently restored to a far higher standard than is typical in major European Russian cities, the remainder of the city centre also includes many late Soviet-era housing blocks in a very poor state of repair, as well as new developments in contemporary architectural style.

Pentecostals and Baptists also both face local state restrictions on mission activity in Khabarovsk region, for example on missionary activity beyond the location where a church is registered (see F18News 1 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=332). For a report on restrictions on using premises for worship in nearby Sakhalin region, see

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=335

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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