

**Orthodox Church in America
Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania
Diocesan Council Meeting Minutes
December 10th, 2025**

Attendance: Archbishop Mark, Fr. Martin Browne, Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk, Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, Fr. Mark Koczak, Fr. Innocent Neal, Fr. Michael Shepherd, Fr. Kirill Zawatski, Dn. Peter Staller, Daria Cortese, John Malinchok, Christopher Yanovich

Absent: Fr. John Black, Mark Linnehan, Danalisa Radu

The meeting was called to order at 10:08 AM with the singing of “O heavenly King.”

Minutes: The minutes from the previous meeting were distributed via email prior to the meeting. A motion to approve them was made by Fr. Kirill Zawatski, seconded by Fr. Michael Shepherd, and passed unanimously.

Supplementary Vote Documentation: Documentation of the inter-meeting vote to extend financial assistance to Stroudsburg was emailed to the Council prior to the meeting. A motion to confirm the supplementary vote was made by John Malinchok, seconded by Fr. Martin Browne, and passed unanimously.

Hierarch’s Message:

- Archbishop Mark recently tonsured seminarian Jacob Kurtz to the subdiaconate.
- Our three diocesan seminarians are Jacob Kurtz, Alexander Korapsak and Nicholas Sheridan.
- In Spring 2026, the 6 students currently in the diaconal vocations program will graduate. To proceed with ordination, His Eminence requires the following:
 - Approval/blessing of the candidate’s rector
 - Baptism/chrismation certificate(s)
 - Consent of the candidate’s wife, if married
 - Marriage certificate, if the candidate is married
 - Results of a psychological evaluation
 - Educational transcripts
- Meetings may take place before graduation to avoid missing the meeting of the Holy Synod.
- Summer Camp registration begins on 2/14/26.
- Registration for the Winter Teen Retreat is now open.
- Fr. Paul Fetsko is currently in the house-buying process in preparation for serving at St. Herman’s in Gradyville. He will be officially installed as the rector upon receipt of his canonical release from the omophorion of Archbishop Alexander.
- We received a lovely letter from Archbishop Alexei of Alaska, thanking DOEPA for our recent donation to that diocese. Vladyka Alexei also sent Archbishop Mark a beautiful icon of our Lady of Sitka, which is now on display at the chancery.
- **2026 Diocesan Assembly Agenda:**
 - The proposed agenda was distributed via email prior to the meeting.
 - The only open Diocesan Council position for 2026 is one auditor position.
 - There was discussion of potential changes to the agenda.
 - Daily Vespers will be changed to Great Vespers.

- A motion to approve the amended agenda was made by Fr. Kyril Zawatski, seconded by Fr. Martin Browne, and passed unanimously.
- Jennifer Bzik is resigning. The diocese needs a new administrative assistant.
- **Background checks/PSP compliance/Census submissions:**
 - There are over 300 people in the diocese who are required to have current background checks. This includes everyone blessed to wear a cassock, everyone who has more than incidental contact with minors, and everyone with a paid role (paid individuals, not contracted companies such as those who provide housekeeping services).
 - Jennifer Bzik explained that emailed requests for background check completion contain a validation code that expires after 10 days. Consequently, it consumes additional administrative time when reminders, and therefore new codes, must be generated.
 - Autumn is the “busy season” for background check renewals, as this is when Church School typically resumes after summer break.
 - Once an individual is in the background check system, the criminal check auto-renews without the need for repeated consent.
 - There was discussion of which parishes are currently in arrears regarding current PSP compliance documentation, which must be submitted yearly after the election of the Parish Council, and in submitting current census information.
 - Fr. Martin Browne commented that this issue should be added to the 2026 Diocesan Assembly agenda.
 - Fr. Innocent Neal remarked that there are applications that can streamline the compliance-tracking process and automate some time-consuming tasks.
 - Fr. Michael Shepherd stated that rectors should address background checks with their parishioners who have not yet complied with these requirements. A personal conversation is often more impactful than an email from the diocesan administrator, who many people may not know.
 - Fr. Martin Browne stated that **clergy, including minor clergy, need to follow these policies without exception.**
 - The PSP stipulates that camp/retreat staff must provide three references: a professional reference, a personal reference and a reference from their priest. Furthermore, it is unacceptable to employ youth camp staff who are not otherwise sacramentally active in their parish.
- **Census discussion:**
 - Some parishes include, on their census, individuals who now live across the country. This contributes to a skewed perception of how many people are actively participating in the life of that parish.
 - Fr. Martin Browne reminded the Council that a person may not be a member of multiple parishes simultaneously.
 - Fr. Martin also recommended disallowing floor nominations at the annual parish meeting, to avoid the embarrassment of an ineligible individual being nominated for a position on the parish council.
- There was discussion of financial difficulties at Ss. Peter and Paul in Uniondale. The parish is currently administered by Fr. Jason Franchak.

