

Delegate Report: 18th All American Council

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Thank you for sending me as your lay delegate to the Atlanta All American Council (AAC). It was an honor and pleasure to attend. This was my seventh All-American Council and second as a delegate.

Since much is available online (daily [video summaries](#), [photos](#), minutes, [reports](#), addresses, audio files) -- I will focus this summary instead on impressions and interpretive comments.

What is an AAC? Why Attend

Held every three years the AAC is the highest legislative and administrative body within the OCA. It (theoretically) brings together the Synod of Bishops, clergy and lay delegates from every parish.

The AAC is time consuming and expensive to attend and some parishes simply are unable to participate. Given the resources required it is reasonable to ask: Why attend?

As I see it the benefits are:

Review the Mission and Identity of the Church in America.

The OCA's mission is to bring the Gospel, as worshipped, preached and lived by the Orthodox Church, to America and Americans. Without occasionally coming together to review that mission our parishes become insular and self-focused. The mission is easily forgotten. It becomes impossible to assess progress.

Make Decisions

Decisions concerning administration and finance were made. (More on that below)

Convey Info

Despite the ability to communicate electronically some information is inevitably lost. Via in person attendance I learned (or relearned) a number of items about expectations, helpful ministries and current activities in a variety of areas.

Understand Multiple Perspectives/ See Diversity

Without occasionally meeting together it is easy to assume that every parish is essentially the same. ("Just like us!") They are not. There are significant demographic, regional, ethnic, ministerial and "values" differences. This can be easily experienced at an AAC. Finding the "center" and building a workable consensus on where to head cannot be done via online meetings, videos and written reports alone.



Figure 1 A General Session of the Council. Attendance was approximately 600 persons.

Establish Contacts; Put Names with Faces

Criticizing unknown, distant leaders can be tempting. However after meeting them and experiencing their dedication and humanity, criticism can transition to support.

Meeting people from other parishes and dioceses becomes a wonderful opportunity for exchange of ideas and learning new effective parish practices. Creating relationships help our parish and helps us to help others.

Midwest Diocesan Assembly

On Monday morning *before* the start of the actual Council, the Midwest Diocese held its annual assembly. Normally a two day affair this assembly was concluded in two hours. (Certain agenda elements were omitted.) Minutes are [here](#).

Having attended numerous Diocesan Assemblies this assembly stood out simply due to the matter of fact, forward looking, action oriented address of Bishop Paul. His Grace was relaxed, realistic purposeful. He plans to focus on four key issues:



Figure 2 His Grace Bishop Paul

1. **Commitment to have every parish implement and follow an active policy for prevention of sexual misconduct.** This includes background checks and other policies for clergy, church school and youth workers. His Grace reviewed a step by step approach to get every parish on board.
2. **Modifying the funding plan for the diocese to move to proportional giving.** An active committee is collecting data from parishes. This will align with similar efforts by the OCA.
3. **Rethinking the previously dormant efforts to assist Diocesan Mission Communities.** The Diocese' past record of helping mission parishes to develop into effective, thriving full function parishes has been woeful. Missions get planted, receive modest financial assistance and struggle. Few if any grow to become viable parishes.
4. **Relationship between Christ the Savior (Chicago/ LaSalle St.) parish and the Diocesan Chancery.** This is a long, old, story –too long for this space. Suffice it to say this has been a long festering problem within the Diocese. It is *refreshing* that Bishop Paul has the energy and forthrightness to dig into this knotty problem.

One gets the very real impression that action will be taken.

AAC Overall Observations

As for the Council itself, this was a surprisingly upbeat, enjoyable, (exhausting!) and positive event. This can be traced back to a variety of factors. Here are three:

1. Resolutions Consensus

Two important resolutions were acted upon at the Council. One was a resolution to adopt a new statute and the other to modify the funding formula for the OCA. Both were openly and respectfully debated and both received over 93%



approval from delegates. Once the resolutions received strong support the council mood swung to being very positive. Delegates wanted to *face forward*.

Revised Statute

The purpose of a statute (essentially by-laws) is to describe how we deal with ourselves (internally); and to tell others how we should be seen and understood (externally). The statute of the OCA, originally adopted in 1970 and based upon older documents, had become a patchwork of amendments, inconsistent language, omissions and poor legal definitions.

