



Azerbaijan



Christianity is growing in Azerbaijan despite harsh restrictions

Once a Christian region, Azerbaijan is now 96% Muslim. The government gives preferential treatment to those religions considered "traditional" (Islam, Russian Orthodox Christianity and Judaism), while other forms of Christianity are actively restricted.

Ever since the country's independence in 1991, the government has repeatedly increased its restrictions on Christians. Christian groups that established a presence in the country only after 1991 and those operating without official registration are particularly vulnerable. Their church services are monitored and raided, Christian literature is confiscated, and their members are harassed and imprisoned.

The country's Religion Law, first adopted in 1992, has been amended 13 times. The latest amendment to the country's Criminal and Administrative Code came into force on 12 December 2011; those caught producing or distributing unapproved Christian literature are now liable to be fined up to nearly nine years of the official minimum wage or sentenced to up

to five years in jail.

Hundreds of churches and Christian groups are waiting for approval of their registration applications after the government ruled in 2010 for the fifth time since 1992 that that all groups must re-register. The application process is burdensome, and some groups have been denied registration.

In April 2012, Baku-based Greater Grace Protestant Church was stripped of its registration in a 15-minute court hearing held in the absence of any representative from the church. It was charged with failing to re-register with the government. Greater Grace appealed against the decision, but its case was thrown out in July. The church then took its legal challenge to the country's Supreme Court, which upheld all previous rulings in an eight-minute hearing on 9 January.

An increasing number of Azerbaijanis are finding Christ. Many of the new Christians are converts from Islam and can meet with hostility from family, community and authorities.

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