

Orthodox Church in America – Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania Diocesan Assembly – January 29-30, 2015

Thursday Night – Session #1 – January 29, 2015

The meeting was called to order at 5 PM.

The **agenda** was presented. A motion to accept it with amendments regarding the All-American Council was made by Fr. James Weremedic and seconded by Mark Linnehan. The motion passed unanimously.

The **officers** were presented:

- Chairs: Fr. John Kowalczyk and Larry Skvir
- Secretaries: Daria Cortese (lay) and Fr. Jason Franchak (clergy)

A motion to accept the officers was made by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky and seconded by Fr. Nicholas Solak. The motion passed unanimously.

Opening Remarks by Bp. +MARK

- Welcome to OCA Chancellor Fr. John Jillions.
- His Grace gave a preview of the upcoming roundtable discussion regarding the 2016 Great Council.
- His Grace asked the Assembly to pray for him.
- Thanks to Fr. Martin Browne and the Auditing Committee.
- Thanks to Mat. Sandra Kopestonsky for her executive secretarial duties and for guest hospitality. Many years to her and Fr. Stephen.
- Thank you to all deans.
- Thank you to everyone involved in the summer youth camps.
- Thanks to Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk for his work with the Liturgical Life Committee. The major issue before the Committee is publishing a new funeral service book.
- Thanks to Aric Gingo for maintenance of the diocesan website and the publication of *Alive in Christ*. Please submit high-quality photographs with clear descriptions. This enhances the professionalism of the website and magazine.
- Bp. +MARK has established a diocesan Google calendar that includes the episcopal visit schedule, major parish anniversaries and guest speaking events.
- See the bishop's message.

Credentials

Fr. John Onofrey presented the credentials for the Thursday sessions:

- 1 hierarch
- 25 clergy
- 23 lay delegates
- 3 Diocesan Council members
- 4 alternates
- 3 observers
- 1 guest (Fr. Jillions)

Session #2

The Assembly heard a presentation by Fr. Nathaniel Symeonides regarding American Orthodox unity and the Great Council of 2016. The major points included:

- The Great Council will convene in 2016 in Constantinople.
- Each represented jurisdiction will have 1 primate and 24 bishops in attendance.
 - The OCA will not have voting representation, but may be permitted to send observers.
- Topics will include:
 - Orthodoxy and ecumenism
 - Relations with the broader Christian world
 - Justice, freedom, brotherhood and love
 - Impediments of marriage (e.g. interfaith unions)
 - The Orthodox diaspora
 - Procedures for obtaining autocephaly
 - Procedures for declaring autonomy
 - Fasting regulations
 - A unified date for Pascha

Questions and discussion:

- Will the Great Council create a unified American Orthodox Church?
- Is there a canonical basis for American autocephaly?
- Fr. John Jillions stated that the Orthodox Church in America is simultaneously committed to solving the “diaspora problem” and to fully-recognized autocephaly. There are several liturgical issues that some hierarchs insist be resolved before any unification process begins. These include interfaith marriage, ordination, confession, preparation for Holy Communion and burial regulations. Nationalism continues to be the greatest stumbling block to American Orthodox unity.
- Bp. +MARK stated that the challenge of American Orthodox unity would be for bishops to administer multi-cultural dioceses. His Grace warned of the dangers of focusing exclusively on immigrants to the detriment of the Orthodox Christians already here in America. He also stated that it is important to recognize legitimate diversity of practice and to distinguish it from unacceptable habits. His Grace also expressed concern

regarding the lack of North American representation at the Great and Holy Council for the Orthodox Assemblies throughout the world.

- Fr. Nathaniel stated that churches have borders defined in their tomoi of autocephaly, and that the presence of a given Orthodox population in an area does not give an Orthodox jurisdiction the automatic right to extend its borders into that territory.
- Bp. +MARK thanked Fr. Nathaniel for the presentation.

The evening closed with Small Compline.

