

AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES:

UNIFIED AND SELF GOVERNED



ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN LAITY



It is truly a scandal for the unity of the Church to maintain more than one bishop in any given city; it contravenes the sacred canons and Orthodox ecclesiology. It is a scandal that is exacerbated whenever phyletistic (ethnocentric) motives play a part, a practice soundly condemned by the Orthodox Church in the last (19th) century.

*The Late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios
of Constantinople*

We consider that a patriarchate of North America... should exist so that we can better serve our faithful.

Patriarch Ignatios IV of Antioch

I strongly believe that a united church in North America, would, without any doubt, be strengthened in its ability to witness the Gospel of Jesus Christ in North America...

*Metropolitan Theodosius, Orthodox Church
in America (OCA)*

Get Involved - A Church Unified and Self Governing - Needs You!

For over 200 years the Orthodox Christian Church has had a presence in the New World. It is a multicultural Church because the people who brought the faith here came from a variety of cultures. The monks and saints who established the Church respected the New World ethos... because that is the Orthodox Way. To develop the spiritual identity of the People of God, we meet them right where they are, and then continue from that point. Until 1917 the New World Church was unified and guided by the Patriarchate of Moscow. The events in Russia affected the Church here, because after 1917 the unity of Orthodoxy was fragmented into ethnic jurisdictions, each reflecting the country of origin for Orthodox Christian immigrants.

As the faithful mature in the New World they realize that Orthodox Christianity must once again be unified to meet the spiritual needs and challenges of assimilated faithful people. The ancient, apostolic and historical Church has been discovered in the West. The challenges of receiving newcomers and retaining our children who have made interfaith marriage the norm, can be achieved by utilizing the gifts that the Holy Spirit provides in unity, while respecting the old world and cultural differences. A synod of all the canonical Orthodox Bishops is the appropriate means of providing guidance in a conciliar way with the clergy and the laity involved in all aspects of Church governance.

The survival of the Church in the New World depends on the laity, prayerfully and responsibly, calling upon all those in authority to trust in the Great Commission set forth at Pentecost and to move ahead in unity. It is up to the laity to take bold steps and to be the rushing wind that moves the Church toward unity. Indifference will not help the cause of unity!

This pamphlet, in its third printing, is an attempt to set forth some of the issues involved in creating a unified, self-governing Church. It is developed by Orthodox Christian Laity, which is a voluntary independent movement of Orthodox laity and clergy, involved with Orthodox Renewal. This is the laity's legitimate role in church governance. Founded in 1987, it is comprised of members from all U.S. Orthodox jurisdictions. Its advocacy efforts for a unified, autocephalous Church culminated in a resolution for self governance on October 10, 1998.

George E. Matsoukas
Executive Director

1 What would a unified, self-governing Orthodox Church accomplish?

- Help unite the current fragmented Church which is in violation of the sacred canons of Orthodox theology, and bring to an end an ethnically divided Church.
- Curb the exodus of Orthodox Christians and their children who leave because of cultural and social problems native to America that the Church is unwilling or unable to address.
- Help meet the challenge of the Apostolic mission of the Church in America which is to spread the message of Jesus Christ within the context of Orthodoxy, to teach and to baptize.
- Reduce the wasteful duplication of time, talent, and financial resources to maintain separate institutions, theological schools, administrative structures and outreach programs.
- Allow the Church to speak with one voice in America – representing several million Orthodox Christians in addressing social, political, religious and ethical issues.

2 What is meant by the term “self-governed?” Is it the same as “autocephalous” or “autonomous?”

The word autocephaly or autocephalous comes from the Greek words “AUTO” which means individual or self and “KEPHALE” which means head. It signifies to be self-governed and free to select one’s own religious and administrative head or prelate (Patriarch) and to be independent of external authority in matters of governance in the United States. The term “AUTONOMOUS” refers to a semi-independent condition whereby the Church is under the direction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

3 *What do the Canons (Laws) of the Church say about more than one bishop serving in the same geographic area?*

The condition is contrary to the Church's rules. Canon 8 of the First Ecumenical Council explicitly states that there shall not be two bishops in one city. Thus, it is clear that the Church did not permit bishops to have dioceses with overlapping or identical geographic areas. Subsequent canons, from both regional and ecumenical councils, prohibit continued co-existence of bishops in a single area.

4 *How many Orthodox Christians are there in the United States?*

The Directory of Orthodox Parishes and Institutions lists over 20 separate Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States with a membership of some 3 million individuals (about 1.2% of the total population) with 40 bishops, 2,250 parishes and 10 theological schools. *The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese* is the largest. *The Antiochian Archdiocese*, which is attracting more "new Orthodox" (converts), is the fastest growing and the *Orthodox Church In America* is the oldest. Nine out of these jurisdictions are in communion with each other through the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America. SCOBA, as this group is called, is not a canonical synod, but an association of ethnic representative bishops.

