



Trinity Baptist Church, Maryport

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Issue 5

Praying for the Persecuted Church

Welcome to this newsletter highlighting the persecuted Church. We all need to know what is going on so we can pray for specific tragedies and Christians going through these tragedies and threats as well as generally for persecuted Christians around the world.

This issue contains items from Release International and Barnabas Fund.

This issue looks at the persecution that Russia have been active in over the last decade and how this is also affecting Ukraine. Russia have been bringing in laws that restrict worship which are used to close church's. Russia is a majority-Christian country that recognises in general Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism as its "traditional" religions and in particular the Russian Orthodox Church as having a special role in the religious life of the country. Russia's constitution officially guarantees freedom of religion. In practice, however, Russian Christians, especially non-Orthodox, are not always given this freedom of religion. Continued on page 2

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

John 15:18-19

Russia

In April 2021 Christian leaders raised concerns about amendments to the country's Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The main concern is a requirement that ministers of religion trained overseas must now obtain "re-certification from a Russian religious organisation" before they can begin their ministry. Those already ministering in Russia are exempt from this requirement.

On 6th April 2021 the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria Theological Institute in St Petersburg was stripped of its higher education licence, leaving it without the ability to conduct the formal theological education and training required under the new law. Other Protestant colleges had their licences revoked.

Another troubling provision of the new amendments is that persons "whose actions have been recognised by a court ruling to contain signs of extremist activity" are barred from taking up leadership positions in religious organisations. The vague way in which extremism is defined could make any minister of religion vulnerable to being barred from undertaking pastoral ministry at the whim of the authorities.

On 2nd December 2021 armed officers from Russia's Federal Security Service disrupted a Christian conference in Ramenskoye, near Moscow, confining attendees for around ten hours. The majority of attendees were charged with an "administrative offence" - an act considered to violate "the rules and norms" of the Russian Federation - because the Christian ministry that had organised the event had been declared an "undesirable" foreign organisation.

Pray for Russian Christians who increasingly have their activities monitored and restricted by the Russian government. Ask the Lord to provide for churches whose future leaders may be both unable to undertake training in Russia at the same time as the government refuses to recognise any training undertaken outside the country.

UKRAINE: THE FEAR OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION UNDER RUSSIAN CONTROL.

25TH FEB 2022



As the world looks on at Russia's attack on Ukraine what could this mean for Christians in that country?

In those parts of Ukraine that were already under Russian separatist control many Protestant churches have faced restrictions, with church services being closed and books banned.

Pro-Russian rebels took over parts of the Luhansk region of Ukraine in March 2014. The following month they proclaimed an independent republic, which was recognised by Russia on February 21st 2022. That same day, Russia also recognised another breakaway region: the so-called Donetsk People's Republic.

Attack on religious freedom

In almost eight years under Russian control, freedom of religion has come under severe attack in those two areas.

*Norway-based "Forum 18" says that in those areas all Protestant communities have been made illegal, along with any church not part of the Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox community.

The breakaway Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) passed the Religion Law on February 17th 2018. This required every religious community to re-register with the authorities. 'In other words, apply for permission to exist'. The justification given was 'to secure the defence of the country and the security of the state'.

Then in March 2019 all Baptist Union congregations were ordered to halt public worship or face punishment. Since the passing of the Religion Law, registration has been refused for every Protestant, Baptist and Pentecostal community.

'The situation for all Protestant churches is bad,' a Protestant from Kyiv told *Forum 18. 'We do not have registration and do not have the right to meet in our buildings, which have been closed.'

John's Gospel banned

Along with the closing of churches, the Russian-backed authorities banned a number of Christian books as "extremist". These included an edition of the Gospel of John.

Among the 12 titles banned in Luhansk are a Baptist hymnbook and books by Charles Spurgeon and Billy Graham. The Justice Ministry added these books to its State List of Extremist Materials.

One pastor told *Forum 18: 'If the word of God - the gospel of John - is deemed extremist, this represents a rebellion against God himself and everything sacred.'

In Luhansk, the State Security Ministry (SSM) banned all Ukrainian Baptist Union communities. According to *Forum 18, the secret police have carried out repeated raids on places of worship and unregistered religious communities, denying them access to their own buildings and preventing them from carrying out social welfare activities.

Christian communities have been put under surveillance, and gas, water and electricity have been cut off to all places of worship owned by unregistered communities.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said several religious communities in Russian-held parts of Luhansk and Donetsk 'continue to face limitations on their enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief'.

Repeated raids

Repeated raids on places of worship and re-registration denials left many communities in a state of uncertainty.

In Krasnodon, close to Russia's eastern border, police raided a Baptist church during Sunday worship. They forced church members to disperse and stay away until the church got its registration. One church member told *Forum 18: 'If they continue to meet, they will be taken to court, fined, and the house where they hold their services will be sealed.'

But the Christian insisted Baptists would continue to meet regardless. Church members told the police: 'Christ's commandments are higher than human laws. We cannot fulfil laws which contradict the holy scripture, because we serve God who is the highest power over all.'

Release International's sister organisations have been providing Bibles for Ukraine, including the Russian-separatist areas.

A partner of Release International is currently in Ukraine and was shaken from his sleep on February 24th by powerful explosions, as the Russian attack began. Ukrainian air defences were shooting down Russian missiles or drones in the sky over Kyiv.

He told Release International: 'The truth is that the real war has begun. The entire territory of Ukraine is under fire. There is no safe place and the goal has been to sow panic everywhere. Our hope is in the Lord.'

Prayer

Please pray for the nation of Ukraine at this time. Pray particularly for those Christians in the disputed areas, who have lived under restrictions in the last few years. Pray also for the safety of the Release International partner currently in Ukraine.

***Forum 18** is a Norwegian human rights organization that promotes religious freedom. The organization's name is based on Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Produced by Mark Fleet on behalf of the Trinity Baptist Church Maryport
As a guide to help with your prayers for the persecuted church worldwide

I hope that this will be helpful for you all.

If you want anything highlighted in future publications please contact me by email (markabfleet@gmail.com) Thank you for your prayers.