

# Russian Baptists schedule historic rally with Orthodox, Catholics

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MOSCOW (ABP) — An Oct. 15 meeting between high-level representatives of Russia's Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox communities resulted in the scheduling of a historic multi-confessional Christian rally for early next year, according to a Russian Baptist press release.

The rally, scheduled for Feb. 4 in Moscow, will address how the three groups' common Christian values can speak to problems affecting Russia. [According](#) to the release from the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, those problems include "the struggle against drugs, alcoholism, pornography, a 'cult of consumption and violence,' abortion and suicide." It said combating those ills is "basic to all Christians" in Russia.

The event came out of a second meeting of the Christian Inter-Confessional Advisory Committee of representatives of the former Soviet Union's Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox denominations. It was only the second meeting of the committee's three members since the Russian Orthodox Church suspended meetings in 2002 amid rising religious tensions in Russia.

"The atmosphere was very open. A spirit of Christian love and acceptance prevailed" at the Oct. 15 meeting, said Vitaly Vlasenko, director of external church relations for Russian Baptists and the Protestant representative on the committee. Other members are Orthodox Archbishop Ilarion of Volokolamsk, Russia, and Pavel Pezzi, the Catholic archbishop of Moscow.

Russian Baptists [have expressed](#) hope that Patriarch Kirill I, a former

ecumenical-relations officer who became head of the Russian Orthodox Church earlier this year, would maintain his predecessor's openness to better relations with the nation's Protestants.

Tensions between the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant communities in Russia have been on the rise in recent years, especially over issues such as church-state separation. A rise in Russian nationalism in recent years has included an emphasis on Orthodoxy as integral to the national identity, exacerbating local conflicts between the Orthodox and other religious groups across the country. Several specific legislative and administrative proposals have also raised tensions, with minority religious groups alleging that they are efforts to establish Orthodoxy and marginalize Protestants and other groups.

The most recent conflict emerged after the nation's Justice Ministry proposed a new law Oct. 12 that would require religious visas for all foreigners active in mission work in Russia. According to the Baptist union, such visas have proven "often difficult to obtain in the past."

But Vlasenko said the proposed rally was a good starting place for improving relations among the nation's three major Christian groups. "We need to start with something on which we all agree," he said. "Once we have a stronger, more trusting relationship in place, we can take on more complicated and controversial issues."

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