A committee of lawyers and canonical scholars worked hard to blend and harmonize past updates, eliminate disorganization, make the statute more comprehensive, and to incorporate lessons learned from the OCA's recent past. It also incorporated updated legal language that can hopefully assure consistent treatment in courts should legal matters arise.



Figure 3 Archpriest Alexander Rentel, a canonical scholar ,explains the revised statute.

The area receiving most attention during debate concerned language dealing with disposition of parish property in the instance a parish closes. The language proposed and adopted was not new. It had been adopted in a previous council but due to clerical error (!) had never been incorporated into published versions of the statute.

Basically the language says that that “all parish property, assets and funds are and shall be owned and held by the parish or parish corporation in trust for the use, purpose, and benefit of the Diocese of The Orthodox Church in America of which it is a part.” Essentially if a parish is closed its revert to the Diocese. While there were questions only one person spoke in opposition to this.

Financial Resolution

Based on a requirement enacted at the Seattle (2011) AAC the OCA Central Administration was required to reduce its costs and to offer at this AAC a formula for transitioning from a head count assessment to a percentage of income formula for funding the OCA headquarters operations. The proposed resolution was complex and inelegant but was judged to be an improvement over current policy and passed with little resistance. Some dioceses (and their parishes) find their assessment increasing a bit while others will experience a decrease. Our parish will likely see a slight decrease.

The primary opposition comments ran along the lines that this resolution had gone too far in crippling the work of the Central Administration. It was cited that the OCA budget had been trimmed from \$3.45M in 2006 to \$1.9M in 2015. Assessment payments by parishes had decreased by 14% since 2011 resulting in drop of a \$400K budget in the last 3 years. Employment headcount had been reduced from 30 to 10.5 persons.

This is of course a long complex topic. Personally I would agree that vital services and ministries have been pruned beyond the point of prudence and viability. Ministry budgets are now ridiculously small and inconsistent with our stated mission.

2. Competence

The primary reason why these issues passed with great consensus is, in my view, the obvious competence of people in the Central Administration and on the Statute task Force. Key officers/leaders have worked tirelessly to move the OCA from turmoil through transition to a period of stabilization.

There is a definite feeling of professionalism, openness and listening. For example the financial resolution was discussed with each diocese personally –something that would never have happened in past practice. Comments from those discussions resulted in improved proposals.

Nowhere is this competence more obvious than with Melanie Ringa the OCA's treasurer. In the past few years since Melanie has handled financial affairs:

- The \$1.7 m Honesdale loan has been repaid in 2014.
- Legal and audit costs have dropped by about 75% and the OCA has received “clean” audits.
- Treasurer reports are clear and published openly.
- Net assets have increased by 30%
- A development activity now known as the Stewards of the OCA has been restarted.



Figure 4 Melanie Ringa, OCA Treasurer

In the words of Metropolitan Tikhon: “10 years of Administrative and financial struggle are slowly being resolved. We’ve been humbled by this. This leads to humility and humility in turn leads to strength.

3. Metropolitan Tikhon

This AAC was the first for His Beatitude Tikhon as Metropolitan. His presence was in my opinion remarkable, uplifting, hopeful and above all *calming*. His joy filled presence was a *major* factor in the success of the Council. He is humble, likable, gracious, loves his flock, a wonderful story teller and FUNNY. (See me for details.)

His Address to the Council can be found [here](#). He referred to four key pillars.

1. **Spiritual Life** - Monastics, Clergy care, Seminarians, Education of the faithful
2. **External relations** - Other Orthodox jurisdictions; Other Christians, Non-Christians, Ecumenical bodies)
3. **Stewardship** of time talent and treasure. Stop asking *what's in it for me*.
4. **Evangelism & Outreach** – We are better prepared than any other Orthodox jurisdiction to bring Americans to Orthodoxy and Orthodoxy to America. Yet we need to avoid triumphalism and insularity.