Friday Morning - Session #3 – January 30, 2015

The meeting was called to order at 10:45 AM and opened with prayer.

Bp. +MARK thanked those who prepared the food, and thanked Fr. Timothy Hojnicky for coordinating the liturgical services. Fr. Ian Shipley also thanked those who prepared the food.

Minutes

- The minutes from the 2014 Assembly were presented by Fr. John Kowalczyk.
- Reader John Kosturos asked for the following additions to the minutes:
 - To include the voting instructions used during the episcopal nomination
 - The prohibition against nominations from the floor
 - Reader John Kosturos' expression of concern that statements made from the dais went against the prohibition of comments for and against Bp. +MARK's candidacy
 - The statement of Bp. +MELCHIZIDEK that he did not believe those comments were intentional violations of that prohibition
- The amended minutes were approved by general acclamation.

Credentials

Fr. John Onofrey presented the credentials for the Friday sessions:

- 1 hierarch
- 28 clergy
- 25 lay delegates
- 5 Diocesan Council members
- 4 alternates
- 3 observers
- 1 guest (Fr. Jillions)

Message from Metropolitan +TIKHON

Fr. John Jillions conveyed a message from the Metropolitan:

- Axios to Bp. +MARK on the upcoming first anniversary of his enthronement as diocesan hierarch.
- Bp. +DAVID (Mahaffey) needs a priest in Juneau during the summer months.

- The Metropolitan's priorities are evangelization/mission, support for clergy and their families, and the strengthening of monasteries and seminaries. St. Tikhon's Seminary and St. Vladimir's Seminary are experiencing financial hardship. His Beatitude asks parishes to prayerfully consider donating 1% of their budget to one or both of these institutions.

Stewardship Presentation – Fr. Stephen Vernak

Fr. Stephen Vernak made a presentation on stewardship. He identified the following issues:

- Declining membership of roughly 100 people per year.
- Aging congregations. The statistics report is available on the diocesan website.
- Many parishes struggle to pay full-time clergy, which leads to an inconsistent liturgical life and a reduction in pastoral care. It also adversely affects evangelism and outreach.
- If current trends continue, in 10 years the Diocese will have closed 10 parishes and have only about 1000 members. Fr. Stephen expressed that the Roman Catholic Church frequently closes *parishes* that drop below 1000 members.
- It is very important to assess the efficacy of fundraisers. To do so, calculate the net profit (gross profit – expenses), divide the net profit by the number of people involved, and divide that figure by the number of hours worked.
- Generosity is the foundation of Orthodox Christian life. We must teach our young people to give generously. Our attitude must not be, "What is my minimum financial obligation?" but rather "How much can I offer to God in thanksgiving?"
- Fr. Stephen encourages parishes to tithe. Beginning with a half-tithe can help introduce the practice.¹
- Parish "dues" can engender a false sense of entitlement, do not require prayerful consideration, and are usually insufficient to meet parochial expenses.
- Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk expressed that concerns about tithing as a Protestant phenomenon can be addressed by reminding parishioners that God commanded the Israelites to support the Levites by tithing.
- Fr. Martin Browne stated that successful tithing requires an understanding of *why* we tithe. Parishes exist to witness to Christ and spread the Good News, and we will fail in this mission if we lose sight of this goal. We do not exist to *buy* time, but to *redeem* time. Fr. Martin also predicted that many parishioners will ask, "What are we going to do with all of that money?" We must think about this and be prepared to answer.
- Bp. +MARK explained that we are like a beggar showing another beggar where to find food. We do work *for* the Church in order to do the work *of* the Church.

Approval of Reports

The reports were posted on the diocesan website prior to the start of the Assembly. The reports were not read during the meeting.

¹ A helpful tithe calculator can be found at <http://www.anycalculator.com/tithecalculator.htm>.

