

Officials Back Down From Closing City's Only Church

The local government of the northwestern Turkish city of Bursa ordered that its only church, which serves four congregations, be vacated by Friday (26 Feb.) before rescinding the order on Tuesday.

Ismail Kulakcioglu, the pastor of the Protestant congregation, said they were given less than a week to vacate the building. Approximately 200 Christians share the church for their Sunday worship services.

The Directorate General of Foundations originally gave oral notice to church leaders on 18 Feb. that they had only five days to leave. It eventually extended the deadline by three days, before removing the order to vacate altogether on 23 Feb.

Four different branches of Christianity congregate in the building, officially known as the French Church Cultural Centre. They include Latin Catholic, German Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant fellowships. Under Turkish law, non-Muslim faith communities face significant legal hurdles in registering an officially sanctioned house of worship. Multiple congregations often share the same space. On Tuesday, the Bursa municipality and the Directorate General of Foundations announced that Christians would not be prevented from using the church.

Kulakcioglu noted that the city government's original decision to close the church was at odds with its self-proclaimed image as a city of religious tolerance.

In a press release, Kulakcioglu said that he and the local government considered Turkey to be a cultural mosaic, and they did not want to see this mosaic smashed to pieces.

The pastor already has an appointment to meet with the Bursa mayor, Recep Altepe, to sign a new protocol for future use of the church building.

In 2013, city officials and church leaders hosted a delegation of Christian and Muslim theologians from Germany as part of an inter-religious dialogue initiative. Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, the Greek Orthodox metropolitan of Bursa, has praised the Catholic congregation for allowing Orthodox Christians to worship there.

Bursa is a conservative city of 2 million in the industrial Marmara region of Turkey. Located 100 miles (160km) southeast of Istanbul, Turks have nicknamed it “Green Bursa,” both for its nearby forests and its Islamic identity.

The church is a relic of a time when Bursa had a large non-Muslim population. It was built in the 1880s to serve local French-speaking people from the Levant (especially Lebanon)—Latin Catholics who lived under the Ottoman Empire—as part of a complex that included the Pere Augustin Assumption College. French Christians are buried in the nearby cemetery.

The four congregations moved into the church after restoring it between 2002 and 2004. They reopened it for worship after signing a protocol with the Bursa municipality.

The eviction order came from a supposed lapse in the protocol. It expired in 2015, and the Bursa municipality told the congregations to reapply. Their renewal application was received positively, but an element within the city council opposed it, Kulakcioglu said.

Bursa’s city council grants use of the building for religious purposes and the Directorate General of Foundations owns the property.

Failure to institutionalize religious freedoms

For decades, the church sat in ruins. Aykan Erdemir, a Turkish academic who grew up in Bursa and is now a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told World Watch Monitor that as a child he played among the piles of rubble with friends. He saw the church's reopening as a symbol of Bursa rediscovering its multicultural past.

Erdemir said the eviction order was a sign of Turkey's failure to institutionalize religious freedom for its non-Sunni Muslims.

"Christians do not have any legal entitlement to the building. They only have usage rights for the time being, which I think is a very precarious situation," he said. "Members of non-majority religions have to depend on the goodwill of bureaucrats and the majority population."

Such problems will continue to happen until religious minorities have property rights for their houses of worship and restitution rights to use their historical churches, Erdemir said.

According to some Turkish officials, the recent decision to close the church was based on a misunderstanding over the church's legal status, not the specific targeting of Christians.

Toros Alcan, a Turkish-Armenian representing minority interests on the Foundations Directorate, said that nobody in the Bursa municipality or his organization ever produced a written order that the church be vacated.

"I don't know where talk of this order for the church to be vacated came from. It could be a rumour or a journalist's report. "The church remains a symbol of the city's non-Muslims' struggle to become an accepted part of society. Kulakciolgu said he had tried to convince the council that Bursa would lose a priceless piece of its cultural heritage if the congregations were forced out of their building.

“We’re trying to explain that this church—which is used as a house of worship by different congregations—is perhaps the only example of its kind in the world,” he said.

Bursa’s Christians have come under persecution in the past. In 2004, three ultra-nationalists beat a Turkish convert from Islam into a coma for distributing New Testaments. One was the president of the local chapter of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

The victim, Yakup Cindilli, suffered physically and mentally and never fully recovered. The three attackers were jailed and faced criminal charges for assault, but were not convicted.