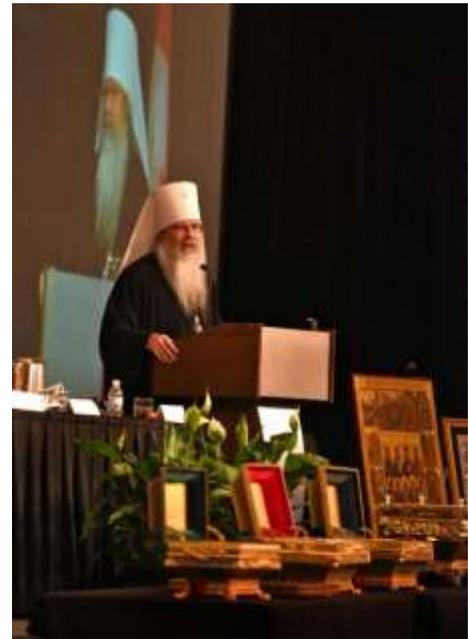


Figure 5 Metropolitan Tikhon addresses the Council

Orthodox Unity/ Assembly of Bishops

There were a variety of reports concerning the issue of Orthodox jurisdictional unity and the role of the “Assembly of Bishops”. In summary the OCA is making strides to become a more significant part of this body yet there are many who are not friendly to the OCA. The ecclesial identity of the OCA is seen as an “anomaly” while the true anomaly is the proliferation of overlapping Sees and jurisdictions.

A few comments from various reports:

- The [Assembly of Bishops](#) had proposed a unification plan. It has been rejected by the Bulgarian (Patriarchal) and Russian (Patriarchal/ROCOR) delegations. All must agree. Apparently the Russians insist on agreement on pastoral practice which would possibly including calendar questions. (Presumably Old Calendar!)
- There was a request for written feedback on the proposed unification plans. The OCA was one of the few jurisdictions to provide feedback. That response, which can be found [here](#), rightly in my opinion, insisted on a local synod. (Essentially autocephaly -- without oversight by ancient patriarchates) (*“We remain committed to the vision of a fully functioning and canonical local Church in our region. Therefore, we continue to maintain the principle that the best solution for this region is a canonically and administratively united local Church with a properly functioning Holy Synod.”*)
- Due to a disagreement over an “old world” (not related to US) jurisdictional issue, the Antiochian delegation from the US did not attend the last meeting.
- While the OCA sees itself as having much to offer in defining a unified church, the continued existence of ethnic dioceses within the OCA mutes our voice considerably.

One speaker spoke eloquently that each of us needs to “Hold up the arms of our bishops” to give them strength in these matters.

Miscellany

Worship

Services at councils are consistently well done and well attended with active participation and excellent preaching. This AAC followed in that past practice –though thankfully some of the worship schedule was scaled back from the daily Hierarchal liturgies of the past.



Figure 6 Metropolitan Tikhon engages delegate in conversation



Figure 7 Youth Choir Sings at Divine Liturgy

Workshops

A variety of workshops were offered on afternoons of the Council on topics such as “Renewing the Vision in My Parish”, “Preaching the Gospel in a Campus Setting”, “Expanding the Mission through Matthew 25 Ministries”, “Making Your Parish Visible on the Web”, “[Building Vibrant Orthodox Parishes](#)”, “Raising Orthodox Christian Children” and “Best Practices of Parish Finance.”



Figure 8 Building Vibrant Parishes Workshop

Since I was a workshop presenter I did not attend other sessions – but many delegates said they were all very well done.

Middle East Collection

A spontaneous request to take up a collection to aid Christians in the Middle East netted over \$13,000.

Evangelization Bequest

A bequest of over \$1M had been received by the OCA with the stipulation it be used for mission and evangelization. First step was to hold a mission training school for clergy and laity.



Figure 9 from right former parishioners Bob Graban, Ray Boyd, Marlene Graban, Archbishop Melchisedek, (and unknown delegate)

1% for Seminaries

Since special collections are no longer taken up for seminaries, a reminder was offered that a resolution was passed at the Seattle Council asking parishes to set aside 1% of their operating budget for support of seminaries. (Has our parish done this?)

Multiple Current and Past Parishioners in Attendance

In addition to Father Steven, Anastasia Kostoff, Nadia and Ingrid Salyers, Konstantine Cornelius and myself there were at least ten other former parishioners in attendance including Father Alexander Rentel, (late 70’s, “first altar boy”), Archbishop Melchisedek (Tom Pleska –late 70’s) Father Dennis Buck (late 70’s) Bob and Marlene Graban (late 70’s) Raymond Boyd (’78-81), Deacon Paul Sokol (early 90’s) John and Judy Blebea (early 90’s.) and Father Todd Franta. (Late 2000’s)



Figure 10 Former parishioners Drs. John and Judy Blebea

Facebook Page

The [AAC Facebook page](#) offers much more interesting info, photos and video.

Questions

If you have questions or desire additional info please feel free to contact me. Joekormos1@gmail.com 513-683-1900)