- A motion to approve the **Chancellor's report** was made by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky and seconded by Fr. George Volkovinsky. The motion passed with 1 objection.
- A motion to approve the **Philadelphia Deanery report** was made by Reader John Kosturos and seconded from the floor.
 - Thanks to Fr. James Weremedic.
 - The motion to approve the report passed unanimously.
- A motion to approve the **Frackville Deanery report** was made by Fr. Ian Shipley and seconded by Fr. John Onofrey. The motion passed unanimously.
- A motion to approve the **Wilkes-Barre Deanery report** was made by Fr. Michael Demko and seconded from the floor.
 - Many thanks to Fr. Nicholas Solak.
 - The motion to accept the report passed unanimously.
- A motion to accept the **Treasury report** was made by Protodeacon Sergei Kapral and seconded by Fr. Michael Hatrak.
 - Larry Skvir asked if the diocese should write off \$31,000 in assessment monies it has paid to the OCA but not received from parishioners. Fr. Martin Browne expressed support for the idea.
 - Fr. Martin stated that parishes with concerns about the accuracy of their assessment records should call his cell phone or contact him via his personal email account.²
 - Mark Linnehan asked about the \$8000 discrepancy between the Treasury report and Auditors' report. This was explained by the auditor.
 - The motion to accept the report passed unanimously.
- A motion to accept the **Auditors' report** was made by Mat. Kathy Kowalczyk and seconded by Fr. Nicholas Solak.
 - The audit report handout was distributed. The most recent audit took place one week ago, and uncovered no problems.
 - The motion to accept the report passed unanimously.
- A motion to accept the **Diocesan Council report** was made by Fr. James Weremedic and seconded by Fr. Nicholas Solak. The motion passed unanimously.
- A motion to accept the **Communications report** was made by Fr. James Weremedic and seconded by Fr. Daniel Kovalak. The motion passed unanimously.
- A motion to accept the **Church School Program Coordinators' report** was made by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky and seconded by John Buckeye.
 - Bp. +MARK recommended a Serbian publication for church school, *Little Falcons*.
 - Another helpful resource is the catechism published by Orthodox Christian Prison Ministries.
 - The motion to accept the report passed unanimously.
- A motion to accept the **Young Adults' report** was made by Mark Linnehan and seconded from the floor.
 - Thanks to everyone who helps with this ministry.
 - The students are asking for a second week of camp.

² (570) 906-1388 * frraymondmartin@hotmail.com

- The motion to accept the report passed unanimously.
- A motion to accept the **Health Insurance report** was made by Protodeacon Sergei Kapral and seconded from the floor.
 - The cost of health insurance depends on the average age of the insured persons. Josh Potteiger stated that his company saves money by setting a high insurance deductible and reimbursing employees who pay those costs.
 - The motion to accept the report passed unanimously.

Statement regarding the upcoming All-American Council – Fr. John Jillions

Two major issues at the upcoming All-American Council will be statute revisions and proportional giving.

- The statute revisions include a simplification of church court procedures, defining the function of the Metropolitan's officers, and addition of material regarding monasticism.
- With regard to proportional giving, most dioceses will experience a reduction in their contributions to the OCA. The ethnic dioceses require review and revision of their financial contribution agreements. Because the dioceses that do not pay assessments do not vote on financial matters, many do not feel like full members of the OCA.
- The transition to proportional giving will take place gradually over five years.
- Fr. Daniel Kovalak asked if the OCA statute revisions require financial contributions from all dioceses. Fr. John responded that the statutes currently do not include such language, and expressed the opinion that the statute revisions should be modified to require that all dioceses financially support the central administration.
- Fr. John Perich expressed concern that the OCA does not have representation at many councils in which schismatics are permitted to vote.

Council registration will be entirely online.³

Fr. John Kowalczyk opened the floor for discussion.

