

Russian Charismatics Face Intensified Religious Persecution

Churches have been burned near Moscow, and Christians have come under attack in a traditionally Orthodox region

Citing beatings and church arsons that have occurred during the last two years, charismatic Christian leaders in Chekhov, a small industrial city outside Moscow, say they are enduring some of the worst religious persecution in Russia.

“Now, it is as though I don’t live in Chekhov. I stay off the street and, as much as possible, out of sight,” pastor Cosme Tossa, who has been severely beaten twice outside his home, said in a January interview. “I’m afraid to invite new people from the street now. We just serve the same people.”

Since the attacks on Tossa, arsonists have targeted two other churches, burning both to the ground. Police have made no arrests in any of the attacks.

Tossa and other members of Chekhov’s tiny Protestant community of some 250 people attribute the violence to the local mafia’s efforts to stop the growth of any faith other than the dominant Russian Orthodox Church.

“We are praying. We are trying to understand why it happened,” said Valentina Milovanova, a member of a charismatic Presbyterian congregation. Her church has been burned twice, most recently in October.

She recalled how thugs threatened construction workers building the church shortly before the first arson in November 2001. "They said: 'There won't be any kind of church here. We've got only Orthodoxy in this town,'" she said.

Her congregation of some 40 believers meets in the cramped living room of her apartment. Each of the city's four other Protestant congregations also meet in apartments because they cannot get permission to rent space in local movie theaters or meeting halls. In Russia, where Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Buddhists outnumber Protestants, such restricted access to rental property is common because locals often eye Protestants with suspicion.

Milovanova is determined to eventually rebuild the church, but Tossa has had enough and would like to leave Russia for church work in the West.

"I can't see any sort of mission for me here," he said. Tossa has been in Russia since 1985, when he came as a student from Benin. Eventually he married a local woman, took Russian citizenship and fathered four children. As an African charismatic Protestant, Tossa has had an especially hard time in Chekhov, where he is the only black man in a city of 150,000 people.

Elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, a Pentecostal home church in Georgia was attacked for three days by Orthodox Christians, who object to the very existence of minority faiths in the predominantly Orthodox nation.

The 250-member church in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, bases its work in the home of pastor Nikolai Kalutsky. The pastor

said he was defenseless as a mob of some 40 people, led by two Orthodox priests, besieged his property. Police observed the conflict but made no arrests, Kalutsky said.

The attack began on Friday, July 5, when the Orthodox Christians staked out the street in front of Kalutsky's home and tried to persuade members of the congregation not to attend an evening prayer service.

"They blocked the road and grabbed believers by the arm and said: 'Don't go there! They are Satanists!' We decided not to have the [prayer] meeting, and people were going to go home," recalled Kalutsky, who, nevertheless, wanted to bless his church members in the street.

"Then some of them grabbed my arm so that I couldn't even bless the people," he said.

Kalutsky said the next day the Orthodox mob stormed into his home and broke up a 6 p.m. worship service, turning over benches, pushing and shoving members of the congregation and roughing up the pastor's 53-year-old wife, Vera, who was hospitalized for three days with head injuries. Cowed by police, the mob simply picketed the church on the final day of the attack, a Sunday on which Kalutsky said he decided to cancel the ordinary prayer service.

The mob's rationale for the attacks was simple, Kalutsky said: "They told us, 'Georgia is an Orthodox country, and it is only for the Orthodox.'"

Georgia, a country of 5 million located between Turkey and Russia, was one of the first states in the region to accept

Christianity in the fourth century. Today the vast majority of the population is nominally Orthodox. There are only an estimated 5,000 adult Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in Georgia, and they keep a low profile.

Frank Brown in Chekhov, Russia