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"The Conundrum of Uniting American Orthodox Church: How to Resolve the Puzzle?"



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Why am I here today to talk about Assembly's work?

- ❖ Work closely with several Assembly's Committees (Canonical and Regional Planning, Agencies and Endorsed Organizations, Financial Affairs, Monastic Communities, Theological Education)
- ❖ Conduct survey-based studies and provide data-driven support for these Committees and Assembly's Secretariat

**A Number of Study Reports is Publicly Available at
www.assemblyofbishops.org/news/research**

- ❖ **Ten Facts about Geographic Patterns of the Orthodox Church Life in the United States**
- ❖ **Eight Facts About Church Attendance in US Orthodox Christian Churches**
- ❖ **Usage of English Language, Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Culture in American Orthodox Christian Churches**
- ❖ **Holy Toll: The Impact of the 2008-2009 Recession on US Orthodox Christian Churches**
- ❖ **Five Interesting Facts about Orthodox Church Geography and Demography in the US**
- ❖ **Fast Questions and Fast Answers about US Orthodox Churches**

Two New Reports Will be Published Soon

- ❖ **Orthodox Christian Fellowship in the United States**
 - **Stage 1. The Study of OCF Spiritual Advisors (Clergy)**
 - **Stage 2. The Study of OCF Student Leaders**

- ❖ **Orthodox Monastic Communities in the United States**

4th Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambesy (June 2009) mandated “preparation of a plan to organize the Orthodox of a Region on a canonical basis”

- ❖ The Chambésy Decision (Article 1) stated that *“it is the common will of all of the most holy Orthodox Churches that the problem of the Orthodox Diaspora be resolved as quickly as possible, and that it be organized in accordance with Orthodox ecclesiology, and the canonical tradition and practice of the Orthodox Church....that is, the existence of only one bishop in the same place.”*
- ❖ At the same time, the Decision (Article 2.c) expressed concern for *“the development of common action of all the Orthodox of each region to address the pastoral needs of Orthodox living in the region,”* including that *“the diversity of national traditions may secure the unity of Orthodoxy in the communion of faith and the bond of love.”* (Chambésy Rules of Operation: Article 5)

Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America

- ❖ One of the thirteen bishops' assemblies established in various "diaspora regions" throughout the world and in accordance with Chambesy Decision. Until 2014 included also Canada (now separate) and Central America (now joined Assembly of Latin America). Still, by far the largest Assembly
- ❖ Among Assembly's goals:
 - "Promotion and accomplishment of Church Unity in the US"
 - "Organization of the Church in the US in accordance with ecclesiological and canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church"

From the Assembly's website:

- ❖ Assembly is a transitional body. If it achieves its goal, it will make itself obsolete by developing a proposal for canonical organization of the Church in United States. This proposal will be presented to the Great and Holy Council. Should this proposal be accepted, it is hoped that the Assembly of Bishops will then come to an end, *ultimately to be succeeded by a governing Synod of a united Church in the United States.*

Committee for Canonical Regional Planning:

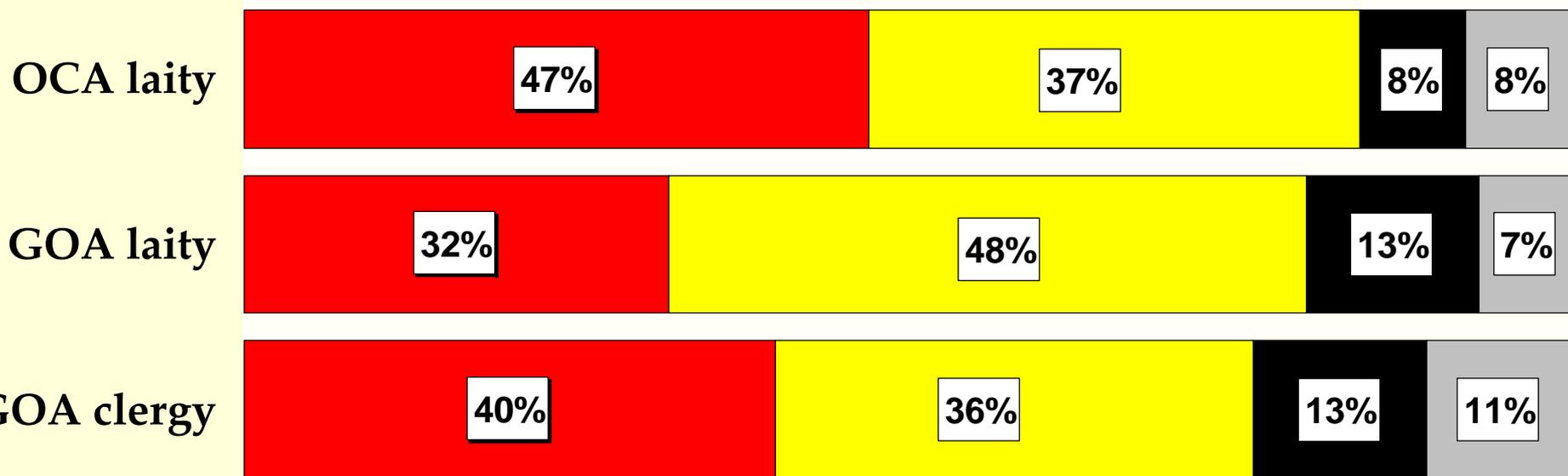
- ❖ The Committee for Canonical Regional Planning is charged with formulating a proposal to organize all Orthodox faithful of every jurisdiction in the Region (i.e. United States) on a canonical basis, in accordance with the Rules of Operation, Article 5.e of the 4th Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambésy.
- ❖ The pre-Conciliar Committee for the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Constantinople, 2016) is set by Mother Churches to function from September 2014-Easter 2015, to prepare the Council and consider any Council related matters/proposals .
- ❖ Final decisions regarding canonical reorganization should be made by the Holy and Great Council in 2016 (each Mother Church will be represented at the Council by up to 24 bishops + Primate)

Thinking about “Unifying Church” in America, there are (at least) four practical nuances to consider:

- ❖ How important is issue of “Orthodox Church unity in America” for the ordinary church members and “rank-and-file” clergy?
- ❖ How strong are today “ethnic sentiments and identity” in US Orthodox parishes (and, therefore, their possible desire to keep current jurisdictions)?
- ❖ Uniting Church in America requires achieving two separate goals:
 - Agreement about “ideal model” for the future
 - Agreement about the “process / pace” of movement from the present situation to this “ideal model”
- ❖ The logistical challenge of making all decisions at the Assembly “by consensus” only.

2007-2008 Survey Data: “The subject of Orthodox unity in America has been discussed for a long time. What do you think about the current situation and possible future developments?”

- Very little has been done so far to achieve this goal. We need more consistent efforts and should act more intentionally
- We are on the right path. Orthodox unity in US will be eventually achieved through increasing cooperation among various jurisdictions - the way it goes now
- The question of Orthodox unity is unnecessarily overemphasized in our church life. There are many other issues which are more important for the future of Orthodoxy in America.
- Any other answer



What survey data tell us?

- ❖ On the one hand, only tiny minority of OCA (8%) and GOA (13%) members simply “don’t care” about Orthodox Church unity in America;
- ❖ On the other hand, however, less than half of OCA (48%) and less than one third of GOA (32%) church members are seriously concerned with “issue of Orthodox unity,” and believe that there is a need to move much faster towards this goal;
- ❖ Bottom line: overall, there is NO sense of urgency to have united Orthodox Church in the United States among the “people in the pews.”

Relative majority of US Orthodox parishes can still be described as ethnically-based

2010 survey of US Orthodox parishes: “Do you agree or disagree with the statement “Our parish has strong ethnic culture and identity that we are trying to preserve?”

