

Threatened Church Wins Court's Favor in Russia

A vibrant, growing Pentecostal congregation in the northern Russian city of Kostroma has won an important court victory, marking the end of a yearlong struggle for survival.

The Family of God Church, founded in 1991 and led by pastor Andrei Danilov, had been denied government registration and was threatened with "liquidation" under Russian law. Government officials claimed Pentecostals were using hypnosis to manipulate members of the congregation and thereby corrupting the morals of Kostroma residents.

After refusing to accept as evidence a surreptitiously filmed videotape of a church service, Judge Tamara Koshkina ordered the Ministry of Justice on Nov. 16 to register the church as a religious organization.

"I think we'll have it done by the end of the year," said Danilov, 36, in a December telephone interview from Kostroma, a city of 260,000 residents on the Volga River. Despite the court victory, Danilov said he expects to face continued attacks in the local press.

"It just goes on and on," he said, referring to a spate of negative local newspaper articles and TV reports.

With about 250 members, the Family of God Church is the largest Pentecostal congregation in Kostroma, which, like most Russian cities, is overwhelmingly Russian Orthodox in its faith.

Throughout Russia, up to 16,000 religious organizations were to have been re-registered by Dec. 31 under a controversial 1997 law designed to restrict the activities of dangerous

religious sects. In practice, the law has been used by local authorities to shut down minority faiths. Pentecostal and charismatic congregations are especially vulnerable, said Vladimir Ryakhovsky, one of Russia's top religious freedom lawyers.

Ryakhovsky represented the Kostroma church in its court battle and has also helped Jewish, Muslim and Old Believer Orthodox communities fight for registration through the courts. Because Pentecostal congregations tend to grow particularly fast, they often attract unwanted attention, he said.

"These are big churches and very active. They will have several thousand parishioners, young people, professionals," Ryakhovsky said.

In Moscow, the Salvation Army faces closure of their local operations. The Salvation Army lost an appeal on Nov. 29 to stay open. This will result in the closure of an operation that includes the feeding of about 6,000 people a month.

—Frank Brown in Moscow