5 *How did the current situation of Orthodox Church factionalism come about?*

Historically, the Orthodox Church which first sent out Missionaries and established churches and diocese(s) would be the Mother Church of a new territory. The newly established Church would develop its ministry and achieve autocephaly upon reaching maturity. In the United States, the Church which has historical presveia (seniority) is the Church of Russia. Moscow sent missionaries to the New World in the 18th century and

established parishes and a diocese in Sitka, Alaska later known as the Metropolia of the Russian Church. As Orthodox immigrants came to the United States in the early 20th century most of the parishes that they established came under the jurisdiction of the Metropolia, which ordained clergy and hierarchs from various ethnic groups.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 threw the Church of Russia into chaos and its Diocese located in San Francisco, was left adrift. Other jurisdictions stepped into the vacuum of authority created by the Russian Revolution as in the Patriarchate of Antioch, the Church of Serbia, the Church of Greece and ultimately the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The latter exercised its prerogative by its interpretation of Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 451), and assumed jurisdiction of the Church of the “Diaspora” under the Ecumenical Patriarchate and established the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in the Americas in 1922. In 1970 the Russian Church finally re-established itself in America as the OCA, or the Orthodox Church in America and was recognized by the Patriarchate of Moscow as an independent entity.

6 *Has there been any recent effort toward unification?*

In 1990, His Eminence Metropolitan Bartholomew of Chalcedon (the present Ecumenical Patriarch) chaired the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission which convened to determine the Orthodox consensus on the topic of “Orthodox Diaspora”. This meeting set the tone for further discussion on the future of the Church in America. In 1994, two other events occurred which suggested that unity among the jurisdictions was progressing. At the Clergy-Laity Congress of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Metropolitan Spyridon, who represented Ecumenical Patriarchate at the meeting, made a strong call for a unified Church in America. Later that year at a meeting held at the Antochian Village in Ligonier, PA. the Standing Conference of Canonical

Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA), presided over by Archbishop Iakovos, declared that "...all of our efforts should be coordinated within an overall ecclesial framework ...to allow us to organically become an administratively united Church". However, the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople disagreed with the Ligonier meeting as not in keeping with the prior decision reached by the Mother Churches (in 1990, through the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission) for implementing autocephaly in the "diaspora" (see Question 7). Archbishop Iakovos resigned shortly thereafter and although other Orthodox jurisdictions have remained committed to support a unified Church official efforts for Orthodox Unity in America have been on hold since 1994.

7 How can a united autocephalous Orthodox Church in the United States be achieved?

- It has been stated repeatedly by the hierarchs that self-governance would come in the "fullness of time" when the maturity of the American Church is demonstrated. Orthodox faithful of all age groups believe that this "fullness of time" has arrived. And they stand ready to work in every way possible with their spiritual leaders here and abroad to achieve unity and autocephaly.
- A welcomed catalyst for change would be for the Mother Churches to act on their decision already reached through the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission which met in Switzerland in 1990 as part of an effort to prepare the agenda of the "Great and Holy Synod" to be convened in the near future. This body of 12 autocephalous and 2 autonomous churches devised a transitional plan whereby the churches in the "diaspora" would become autocephalous. The plan calls for "episcopal assemblies" throughout the "diaspora" including the U.S. where all canonical bishops would work out a common ministry for all Orthodox. These assemblies would report to the Ecumenical Patriarchate until they are recognized as

autocephalous. The vote for this adoption was unanimous.

- SCOBA needs to play an active role in energizing all Orthodox jurisdictions to actively support the concept of a unified Orthodox Church in America. Under SCOBA leadership theological schools and other duplicated institutions, programs and activities of the various jurisdictions could join resources as a first step in demonstrating the benefits of unity.
- The ruling hierarchs of each jurisdiction at the same time would need to petition their Mother Churches or Patriarch abroad to grant them self-governance. After a reasonable time has passed, if this request is not addressed, then all the leaders of the of the Orthodox Churches in the United States would need to call a special congress and with the help of the Holy Spirit declare themselves autocephalous. This process has been the historical procedure by which many churches have achieved autocephaly in the past.

8 *How would an autocephalous Church in the United States be administered?*

A Holy Synod or Council of Bishops with the participation of the clergy and the laity would administer the American Church just like it is done in other Orthodox churches throughout the world.

However, at first, each jurisdiction will likely maintain its own administrative structure. Orthodox hierarchs expect this process to occur in stages. Eventually, the highest body of this self-governed Church would be an annual or biennial congress made up of clergy and laity. This assembly would deal with all of the matters affecting life, growth, and unity of the Church; her institutions; her finances; and her administrative, educational and philanthropic concerns. A charter and bylaws or regulations would be specifically developed for this newly formed entity and would be approved by the congress as would any subsequent changes. Issues of

dogma, doctrine or canon shall continue to be under the purview of Patriarchs and ecclesiastical assemblies who can convene Councils and rule on matters.

