

Russian pro-lifers to launch women's health clinics that don't provide abortions

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Moscow, July 1 (ENINews)--A Russian pro-life organization is about to launch a network of clinics offering pre- and post-natal care while excluding procedures such as abortion and in-vitro fertilization that "contradict the teachings of the Russian Orthodox, Catholic and traditional Protestant churches," said Alexey Komov, the project manager.

The Life-Family Medical Centers Network will be run on a franchise basis under the auspices of "Za Zhizn" ("For Life"), an anti-abortion organization led by two Russian Orthodox priests. Its formation was announced in Moscow on 30 June at the end of a two-day summit held by the Rockford, Illinois-based World Congress of Families (WCF). The clinics will cooperate with American organizations such as Heartbeat International, which also runs pro-life medical centers.

Komov, who is the WCF representative in Russia and most of the former Soviet Union, said applications to join the project have already come in from 30 cities. Muslims and Jews who are against abortion will also be welcome. The first clinic should open within a month, he said.

"This is a new niche," said Komov. "We think the idea is in the air. We guarantee that people who come to the clinics, whether Christians or from other traditions, can rest assured they won't be forced to have abortions or pre-natal screenings that harm expectant mothers."

Russia has one of the highest abortion rates in the world, and pro-lifers say women are often pushed into having them. Komov said doctors who had to leave state or private clinics because they refused to perform abortions

would be hired by the Life-Family Medical Centers.

The two-day "Moscow Demographic Summit: The Family and the Future of Humankind" offered tangible evidence of a new alliance between American evangelicals and the Russian Orthodox Church. Participants discussed ways to stem Russia's precipitous population decline, fight abortion and sexual immorality--seen as root causes of the demographic crisis--and promote large families as a social model. Many speakers also condemned contraception.

In another sign of changing times, the event had Russian corporate sponsors, including UralSib and Interros, two of the country's biggest financial holding companies.

Summit participants included officials and activists from as far away as the Philippines and as close as Ulyanovsk, Vladimir Lenin's birthplace, in addition to Hungarian government officials seeking support for a sanctity-of-life clause they added to their constitution.

Among the speakers was Janice Shaw Crouse, a former speechwriter for President George H.W. Bush, and a senior fellow at the Beverly LaHaye Institute, the think tank for Concerned Women for America.

In her speech at the summit, Crouse said both Russia and the United States have suffered from the pro-choice movement. "And what a heavy price both of our great countries are paying for the choice: millions and millions of children are conceived only to die before they are born."

In a visit to the U.S. earlier this year, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, met with evangelicals. He said churches that adhere to traditional social doctrine on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and family values are natural allies.

"It was a real encouragement for evangelicals in the States to hear the kinds of things we heard from Metropolitan Hilarion," said Crouse. "That here in Russia you've got people who are very concerned about the life issue, about the breakdown of the family, about how children are being raised, about cultural influences."

Rev. Dmitri Smirnov, a leader of the "Life" movement and an outspoken critic of gay rights, said the extra frozen embryos often destroyed after in-vitro fertilization mean a woman who has IVF treatment "is basically having the equivalent of five abortions." His colleague, Rev. Maksim Obukhov, said "It's clear that we must now create a movement in defense of the family as a whole," he said, listing modern scourges to be fought against such as abortion and homosexuality.

In the fall, Russia's parliament, with heavy lobbying from the Russian Orthodox Church, will consider legislative amendments that would place some restrictions on abortion. The Russian church would like more.