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Moscow's Only Anglican Church Is Divided, and Headed to Court

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St. Andrew's Anglican church in Moscow. **Sergei Karpukhin / TASS**

A long-simmering power struggle inside St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Moscow burst into public view this week after parishioners arriving for Sunday worship were blocked from entering the church by a rival group of members accused of trying to seize control of the congregation.

Founded in the early 19th century, St. Andrew's occupies a rare place in Russia's religious landscape. The church, the only one of its kind in Moscow, was confiscated by Soviet authorities and returned to the Anglican community only in 1994.

It has since served as a spiritual and social hub for foreign residents and English-speaking worshippers in the Russian capital, largely free of serious internal disputes — until now.

The first signs of trouble surfaced in September, when the church said its website and

WhatsApp channel had been "hacked" without naming who was responsible.

Soon after, the church's chaplain, the Rev. Canon Dr. Arun John, accused a "handful of members" of using "intimidation and threats" in an effort to illegally take control of the church's administration and finances.

The dispute, he said, had also interfered with his ability to secure a visa to return to Russia. Rev. John, who was appointed chaplain in 2024, had now found himself back in his native India and unable to return to his congregation.

Not long afterward, a new Telegram channel claiming to represent St. Andrew's began publishing updates and commentary. But the church's long-established Telegram channel, with more than 2,000 subscribers, continued to operate, an outward sign of a growing internal split.

Tensions escalated in December, when church warden Nicolette Kirk filed a civil suit in a Moscow court challenging the appointment of another church member, Sarah Harris, as head of the St. Andrew's legal entity, RO Anglican Church in Moscow.

In a public notice signed on Dec. 11, Kirk argued the church meeting that appointed Harris lacked a proper quorum and called on other parishioners to join the suit.

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The Diocese in Europe, which oversees Anglican congregations across the continent, confirmed the dispute in a statement to The Moscow Times. Spokesperson Ruth Blanco said a "very small number" of parish members had disrupted church operations and was witholding visa support needed for Rev. John to return to Russia.

Blanco confirmed the chaplain remains in India because of the visa impasse.

In comments to the newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta this week, Kirk accused Harris and "a small group of disgruntled individuals" of using Rev. John's absence to "illegally seize control of the Russian legal entity that allows us to operate in the country."

"Despite Father Arun being duly selected and appointed by both our church authorities and the Russian legal entity, Ms. Harris's group unilaterally decided to cancel Father Arun's visa application without consulting the parishioners, thereby preventing his return to Russia," Kirk was quoted as saying.

Rev. John did not respond to requests for comment sent to his social media accounts.

The dispute came to a head over the weekend, when St. Andrew's administration announced that services had been suspended "due to the absence of persons authorized to conduct them in accordance with Russian law." Shortly afterward, the church's long-standing Telegram channel reported that parishioners had been physically locked out of the building.

"Dear all, unfortunately, we have been locked out of the church this morning," the message, posted on Sunday morning, read. "The 11 a.m. service will be taking place in the Art Court

Hotel opposite."

The incident was confirmed by a current church member who asked not to be named as well as a spokesperson for the Anglican Church in England. The spokesperson said the church was "shocked" by developments and called the suspension of services "an unfortunate escalation in tensions faced by the chaplaincy in recent months."

In a statement issued soon after the news that services at St. Andrew's were suspended, the Bishop of the Diocese in Europe, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Robert Innes, accused the group aligned with Harris of subjecting other church members to "harassment and threats," including through the use of a "private security company."

More pointedly, Bishop Innes said the Russian legal entity now led by Harris no longer recognized the authority of the Anglican Church. That, he said, had made it impossible to continue holding services.

"Such harassment and intimidating behavior is unacceptable in any context, let alone at church," he said.

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That statement prompted a sharp rebuttal posted on St. Andrew's website, which appears to be controlled by the group backing Harris. In it, the church administration accused the Diocese of ignoring complaints lodged against Rev. John, including allegations of "bullying" and "misogyny."

"Bishop Innes continues to support Rev. Arun John, who is now disrupting the community from abroad through proxies who slander and lie to the media and claim to have leadership roles in St. Andrew's Russian legal entity when they do not have such roles," the statement said.

It also claimed that Rev. John had failed to follow through on an agreement to obtain a work permit and labor contract with the church's Russian legal entity after arriving in Moscow in December 2024.

"When he arrived in Moscow in December 2024, he... started a campaign to disrupt and cause chaos within our community," it said.

In a statement sent to The Moscow Times on Friday, St. Andrew's administration repeated its allegations against Rev. John, but stressed that the church remains open to visitors and that other activities "continue as usual" despite the suspension in religious services.

Although the church falls under the Diocese in Europe, Rev. John's license to preach does not automatically extend to Russia. Since 2016, foreign clergy have been required to obtain special accreditation to conduct religious services or missionary activities in the country, a law that human rights groups have criticized as restrictive. Still, the Diocese of Europe recognizes Rev. John as the chaplain of St. Andrew's.

At the same time, those involved say the current dispute does not appear to involve Russian

authorities directly.

The Anglican Church said the Russian Orthodox Church has offered support, though it did not specify what form that support has taken. A former parishioner still in contact with church members, who requested anonymity, described the situation as "internal" and having "nothing to do with the state."

A current member of St. Andrew's told The Moscow Times he believes those claiming to represent the church's administration under Harris "have no legitimacy." He declined to comment on the lawsuit filed by Kirk, citing the ongoing court proceedings.

For the time being, parishioners, deprived of their physical church, say they will continue weekly services by livestreaming them on YouTube.

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