

Biographical Information

Alexander Ogorodnikov, longtime Russian religious dissident and Gulag survivor, was born in 1950 and raised “as a normal Soviet child” in an atheist family. However as a philosophy student at the University of the Urals in Sverdlovsk, he questioned the materialistic ideology. In 1971, the University expelled him for a “dissident way of thinking incompatible with the title of the Komsomol member and student.”

Ogorodnikov later attended the Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. Continuing his search for the truth, he became a believer. Alexander visited an Orthodox church in Moscow and received his first Communion from Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, Bishop of London, who was visiting Russia. The Institute eventually expelled him for his religious faith.

In the capital city, Alexander met other young believers predominantly from the intelligentsia. They quickly realized that the Church was not ready to accept a generation of young adults because they feared persecution. Alexander founded the Christian Seminar, an underground group of believers from various denominations. They met to read the Bible and discuss theology and faith. The Christian Seminar had branches in Smolensk and Leningrad. In 1976, Ogorodnikov published an underground philosophy journal with a religious basis *Obshchina (Community)*.

Ogorodnikov was arrested several times for his religious activity. In 1976, he was jailed in a psychiatric hospital because his religious convictions constituted a “mental disorder.” In 1978, he was arrested again and sentenced to prison. He spent nine years in Perm 36, a camp for “the most dangerous political criminals” of the state. Alexander was released by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987 after Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher intervened.

Nevertheless, the KGB continued harassing and persecuting Ogorodnikov who refused to compromise his convictions. Special police conducted searches of his residences and destroyed his personal archives, including all copies of his underground publications: *Community*, *Bulletin of Christian Community*, and *The Weekly Chronicle*.

Since 1987 Alexander Ogorodnikov has continued his religious and human rights activities. He has lobbied for the release of prisoners of conscience, the immigration of 20,000 Pentecostal Christians to the United States, and the return of buildings to the Orthodox Church. In 1988, the year celebrating the “Millennium of Russia’s Baptism,” he attempted to display “an alternative millennium exhibition” showing destroyed churches. The Moscow Patriarchy and the post-Communist government did not welcome his idea. In 1989, he founded the Christian-Democratic Union, the first Christian political organization in Russia and was elected its chair. Ogorodnikov spoke at international congresses and before parliaments in the United States, United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, and Germany about the situation in the USSR.

In the early 1990s, Ogorodnikov elected not to pursue a career in politics. Instead, he established a Moscow-area soup kitchen and a non-governmental Christian shelter called Island of Hope for girls and under-aged mothers who were victims of drug and domestic abuse. Alexander collected and managed humanitarian aid to Abkhazia, Chechnya, and other regions of Russia. He helped build a church in a prison in the Ivanovo region and established inter-regional rehabilitation services for orphaned children.

Ogorodnikov continues work on a book about the Christian Seminar and his experiences as a religious dissident in Russia. Because special police destroyed his personal archive during one of the searches at his residence, the Keston Archive is the only location of his Christian Seminar documents and the underground journals he published in the late 1980s. In 2013, Belgian publicist and journalist Koenraad De Wolf published a biography of the religious leader: *Dissident for Life: Alexander Ogorodnikov and the Struggle for Religious Freedom in Russia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).