

Churches to Russia: We're not leaving

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue

Several religious denominations remain defiant in the face of new laws that would ban them from proselytizing in Russia.

The so-called “Yarovaya laws” make it illegal to preach, proselytize, or hand out religious materials outside of specially designated places. The laws also give the Russian government wide scope in monitoring and recording electronic messages and phone calls.

The package of laws, billed as antiterrorism measures, was passed by the Russian Duma, or parliament, in June and signed by Russian president Vladimir Putin earlier in July.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan government panel, condemned the new laws.

“These deeply flawed antiterrorism measures will buttress the Russian government’s war against human rights and religious freedom,” Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit priest and chair of the commission, said after the measures were passed. “They will make it easier for Russian authorities to repress religious communities, stifle peaceful dissent, and detain and imprison people.”

The new laws require a government permit to engage in proselytizing activities and ban those activities outside any registered religious organization, such as a church. Russia has numerous house churches meeting in family homes, and those are now illegal under the new law.

Violations can result in fines of \$780 for an individual or \$15,000 for an organization and can lead to deportation.

Religious organizations directly affected by the new laws are those with strong evangelization programs in Russia: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and other Protestant organizations with Baptist, Pentecostal, and

independent Christian roots.

Only about 1 percent of the Russian population is Protestant; the majority religion is Russian Orthodox Christian.

A spokesman for the LDS Church said the 15.6-million-member church has no plans to recall its approximately 30 missionaries currently assigned in seven Russian locations—a low number for a country Russia's size.

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses have 2,500 congregations in Russia. The Russian government has shut down several Witness organizations since the beginning of the year, most recently the church's administrative center in St. Petersburg.

The new law effectively bans the Witnesses' practice of going door-to-door to preach and hand out tracts.

Witness officials have called the Russian government's focus on its activities "a deliberate misapplication of Russia's law on extremist activity."

Eric Baxter, senior counsel for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, described the law as "very restrictive on its face." Baxter served on a mission for the LDS Church in St. Petersburg from 1992 to 1994.

"Despite decades of enforced atheism under the U.S.S.R., in my experience the Russian people are people of deep faith," he said. "Religion inspired their art, their literature and their music, and I think that the natural human instinct to share their faith will prevail and Russians will find the freedom to live their faith." —Religion News Service

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