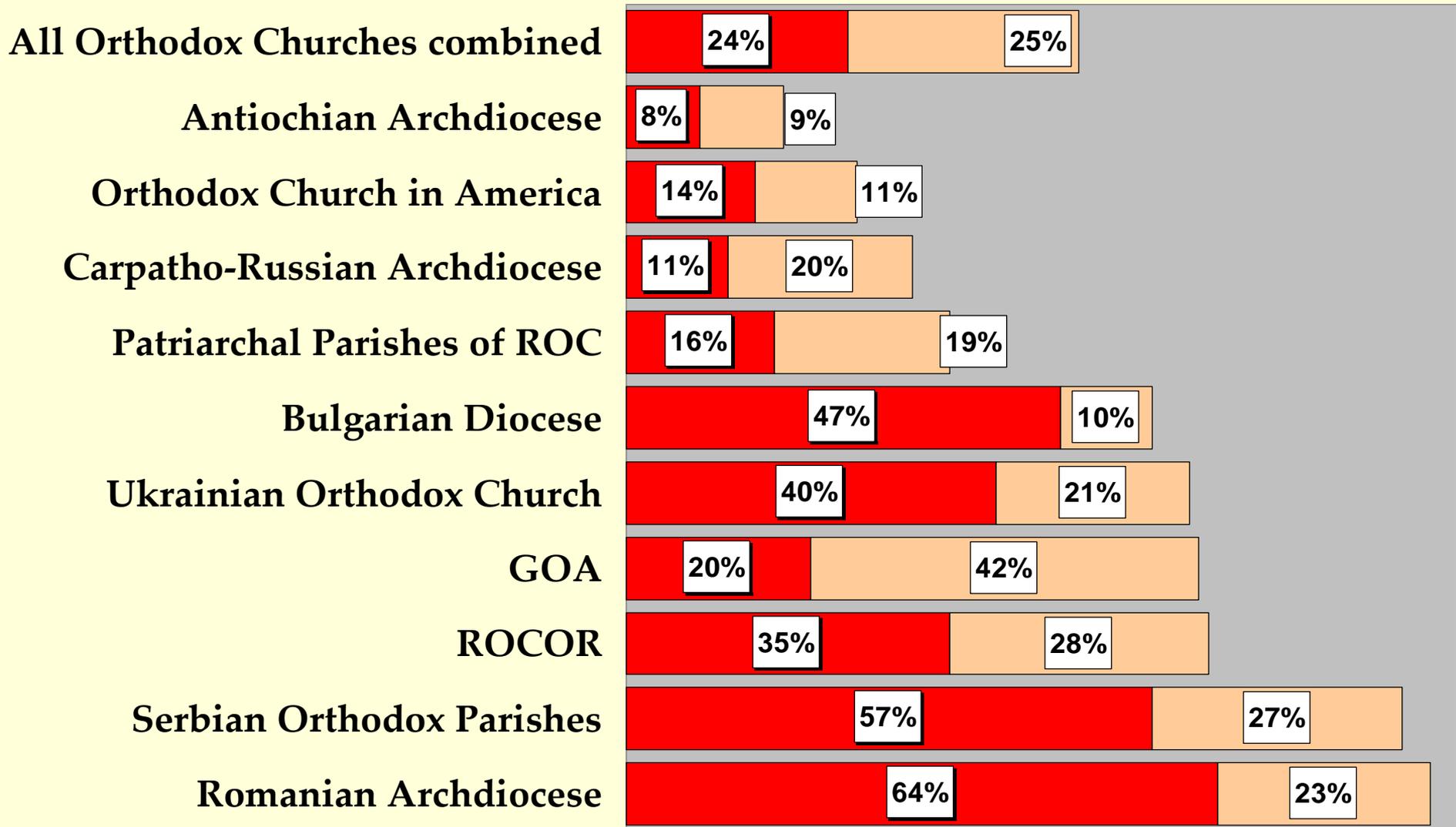
- 49% of US Orthodox parishes “agreed”**
- 35% of US Orthodox parishes “disagreed”**
- 16% of US Orthodox parishes were “unsure / neutral”**

66% (two thirds!) of Orthodox Church members are in the parishes that “agreed” (those are larger parishes)

"Our parish has a strong ethnic culture that we are trying to preserve."

■ % parishes "strongly agree"

■ % parishes "rather agree"



**A Model for possible future church arrangements was proposed and discussed at Assembly IV (2013):
“Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ethnic Vicariates”**

- ❖ **Ecclesiastical Provinces** would be groupings of Dioceses (at least two) of which one is the Archdiocesan/Metropolitan See
- ❖ **Dioceses** would exist within each Ecclesiastical Province organized on principle of locality, containing parishes of all ethnic backgrounds
- ❖ **Ethnic Vicariates (EVs)** would be informal associations of parishes (not dioceses) which have the same ethnic heritage and maintain their ethnic identity and culture in a particularly strong manner
 - EVs would be organized within Ecclesiastical Provinces.
 - EVs **would not** have governing authority:
 - EV as a whole would report to provincial Archbishop/Metropolitan
 - Individual parishes within each EV would remain under the full authority of the diocesan bishop

