

Church Demolished: Russia's Fading Religious Freedom

A recent nighttime raid and destruction of an evangelical church outside Moscow raised concerns that religious freedom is fading in Russia.

That's because police simply watched as dozens of men with heavy machinery demolished the Holy Trinity Pentecostal congregation.

Some fear its part of a threatening pattern against Russia's evangelical Christians.

Authorities Raid Church

Sveta Romanyuk finds it difficult to talk about what happened the night of Sept. 6, 2012.

"What they did was not right. We didn't even have time to save the Bibles," she said.

On a recent morning on the edge of Moscow, 12-year-old Sveta and a handful of her friends held Sunday school on the steps of what used to be the entrance of their church.

"I want the people who did this to know I still love Christ and I am going to pray for them and our country," Sveta said.

In the early hours that September morning, about 45 men, backed by local Russian police, descended on Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church.

"I got here around 4 a.m. and saw two large excavators tearing through the church building," Zhidkov Maxim, who attends the church, said. "The police just stood and watched the whole thing."

As word spread, other church members, like Alena Maltseva and

her husband, rushed to try to save the church.

"I'll never forget the sound of my church being crushed," Maltseva said. "It was so painful."

Pastor Vasily Romanyuk also tried to stop the men but it was too late.

"When I tried to get into the territory I was stopped by drunk tough guys who introduced themselves as a vigilant group acting on behalf of the city district," said Pastor Romanyuk, who leads Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church. "They refused to show their IDs and papers."

By 3 a.m., the three-story building was in ruins.

"Unfortunately, what we are seeing today is nothing new. For decades evangelical Christians in Russia have experienced similar or worse," Pastor Romanyuk said.

Legal Government Battles

Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church became registered in the late 1970s while Soviets still ruled. In 1995, the church was forced out of its original building and moved to a site some 45 minutes outside Moscow.

The church erected a temporary building but battled authorities over building permits.

Pastor Romanyuk wanted to build a bigger, more permanent structure. Authorities refused. For 17 years, the city even prevented the church access to water and electricity.

Then in late August 2012, a district official notified Pastor Romanyuk that the church was slated for demolition.

"I never imagined they would actually do it," he said.

The brazen act stunned the evangelical community.

"They chose in front of the entire public, in front of the

entire world, in Moscow, in the largest city in Russia, the capital, just to simply level the evangelical church making that statement,” Sergey Rakhuba, with Russian Ministries, said.

Pattern of Discrimination

Romanyuk said he sees a pattern emerging.

“You talk to any evangelical leader in Russia and they will tell you this is all about ideology. The government and the Russian Orthodox Church view us evangelicals as a threat,” he explained.

“They see our congregations growing, they see how dynamic our services are, and they are threatened by it,” he said.

Even though the country’s constitution states that all religions are equal before the law, the government is often accused of discriminating against citizens who profess faiths other than Orthodox Christianity.

Vladimir Ryakhovsky, a leading human rights lawyer in Moscow, said Holy Trinity’s property and legal challenges are just part of an emerging pattern against Russian evangelicals.

“Bottom line: this is discrimination,” Ryakhovsky, who runs the Slavic Center for Law & Justice, said. “This year alone, the government has given the Russian Orthodox Church 200 building permits and in many cases the government will help fund the new churches.”

Cozy Orthodox Church-State Relations

And what evangelicals are most concerned about is the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church within the state apparatus. They accuse President Vladimir Putin of tearing down walls between church and state.

“Muslims from time to time will face similar challenges in trying to build mosques,” Vasily Evchik, a Russian evangelical

leader based in Moscow, said. "But you will never hear of an Orthodox church being bulldozed and ransacked in the middle of the night."

Back on the grounds of Holy Trinity Church, Romanyuk and the congregation are pressing forward. They're holding weekly services in a large tent next to the demolished church. There are reports the city wants to turn the land into a large sport complex.

"I never imagined in my life that I would go through such an experience," Pastory Romanyuk said. "But to tell you the truth I feel emboldened and full of hope, thanks to the prayers of Christians around the world."

Twelve-year-old Sveta is also hopeful.

"Since this happened I've been asking God to provide us a new place, a place we can continue to meet and share with others about the love of Christ," she said. "I know God will take care of us."