

## Report of the 18th All-American Council

July 20-24, 2015 Atlanta, Georgia

### "How to Expand the Mission"

by

Reader Stephen Bradford, HTOC delegate

#### History

While it was the practice of the Early Church to make its major decisions in Council, that practice died out by the 14th Century for various secular reasons. In 1908, the North American Mission of the Russian Orthodox Church decided to come together to discuss the Church at a gathering, the *All-American Sobor*, the term deriving from the ancient Russian word *soborny*, meaning *to make decisions together*. That Council was comprised of bishops, clergy and laity all gathered together in Mayfield, PA to decide how to expand its mission beyond the Russian people to become an all-encompassing Church in America. Unfortunately, the recall of its farsighted Hierarch, St. Tikhon Bellavin, to Russia and the turmoil of the Russian Revolution put that goal out of sight until 1970. With the inception of autocephaly, or a church released from its oversight by another church, in that year, the name changed to All-American Council. The OCA now holds one of these triennially, or as needed.

#### Overview of the 18th AAC

The OCA underwent some trying times from 2005-2012, now referred to as *The Time of Troubles*. These were caused by fiscal and leadership bumbles at the top level. Since the election of Metropolitan Tikhon much has been done to remedy these issues through more solid leadership and fiscal and operational transparency. It was therefore decided to adopt the title of the first Council in 1908 to reflect the renewed direction of the Church.

The Council began with registration on Sunday, July 19th. On Monday, as registration continued, several seminars were offered focusing on the life of the Church. since a healthy Church can direct its life outward to foreign missions, I chose to attend a seminar on the Orthodox Christian Missions Center, an outreach program that while under the separate Greek Archdiocese, is open to all Orthodox. The Diocese of New England has been blessed to see the participation of Archpriest Vladimir and Matushka Suzanne Aleandro of Southbury, CT in summer mission to Africa. They spoke during the seminar on their work in Kenya. Material on the OCMC has been placed in the parish library at HTOC if you wish to learn more.

On Monday the AAC began to take shape. Present were bishops and delegates from the USA, Canada and Mexico. It is here we can see how culturally diverse the Church is. Over the course of the Council video reports on the life of each diocese and institution of the OCA were presented, and these have been archived on oca.org. Also Ancient Faith Radio has audio transmissions of the actual sessions in its archive.

His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon began with the Prayer Service Opening a Meeting, then his address, highlighting the vibrant life that the Church displays all over our continent. His comments were supported by both the National Chancellor and Secretary in their reports.

There were 5 Plenary Sessions, where Church business was discussed. Four major items were on the floor:

--accepting a new Statute, or operations document guiding the Church, for the OCA

--approving a major Financial Resolution

--consideration of a motion made from Pennsylvania on "Spiritual Abuse"

--consideration of a motion left unvoted on from the last AAC on the conditions of life of Palestinians

The first session on Tuesday, under the overall chairmanship of His Beatitude, and Judge E. R. Lanier acting as lay chair and Archpriest Peter Baktis, nephew of George and Zenia Zlotnick, acting as clergy chair. began with a "State of the Church" report that outlined the need for a revision of the current Statute, dating from 1972. It has been repeatedly amended, so much so, that it became unclear in places. It also lacked clear language to deal with parish ownership and with monastic life. The new document cleaned up the overall language, streamlining it, and clarified the issue of parish ownership--basically saying that once a parish was established under the OCA and received a priest from her, the people of the parish held the property *in trust* for the Church. Much discussion ensued, but at the vote it passed 473-15. I voted for it. The new Statute resolves upfront many issues that have previously divided the Church, and on occasion our own Diocese. We can have a more straightforward life under this Statute. And too, monasticism can now be directed in a fashion that encourages its growth, something we did not have at the time of autocephaly.

The second session addressed the Finance Statute, supporting a cost-sharing approach. As written, it was a very confusing system that few at the Council seemed to understand. Again, it was debated pro/con. The Diocese of New England stood en bloc against it, with the exception of his Eminence Nikon, since it appeared to do little to help us financially and it helped the several "ethnic" dioceses better. It did pass, though, 451-14, with 17 abstentions. I voted against it myself, since I felt that it could be misused to shirk financial duties. If it had specified a clearer percentage giving system or budget-driven support, I might have supported it.

The third session, along with more diocesan reports, focused on the Spiritual Abuse motion. It was introduced by a Ph.D. psychologist who had experienced an abusive relationship in a parish, where the priest there kept asking deeply personal questions outside of confession and was forbidding her to speak with other priests about her spiritual state. The Holy Synod intervened here and said that this was a matter proper to their jurisdiction and that something would definitely be forthcoming on the matter.

The fourth session was a series of reports on various Church institutions and agencies. These will be in the notes binder in the parish library and on the national Church web site, for your perusal. It was exciting to see how far-reaching our apostolate in mission is to those inside and outside of the

Church.

In the afternoon we had opportunities to attend various Church Life Workshops. On Tuesday I attended one (accidentally, since I had planned to go to another but rooms were constantly changing!) that spoke on the vibrant parish--and at one point featured US, showing our sign and church interior, both drawing many oohs and ahhs! I had a few questions about it when I'd meet people.

The other was on Budget-driven Church Finance and I will share with our parish officers. It introduces some dynamic ways to meet our financial duties, mostly by reorganizing what we are now doing.

The fifth and final session focused on remaining issues: electing members to the Metropolitan Council and Pension Board (reflected in notebook) then several more reports. One, a carry-over from the previous AAC in Seattle in 2012, addressed the needs of the suffering people in the Middle East, many of whom are fellow Christians. This was accepted and passed unanimously by voice vote. A basket was passed that raised \$12,000 to help the International Orthodox Christian Charities another pan-Orthodox effort) with their mission among these needy people.

Another report was given by Alexei Krindatch, noted Orthodox sociologist, on giving in our parishes. It is interesting where we in the OCA stand on this issue .A final report was on the progress of the Assembly of Orthodox Bishops of the Americas.

#### Conclusions

After we adjourned with a Molieben of Thanksgiving Friday afternoon I was left pondering the many adventures of the past five days. I concluded that the OCA is very ready again "to expand the mission" to evangelizing America. The outreach programs we share with other Orthodox jurisdictions, the slow progress towards Orthodox unity in America, these thoughts prompted me to agree that we as a Church are on the move.

What struck me most was the phenomenal growth of Orthodoxy since I entered the Church in 1986. It was providential for me that the AAC was in Atlanta. It gave me many opportunities to observe just how ready America is for the Church. There is a voracious hunger for what we have to give.

I attended Divine Liturgy 3 times so far, outside of the AAC, where we had daily Liturgy available along with many services of prayer. In a Carpatho-Russian parish in central Georgia, in a new mission in my dad's hometown of Anniston, Alabama, in Tulsa, Oklahoma where I am writing this at my daughter's home (Madison is walking, talking and singing songs, by the way!), the Orthodox Church has set down strong and thriving roots and the Faith is nurturing thousands. We may not see that in the Northeast, but in the South and West it is happening. We need to find a way to bring that home to New England.

Respectfully submitted,

*Reader Stephen Bradford*