Holy Resurrection Cathedral Update

- The rectory needs cleaning (but not deep-cleaning).
- There is slight water damage on the ceiling of one bedroom.
- There is evidence of a break-in attempt.
- The power is on.

- **Water:** The city has all the required information and has provided a code for the water contractor to complete their portion of the job (the job is split between the city and a private contractor).
- Fr. Innocent does not know if the realtor will list the property before the cleaning is complete.

Chancellor's Report

- The report was distributed via email prior to the meeting.
- Since the last Diocesan Council meeting in September 2025, there was a clergy continuing education meeting at St. Nicholas in Bethlehem, featuring Fr. Bogdan Bucur from St. Vladimir's Seminary. The session focused on the Nicene Faith, as we mark the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council. Many thanks to Fr. Nikolai Breckinridge and the faithful of St. Nicholas for hosting.
- The Advent Clergy Retreat recently took place at Daylesford Abbey in Paoli, and featured two excellent presentations on preaching given by Fr. Paul Witek.
- The Pre-Lenten Clergy Retreat will take place in February.
- Beginning in late January, our clergy will undertake a four-month book study on From Object to Icon; books and the study syllabus have been distributed to clergy who attended the Advent retreat.
- We need a diocesan policy for the reception of converts. There are currently vast differences from parish to parish, and we need to improve consistency.
 - Clergy should great care in establishing precedents that future priests will have to follow.

Vice-Chancellor's Report

- Fr. Timothy is working on standards for the reception of converts, to include:
 - Recommended reading
 - Regular attendance
 - List of topics that must be addressed with catechumens, including how to prepare for Confession and Holy Communion
 - A catechetical period of at least one entire liturgical year
- This is about the care and responsibility priests have for souls, and about inquirers/catechumens taking responsibility and being proactive about attending services and classes.
- His Eminence remarked that we need a form for tracking inquirers and converts. Tracked data points should include:
 - Date arrived
 - Date catechesis begins
 - Classes attended
 - Services attended

Treasury Report & Budget Proposal

- The Treasury Report was distributed via email prior to the meeting.
 - The financial state of the diocese is very good, but the closing of Holy Resurrection Cathedral is reducing our net worth and taking us over budget. Holding and demolition costs are unbudgeted, and will continue to affect our budget until the property is sold.
 - Cathedral closing costs are affecting budget-versus-actual totals and diocesan cash flow statements, as we withdrew some funds from CDs to help with the closure costs.
 - There are no aging concerns.
 - Loans to Thomas Pickup (Lykens property) and Fr. Vjekoslav Jovicic (home financing) are up-to-date.
- **Notes and recommendations:**

- The Council should discuss our investment with OCCIF.
- Mark Linnehan asked if he should send a contribution to OCF, Mexico and/or Alaska.
- The Council should discuss changing investment allocations.
- John Malinchok expressed the belief that DOEPA has too much money in one bank, raising concerns about FDIC coverage. He suggested finding a money manager who earns money only when clients' investments earn money.
- Mark Linnehan has expressed frustrations about working with PNC Bank.
- There was discussion of potential amendments to the proposed budget.
- A motion to approve the budget proposal with the following amendments was made by Fr. Martin Browne, seconded by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, and passed unanimously:
 - The budgeted amount for property insurance was increased to \$7,000.
 - The stipend for His Eminence's subdeacon was increased to \$12,000, and the subdeacon's mileage line item was increased to \$4,500.
 - Summer Camp applicants will now pay a \$50 non-refundable application fee. Families with multiple campers will pay a flat non-refundable \$100 application fee.

Deanery Reports

Frackville: Fr. Kirill Zawatski and Holy Ascension in Frackville will host a concert of international Christmas music on December 21st at 5:30 PM. The choir will include over 40 singers.

Wilkes-Barre:

- There was discussion of potentially missing financial reports from Stroudsburg. The parish is now financially in the black.
- St. Vladimir's (Lopez) now has Divine Liturgy three times monthly, and on the 4th Sunday of each month Fr. Innocent is encouraging celebration of Typica. Father Innocent also recently attended their annual meeting, and the parish council expressed positivity regarding the improving state of the parish. Fr. Gregory White is teaching regular classes and doing an excellent job of contacting inquirers.
- In January, there will be a team-building meeting in the deanery to prepare for the Annual Diocesan Assembly.
- St. Nicholas' Church recently hosted the fall deanery retreat.

Philadelphia:

- The general state of the deanery is very good.
- Fr. Paul Fetsko will officially be installed at St. Herman's (Gradyville) in January 2026. The parishioners seem excited to receive him.
- Fr. Joseph Sherman is assisting Fr. Silouan Burns at St. Michael's in Wilmington. The parish is doing phenomenally well, and may be opening a mission in the near future, as zoning restrictions will not permit them to add another building to their current property.
- The building project at St. Mark's in Wrightstown is progressing very well, with construction likely to begin shortly after Pascha 2026.
- Fr. Victor continues to help St. Nicholas Church in Coatesville become a stronger, healthier parish community.
- There are 6 students in the Diaconal Vocations Program at St. Stephen's Cathedral. All are entering their final semester, and Fr. Victor highly recommends them all for ordination.