9 *What would be the composition of the newly formed Holy Synod?*

All current hierarchs – bishops, archbishops, and metropolitans – would make up the Synod. Representatives of the clergy and laity as well as a staff of theologians, canonists, legal and other specialized professionals would serve as advisory members.

10 *How would a unified, autocephalous Church minister to its faithful?*

The worship life of the Church would be conducted in accordance with Orthodox theological tradition, meeting the local needs of Americans of all ethnic backgrounds.

11 *What would happen to the various cultural distinctions and traditions currently maintained in the ethnic Orthodox Churches?*

All the unique religiously grounded and other valued cultural distinctions, traditions, and customs of the various jurisdictions, rather than being confined to local ethnic parishes, could be shared and appreciated by everyone. The Orthodox Church in America no longer is a church of the “diaspora.” The United States is the birthplace and the homeland of the majority of the Orthodox faithful. However, a united Church would seek to preserve and enhance what is best in the traditions and heritage of each jurisdiction.

12 *What would the relationship be between the “new” Church in America and the Ecumenical and other Patriarchates?*

All Orthodox Patriarchates toil to guard the tenets of the faith and maintain its spiritual rudder. According to the Sixth Ecumenical Council of 680, it was ruled that all

autocephalous churches are equal. And the Ecumenical Patriarchate would maintain its traditional position of honor as “First Among Equals.”

13 *How would the Orthodox apostolic mission “to go, teach and baptize” benefit from a Church that is unified and self-governed?*

- Orthodox spiritual leaders meeting together would unify the Church’s mission revitalizing ministries for youth, social service, outreach, religious education, and other programs and avoid duplication of effort and of resources.
- Smaller parishes in urgent need of membership would more readily attract congregations of ethnically diverse Orthodox Christians.
- Seminaries, designed to serve the whole Church, would encourage more young men and women to seek a religious calling and serve in many areas of church life.
- A new spiritual vitality freed from the constraints of ethnocentrism and authoritarianism would again flourish. It would welcome new families of interfaith marriages, “new Orthodox” (converts) and attract many younger people who are unchurched or have gone elsewhere.

14 *How can I, as an Orthodox Christian, personally help toward this unification effort?*

- Educate your family, friends and fellow parishioners on the benefits of a unified Orthodox Church in the United States.
- Reach out to Orthodox faithful in other jurisdictions through joint religious services, Bible study groups, social activities and organize pan-Orthodox groups locally to promote unity.

- Speak to this issue at general assemblies, diocesan conferences and retreats with your clergy and hierarchs.
- Offer financial resources to help the movement.
- Plan activities such as circulating a petition on unity and obtaining as many signatures as possible urging the hierarchs to move forward actively on the establishment of a self-governing Church in the United States.
- Pray for Orthodox unity.



ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN LAITY



A PRAYER FOR ORTHODOX UNITY

Oh All Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we your faithful children beseech you to forgive us the sin of divisiveness, which is rooted in our hearts, our dioceses and land. Implant in our lives the holy vine of unity which only you can bestow on those who have come together in your name. Enlighten us with your grace so that we may come to the knowledge of your truth and move our hearts to respond with trust and total obedience to your divine will. Through the intercessions of the God-inspired Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea, who in harmony decreed that there should be one hierarch in each city serving your faithful as a loving father over his children, one shepherd over a united flock, we also praise your all holy name. O Father who is without beginning, O Son who is eternal and O Holy Spirit, the life-creator, illuminate the way and guide us all to once again unite your Holy Church. Amen.

For Further Reading

Andrew T. Kopan "Orthodoxy in America: The Unity We Seek" in Stephen J. Sfekas and George E. Matsoukas, eds., *Project for Orthodox Renewal*, pp. 181-316 (Chicago: Orthodox Christian Laity, 1993).

Alice O. Kopan, ed. *The American Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate*, (Chicago: Orthodox Christian Laity, 1998)

Alexander A. Bogolepov. *Toward an American Orthodox Church*: (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1963: Revised 2001, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press).



The Orthodox Christian Laity is an independent lay volunteer organization; a non-profit corporation, chartered in the State of Illinois with headquarters located in West Palm Beach at PO Box 6954, West Palm Beach, FL 33405.

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ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN LAITY

A Resolution for Autocephaly Adopted Oct 10, 1998

B e it r̄esolv̄ed: that the Orthodox Christian Laity (OCL) assembled at its 11th Annual Meeting in the city of Los Angeles, California, on the eve of the Feastday of its patron saint, Symeon, the New Theologian, petitions His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the Holy Synod of Constantinople to grant autocephaly to the American Church and calls upon the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) to reconvene the Ligonier conference of American hierarchs to once again proclaim that the American Church is no longer a “Diaspora,” and to pursue the necessary steps with the Mother Churches in declaring that the “fullness of time” for the unification and autocephaly of the American Church has arrived as we move toward the third Christian millennium, and calls upon the members of the OCL and all Orthodox Christians in America to support the establishment of a united autocephalous Orthodox Church in America. (The Orthodox Christian Laity will continue to be supportive of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the other Mother Churches.)

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