Ecclesiastical Provinces (EPs):

- ❖ Country could be divided into EPs with comparable number of church members. Each EP would consist of one Archdiocesan/Metropolitan See and several other “regular” dioceses.
- ❖ The proposed nine EPs would have 150-300 parishes and 70,000-110,000 adherents each. The proposed nine EPs is first attempt to define geographic borders between possible EPs, but this number can be modified as needed.
- ❖ The heads of EPs would form a national synod chaired by a national Primate (alternatively, the National Synod could be composed of all diocesan bishops). National Primate would be elected by all bishops
- ❖ The heads of EPs (Archbishops/Metropolitans) would chair the provincial synods, but would have no direct authority over other diocesan bishops
- ❖ The question of number of dioceses within each EP needs to be addressed considering many factors: geography and number of parishes, finances and clergy situation (full/part time), etc.

Dioceses within Ecclesiastical Provinces:

- ❖ Each diocesan bishop would shepherd and have full control over all parishes within his territory, regardless of rubrics, practices, “ethnic” traditions.
- ❖ **But** major church offices and church ministries would be organized on provincial – not diocesan – level in order to save and “concentrate” financial and human resources.

Ethnic Vicariates (EVs):

- ❖ EVs would be informal associations (not dioceses) of parishes which have the same ethnic heritage and maintain their ethnic identity and culture in a particularly strong manner.
 - EVs would address the fact that nearly 50% of US Orthodox parishes described themselves in 2011 national survey as “having strong ethnic identity and culture that they are trying to preserve.”
- ❖ EVs would be established on the provincial level: that is, the parishes within any EV could be in different dioceses
- ❖ EV would serve as liaisons between “ethnic” parishes and the diocesan bishops.
- ❖ EVs would assist diocesan bishops in ministering to particular ethnic diversity needs

(Some) Principles for Ethnic Vicariates

- ❖ EVs would not have any governing authority or structure.
 - EVs would be formed and coordinated within each province, serving all parishes of certain ethnic heritage.
 - Individual parishes which form EVs would remain under full authority of diocesan bishops.
 - Heads of EVs would be senior priests, not bishops.

- ❖ Each parish community would be free to decide to either join EV or to stay an ordinary “territorial” parish. Procedures and rules need to be discussed for how parishes will join or leave EVs.

- ❖ Number of EVs within each province would depend on composition of parishes, strength of their ethnic heritage and desire to join vicariates.

From the Minutes of Assembly IV (2013) regarding proposed and discussed Model:

- ❖ “There was a general sense that there was no agreement on the proposed model at this time, but that the model was a good starting point for further discussion and development.”
- ❖ The suggestion was made that, “following the conclusion of Assembly IV, there should be discussion within each jurisdiction about the proposals.”

Situation prior to the Assembly V:

- ❖ Some bishops believe that they need to continue to maintain their independent jurisdictions in the Region. Several reasons were offered to support this position:
 - Recent significant influx of Orthodox immigrants for whom it may be important to maintain “ethnic jurisdictions,” keep “their” bishops and administrative links to Mother Churches;
 - Danger of schisms into uncanonical groups by parishes and faithful who wish to maintain present jurisdictions;
 - Need to *first* (before any organizational restructuring) resolve differences among jurisdictions in various pastoral practices (qualifications for and process of ordination, confessions, mixed marriages, acceptance of converts, etc.)
- ❖ Some bishops also apparently have “different” reading and interpretation of Chambesy’s decision

In my personal observation:

- ❖ There is also a potential issue that was not discussed so far: the way in which a United Church in the US would relate to the Mother Churches
 - Some bishops may desire full autocephaly
 - Some bishops may prefer autonomy under Ecumenical Patriarchate (either as permanent solution or as interim step towards autocephaly)
 - Some bishops may oppose coming under jurisdiction of Ecumenical Patriarchate in any form

What Was New and What Was Achieved at the Assembly V:

- ❖ Pan-Orthodox Clergy-Laity Gathering was held prior and in conjunction with Assembly.
- ❖ Local clergy and laity from various jurisdictions + more than 30 Assembly's bishops participated
- ❖ Five bishops representing various jurisdictions (and generations) were on the podium answering direct questions from audience (including some "tough" questions)