- Bp. +MARK emphasized the importance of not only signing off on the PSP, but on reading the regulations thoroughly and abiding by them. Parish compliance is very strong, and it is important to remember that similar policies are *de rigeur* in the secular world. Some bishops will suspend priests of non-compliant parishes. Clergy and parish councils should read the entire document thoroughly. Other parishioners should, at minimum, read the summary. The documentation is available online.⁴
- Fr. John Perich urged the Assembly to fight for OCA representation at worldwide Orthodox sobors.

³ <http://18aac.oca.org/>

⁴ <https://oca.org/PDF/sexual-misconduct/2014-04-PSP-Sexual-Misconduct.pdf>

- Fr. Daniel Kovalak suggested sending a letter requesting representation at the Great Council of 2016. Fr. John Kowalczyk said that a letter from the diocese (to the central administration) would be helpful.
- Mark Linnehan suggested a statute modification to relieve the diocese of its obligation to pay monies to the national Church not received through diocesan assessments. Bp. +MARK stated that proposed statute modifications will soon be available online, at which point comments are encouraged.

The Assembly broke for lunch.

Session #4

The floor pointed out that the **Revitalization report** was not yet approved. A motion to accept the report was made by Fr. George Volkovinsky and seconded by Fr. Daniel Kovalak.

- Fr. Tim Hojnicky encouraged parishes to invite guest speakers to help with revitalization efforts.
- The motion to accept the report passed unanimously.

Budget Presentation

The proposed 2015 budget was presented by Fr. Martin Browne.

- National assessments have decreased by \$2. The \$5 diocesan assessment increase offsets the loss of roughly 100 persons on the annual census.
- Mission funds are currently received by the Holy Apostles Church in Mechanicsburg and the Russian Mission at St. Stephen's Cathedral.
- A motion to accept the budget was made by Fr. John Perich and seconded by Fr. Stephen Vernak. The motion passed unanimously.

Old Business

1. *Diocesan Center property transfer* – the property has been appraised at \$426,500. A major reason why the transfer has taken so long is the necessity of creating legal firewalls between the diocese, St. Tikhon's Monastery and the OCA. Another complication is that the orphanage owns the land in question, but the monastery owns the parking lot. Although meetings took place, a lack of clear leadership stalled the process. The property transfer will probably be subject to a 2% fee (\$6000). Fr. John Jillions stated that the OCA has no financial interest in the transaction, but that it should be handled through the Metropolitan Council.
2. *Bylaws* – the diocesan bylaws will be modified after the statute revisions expected to occur at the All-American Council. Bp. +MARK asked if there was a desire to convene a special assembly to deal with bylaw issues after the All-American Council. There was no response for or against.

New Business

- The deaneries elected deans Fr. Timothy Hojnicky (Frackville), Fr. John Perich (Philadelphia) and Fr. Nicholas Solak (Wilkes-Barre). The remaining officers will be elected at the next meeting of their respective deaneries.
- Fr. Martin Browne proposed to write off existing diocesan assessment arrears for the parishes of St. Vladimir's in Lopez and Holy Resurrection in Alden Station, due to extenuating circumstances in the past and the resumption of regular, timely assessment contributions for the past several years, and to deal with future arrears on a case-by-case basis. A motion to accept the proposal was made by David Yeosock and seconded by Fr. Daniel Kovalak. The motion passed unanimously.
- There was a proposal from the floor to remove the assessment debt owned by parishes in Lopez and Alden Station, due to inability to pay. The motion was made by Fr. Daniel Kovalak and seconded from the floor. The motion passed unanimously.
- Fr. Nicholas Solak proposed drafting a petition for an OCA seat at the Great Council of 2016. Fr. Daniel Kovalak will draft a proposal and submit it to the Diocesan Council.

Date of 2016 Assembly: January 28-29 at St. Nicholas' Church in Bethlehem.

At 3:30 PM a motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Fr. Nicholas Solak and seconded by Fr. Michael Demko. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Daria Cortese, lay secretary

Fr. Jason Franchak, clergy secretary