- Archbishop Mark asked Fr. Victor to encourage students to get their rectors' blessings to proceed with ordination, and to schedule meetings with His Eminence. Fr. Victor will also call the rectors to relay this message.

Metropolitan Council Report

- The report was delivered by Fr. Martin Browne.
- The Fall, in-person meeting took place in October in Springfield, VA, including a Divine Liturgy for the Feast of St. Tikhon of Moscow. The Liturgy took place at St. Luke Serbian Orthodox Church (OCA).
- Public information from the meeting has been posted on the OCA website.
- There was discussion of mission-planting grants.
 - Currently, missions with bi-vocational priests are ineligible for grants. This policy must be revisited.
- The Spring meeting, which will take place over Zoom, is scheduled for March. The Council will meet for two hours per day for three days.
- Monthly clergy Zoom meetings continue, providing mutual support, information sharing and decisions on moving forward with the ever-changing events taking place in DOEPA.
 - One major focus is the standardization for the procedure of accepting converts. Currently there is great inconsistency regarding the content and length of catechesis. Poor formation leads to hasty commitments and/or distorted expectations, and clergy must do everything possible to prevent this.
- The 62nd Annual Diocesan Assembly will take place on 1/29-30.
 - Frs. Innocent Neal and Michael Shepherd are working with their respective parish communities to prepare for this event.
 - Vice-Chancellor Fr. Timothy Hojnicky will oversee the liturgical schedule.
 - The guest speaker will be Fr. John Parker, Dean of St. Tikhon's Seminary, who will speak on the vision of the Church as reality to be lived in ever-increasing perfection.
- Fr. Martin emphasized that records and background check information are crucial not only for new allegations of recent misconduct, but also for allegations that may occur years or decades into the future.
 - DOEPA still does not have 100% compliance, and we are the most compliant diocese in the OCA.
 - Stavropegial institutions are now fully compliant.
 - His Eminence remarked that background check information and references for camps and retreats must be retained by the diocese, not just by the camp/retreat.

Diocesan Media Office Report

- The report was distributed via email prior to the meeting.
- The diocesan Instagram account continues to grow.
- YouTube is the weakest diocesan media platform. Rdr. Nicholas Hojnicky, Director of Communications, continues to work on ideas to strengthen it.
- Archbishop Mark has blessed Rdr. Nicholas to discontinue to Facebook group "OCA Diocese of Eastern PA," effective 1/1/26. This will help direct people to the official diocesan Facebook page as the official single source of news and postings from DOEPA. Doing this will limit confusion, maintain professionalism and help keep communication organized.
- The diocesan website continues to grow.
 - Many thanks to Fr. John Parsells for his outstanding assistance and contributions.
 - Since September, we have averaged more than 105,000 website visits and 40,000 unique visitors per month. This demonstrates consistent engagement.
- The most engaging content across all diocesan platforms continues to be hierarchal visits and memorials for clergy and other prominent Orthodox Christians who have reposed.

- Please contact Rdr. Nicholas with any questions, concerns, suggestions or other feedback.

Old Business

- Fr. Innocent Neal made a motion to give Christmas gifts of \$1,000 per seminarian family and \$500 to individual seminarians, as the Council has done in previous years. The motion was seconded by John Malinchok and passed unanimously.
- Daria Cortése showed the Council copies of the recently released Liturgical Psalter from Aorist Press, published in part thanks to the publication grant given by DOEPA at the Spring 2025 meeting. Copies are \$50 and available for purchase at www.aoristpress.com.

The date of the next meeting will be determined after the election of the 2026 Diocesan Council.

A motion to adjourn was made via general acclamation, and passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 2:29 PM with the singing of “It is truly meet.”

**Respectfully submitted,
Daria Cortése, Recording Secretary**

Action Items

1. Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk will encourage students in the Diaconal Vocations Program to seek their priest’s blessing to apply for ordination.
2. Fr. Victor will speak with the clergy who have students in the Diaconal Vocations Program to encourage them to bless their student(s) to apply for ordination, and to schedule a meeting with His Eminence for that purpose.
3. Fr. Timothy Hojnicky will continue to work on development of a standards/best practices document for the reception of converts.
4. Archbishop Mark will speak with Dan Peck regarding the Summer Camp application fees.
5. Mark Linnehan will send Christmas checks to our seminarians.
6. Clergy will speak with their parishioners who require background checks to ensure that they are completed in a timely manner.
7. Clergy will ensure that their annual PSP compliance is up-to-date.
8. Clergy will ensure that accurate parish census information is provided to DOEPA.