

Authorities Threaten to 'Liquidate' Pentecostal Church in Russia

Local officials are waging a smear campaign, using accusations that church leaders engage in brainwashing

A thriving Pentecostal church in Kostroma, a provincial Russian city on the Volga River, is being threatened with closure by local officials who accuse church leaders of using hypnosis and brainwashing.

"First they refused us registration, and now they are taking us to court to have us liquidated," said Andrei Danilov, 36, who vows to fight to keep his Family of God Church open.

With the help of Moscow-based religious-freedom lawyers, Danilov predicted his church would prevail over the local department of the Justice Ministry as have other charismatic churches that were faced with similar threats.

"I think any judge will be on our side as long as he is not bought off," said Danilov, a lanky, clean-cut preacher with an earnest manner. "There is no proof. They haven't come to our church or even talked to our members."

Troubles for the 350-member church began in October when a local television station broadcast a highly critical report using footage secretly filmed during a worship service. The footage included a portion of the service in which a woman collapsed as she was overcome with the Holy Spirit.

In subsequent television reports and newspaper accounts, Pentecostal believers are repeatedly referred to as sektanty, a Russian term with a more negative connotation than its English counterpart, "sectarians."

"It is an insulting word used to describe people who engage in dark deeds, orgies, money laundering, the destruction of families and the encouraging of children to run away from home," Danilov said.

Typical of media accounts that perpetuate negative stereotypes about members of some of Kostroma's newer minority faiths was a large, front-page April 11 article in the Trading Rows weekly newspaper. It was headlined "New Churches: Song and Dance Companies in Christ's Name" and offered a broad denunciation of newly founded Protestant churches and Western missionaries doing the work of Western governments by spreading Western values in Russia.

The article was vague and included unnamed sources but did close with a reference to a special commission's ongoing work to determine whether the Family of God Church and another Pentecostal church in Kostroma were using hypnosis to manipulate congregants. That commission of local experts did rule in April that the Family of God Church used hypnosis. In turn, the commission's finding was used by the Justice Ministry to deny registration and initiate a court proceeding in early June.

Registration with the Justice Ministry as a religious organization is vital in Russia. Without it, the Family of God Church would no longer have the legal right to rent space in Kostroma's Philharmonic Concert Hall. Danilov said the

Philharmonic is one of few spaces in the city that has space enough to accommodate his congregation and management that is willing to rent to Pentecostals.

Judging from the enthusiasm of the congregation during a recent Sunday service at the Philharmonic, closure of the Family of God Church would be a severe blow. Beginning with a rousing, rocking musical program, Danilov led the mostly young congregation into an eloquent sermon in which he openly discussed the attacks being made on the church.

Using direct language, Danilov urged his listeners to examine their own lives and think about issues of pride, tolerance and being overly concerned with outward appearance.

Stepping near the edge of the Philharmonic's stage and leaning forward, Danilov told believers to speak openly of their membership in the Family of God.

"Say, 'Yes, I'm a fanatic.' Say, 'Yes, I'm crazy-crazy for the sake of God,'" he told them.

After the service concluded and the aisles emptied, one of the older congregants, Sofia Alexeyeva, 64, spoke of how puzzled her Russian Orthodox friends are about Spirit-filled worship.

"For them, it is very difficult to understand," said Alexeyeva, a pensioner who barely survives on 600 rubles (\$21) a month from the government. "They only go to church for the holidays. Here, they open our eyes and ears through the Bible."

Alexeyeva said her life would suffer without the fellowship offered by the Family of God Church, especially since she just discovered that she has diabetes.

A court should have little cause to shut down the church, especially since the church is part of a Russia-wide centralized religious organization and is therefore immune from the sort of local review the commission applied.

Danilov predicted the process would be a long one.

“I think they will use any kind of means not to register us. They will keep searching for reasons. The worse case is that they will use the money we get from America to make a case with the Tax Inspectorate,” said Danilov, explaining that his church receives about \$400 a month in support from various U.S. churches. □