What Was New and What Was Achieved at the Assembly V:

- ❖ Much greater (compared to previous Assemblies) degree of involvement of the bishops present at Assembly
- ❖ During discussion on canonical reorganization of the Church in America, nearly all hierarchs in the room contributed to conversation
- ❖ Emergence of the new “young” generation of bishops

What Was New and What Was Achieved at the Assembly V:

- ❖ Newly established Committee for Agencies and Endorsed Organizations (Bishop Gregory, Carpatho-Russian Diocese, Chairman)
- ❖ Agencies and Assembly will work in much closer cooperation than it was before
- ❖ Agencies can be seen as components of future unified Church (i.e. common church-structures shared by all jurisdictions)

What Was New and What Was Achieved at the Assembly V:

- ❖ Representatives (directors) of all agencies came and reported on the work of their agencies (IOCC, OCMC, OCN, OCPM, OCF, OCEC, EOCS): Q&A
- ❖ Representatives (directors) of all agencies addressed five standard questions that were given to them in advance

Five Questions Offered to all Agencies:

The stated purpose of the Assembly of Bishops is to "to preserve and contribute to the unity of the Orthodox Church by helping to further her spiritual, theological, ecclesiological, canonical, educational, missionary and philanthropic aims." How do you understand your organization's contribution toward fulfilling those purposes? What are your organization's relationship to the core ministries of the Orthodox Church?

What benefit does your organization derive from formal association with the Assembly of Bishops?

In what ways can the work of your organization be understood as providing a benefit to the Assembly of Bishops, or serving as a resource to the bishops in fulfilling their work together?

How does your organization understand its relationship to the spiritual authority of the Orthodox bishops, the Assembly of Bishops and the local bishop(s) in the context where your organization is centered and the local church in the context(s) in which it undertakes its program activities?

In what ways does your organization partner with other Assembly Agencies?

What Was New and What Was Achieved at the Assembly V:

- ❖ Antiochian Archdiocese resumed its active participation in the Assembly's work
- ❖ Antiochian clergy and lay consultants resumed their work at the various Committees of the Assembly (Committees for Youth and for Pastoral Practices were literally "disabled," because their chairmen were from AOCA)

What Was New and What Was Achieved at the Assembly V:

- ❖ Extensive (and “participatory”) discussion on canonical reorganization of the Church in United States
- ❖ Two different phased plans for canonical reorganization (i.e. for the *process*) were presented and discussed

**From “Preliminary Response of OCA Holy Synod to canonical restructuring proposals”
(published on OCA website, September 18):**

- ❖ “We note that the two proposals most recently distributed to the bishops articulate *two different approaches* to the question of canonical restructuring. The *first (from the Committee) proposed a 10-year path towards a potential autocephaly* via an interim status of autonomy to be overseen by all the Primate of the Orthodox Churches. The *second (from an unsolicited source) proposes a similar 10-year plan but with the emphasis on common and concerted joint local effort* of the members of the Assembly in addressing a number of specific areas (pension, theological education, missions, etc.).”

**From the article published by Fr. Andrew Damick
(Antiochian Archdiocese) available at:**

<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/09/are-you-greek-3>

❖ “At least two proposals for unity were put forward at the recent Assembly meeting — one which directly *addressed the territorial issues immediately* and also a *two-track proposal which initially unifies various ministries* and departments to nurture a common life, while solving the territorial question more gradually.”

What will happen next?

- ❖ It was decided that the Committee for Canonical Regional Planning will take one of proposals for further communication with jurisdictions.
- ❖ The goal is to collect all comments, suggestions, points of disagreements so that this proposal would be amended and refined and consensus can be achieved.

Just to keep for us (here, in US) in mind:

- ❖ Question of canonical reorganization of the Church in the USA is one of many items on the agenda of forthcoming Great and Holy Council
- ❖ Good review of the “issues” surrounding Great and Holy Council can be found in article “The Fragile Promise of the Pan-Orthodox Council” by Fr. Cyril Hovorun (Patriarchate Moscow). Available at:
http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/3001/the_fragile_promise_of_the_panorthodox_council.aspx

Time for “tough” questions: please, ask!