

Pentecostals in Belarus Face Harassment

A government crackdown is using secret police and propaganda against believers

The pastor of one of the largest churches in Belarus reports that the government has recently launched a campaign of harassment and intimidation aimed at curtailing the work of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in the former Soviet republic.

From the capital of Minsk, pastor Vasily Moskalenko offered an unfavorable comparison of religious freedom in Belarus with situations in other former communist-bloc countries. Belarus, located between Poland and Russia, has secret police still known as the KGB.

“I think the situation is the worst in Belarus,” said Moskalenko, 40, of former European Soviet lands. “It is freer in Russia, freer in Ukraine and in the Baltic countries.”

Moskalenko, pastor of Minsk’s Grace of Christ Church, also said that finding space to meet on Sundays is the foremost problem.

“In Russia, you can rent a movie theater. But in Belarus, all the churches were driven out from all the meeting places about four months ago,” Moskalenko said.

Moskalenko attributed the crackdown on the country's 70,000 Protestants to pressure from Belarus' dominant faith, the Moscow-based Russian Orthodox Church. Throughout the former USSR, local Orthodox prelates frequently complain about the rapid growth of what they term "untraditional" faiths that include Pentecostals.

Pentecostal and charismatic believers are also frequently tagged as being members of "totalitarian sects," Moskalenko said, explaining that practices such as speaking in tongues and faith healing are sometimes misunderstood.

At Grace of Christ Church, the government's paranoia over those manifestations –and especially the incidence of congregants falling to the ground during altar services–has resulted in constant monitoring of meetings to prevent such activity, Moskalenko said.

"People cannot fall down, because [the KGB] are always watching," said Moskalenko. "Those [Pentecostal] churches that weren't careful were among the first to be driven out of the space they rent for services."

Despite such pressures on his 1,200-member church, Moskalenko said the congregation is steadily growing—to the point where Sunday services have been broken up into five shifts in order to accommodate believers. The church also purchased a building for \$120,000 (U.S.), which is a miracle considering the average monthly salary in Belarus is \$35.

Jim Raley, pastor of Calvary Christian Center Assemblies of God in Ormond Beach, Fla., has traveled to Minsk twice to preach at Grace of Christ. Raley told Charisma that

congregants there gather together closely during altar services so that no one would fall.

“The government did a documentary in which they compared Pentecostal and charismatic churches to Hitler and Nazism,” Raley said. “They made a government-sponsored program and filmed Grace of Christ services, and showed clips of Benny Hinn, and compared us with the Nazis and Hitler.”

Raley added, “There is incredible freedom of worship in the midst of that oppression. At any given service, the KGB are there. Last year when we were there, I couldn’t even open my Bible. The pastor just introduced me as an American ‘who is going to give a testimony.’”

Grace of Christ operates 30 home Bible-study groups, and special programs for alcoholics and cancer patients. Members also participate in daily prayer walks through Minsk with stops at the parliament building and the residence of the authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenka, who is up for re-election later this year and is a strong backer of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Raley said he believes the growth of Pentecostal churches strikes fear in governments and in the Orthodox Church. Despite persecution, God continues to move “because these people just lay it all on the line for Jesus,” he added.

“Please pray for the persecuted church that there is a lifting of the oppression, because there is a burning, boiling revival that is beginning to take place,” Raley said.