

Metropolitan Council Report * July 2007

By Diocesan Clergy Representative, Fr. Philip Reese

Since last year's Assembly, the Metropolitan Council has met three times: December 06, March 07 and June 07. The increased number of meetings were necessary due to the damage control caused by the Central Church scandal.

This past year has been a very trying year for Gary Popovich and myself who attended these meetings. They have been tedious, long, and filled with ups and downs. Of course, too, there has been plenty of scrutiny, criticism, as well as some praise over the internet: the ocanews site and various bulletin board forums, and elsewhere. Truly, as members of the Council, we are aware that the eyes of the Church - OCA and elsewhere, are upon us.

How the Metropolitan Council Has Changed

I wish to comment first upon how the current scandal has changed the Metropolitan Council:

Pre-scandal Metropolitan Council meetings for years have fit a particular pattern with little work involved and with a very predictable outcome - to pass the budget that was put before us with little, if any question or adjustment, and to hear various reports. They took place always a number weeks after a Holy Synod meeting. We were always told at our meetings that the Holy Synod members saw the budget figures before us, implying that the numbers were generally approved by them. The budget was passed and we went home. There was little awareness of our legal responsibility as Metropolitan Council members in terms of being real directors with legal fiduciary responsibility to the point of being liable for damages to the Church corporation according to civil law.

And besides, how could there be anything seriously wrong? We trusted the men who guided the church ship, the Metropolitan, chancellor, treasurer, and other officers of our central office. They were our men, the men we knew, liked, and respected. With the breakdown of the Central Church Administration, the Metropolitan Council had to go into action to compensate and try to repair.

Your post-scandal Metropolitan Council now thinks and operates in an entirely different world. We are very aware of ourselves, together with the Metropolitan, as being the legal fiduciary directors of the Church, playing a role in personnel issues, legal issues, organizational issues, ethical issues, and policy issues concerning operations at Syosset. The Council has reorganized itself in order to play a more active role in helping to oversee, and to some degree help guide the Central Administration. In the long term, there is a finance committee that looks at the numbers and helps put together a budget,

an audit committee that makes sure the numbers square and also interfaces with the professional (outside firm) and internal (OCA elected) auditors, an investment committee which analyzes, gives guidance, and reports on the OCA's investment holdings, and also an ethics committee which will deal with questions and issues concerning possible future conflicts. In at least the short term, there is a reorganization committee (to redo the chancery), a search committee (for analyzing and hiring personnel), a charity committee (to deal with charity monies properly reaching their intended destinations), and a special investigative commission (to overlook the Proskaur/Rose report and to further investigate the trail of wrongdoing within the Central Administration).

So today's Metropolitan Council is much more actively engaged, asks more questions, argues more with each other, even challenges the chair, and ultimately comes to consensus over a wide range of issues.

Accomplishments in the Aftermath

Looking at the work that has been done, it is plain that there have been concrete accomplishments by the Council that will positively affect the future of our OCA:

1. Reorganized the Structure of the Administration by reducing the all-encompassing authority of the Chancellor, making it equal status with the other statutory officers, Treasurer and Secretary, and also with a new position, approved by the Holy Synod - Directory of Ministries & Communications. All of these positions would report directly to and have equal access to the Metropolitan.

2. Analyzed and redefined staff positions, balancing the payroll and lowering the total number of paid positions.

3. Reorganized itself in order to be more informed and involved with the Administration as per the Statues.

4. Changed the budget procedures and balanced the OCA budget.

5. Searched and hired (with the Holy Synod's approval) three of the four executive positions with talented and able people. The treasurer position is still being sought.

6. Authorized for our offices accounting software suggested by our accounting firm that keeps track of all figures and keeps a true paper trail.

7. Crafted a "Best Practices" policy document with "whistle blower," "conflict of interest," and ethics and enforcement procedures.

8. Approved the sale of the Martin Drive property.

9. Heard and questioned, together with the Holy Synod, the investigative findings of the Proskaur/Rose (PR) law firm regarding the scandal.

10. With the backing and participation of the Holy Synod, a Special Investigative Committee was formed and tasked with over-viewing the evidence and confirming the findings of PR and report to the Council. The

Council accepted their report and voted to forward it along with its accompanying recommendations to the Holy Synod. (One of the recommendations was to suspend Fr. Kondratich and bring him to a Church trial.)

11. Voted that the Special Commission continue its investigation to help tell as full a story as possible as to what happened at Syosset. Reconfirmed that vote following the “temporary” suspension of the Commission by the Metropolitan.

12. Has never stopped advocating full disclosure of the facts of the investigation into this scandal, and has pointed out the inherent conflict of interest in having two former treasurers, acting Metropolitan, and Metropolitan during the period in question oversee, and at times over-ride, the Council’s questions and investigative work.

Dealing With Inertia

After the revelation of the scandal and the firing of the chancellor, I thought that the Council at the very next meeting would be approached by the Metropolitan with a strong sense of humility, with words of apology on behalf of a badly wounded administration, with an impassioned call for help, to be more willing to reveal information to us, and bring forward an urgent call to work together as a team. I was somewhat disappointed when the tenor of the meeting began almost like any other meeting. And then a confrontation took place between the chair (Metropolitan) and few members who requested that the PR law firm hired for Church be present to speak to us. A ruling of “out of order!” came from the chair. This was not a good beginning, I thought.

Of course, it wasn’t always like this, but it is an example of a perception of uneasiness and cautious handling which has made this ride rather rocky.

Two other clear examples I can give you were the reluctance and refusal by PR to fully cooperate with the Special Commission (and they work for the Church?), and the “temporary” suspension of the Special Commission that lasts until this day.

So if perception is reality, then it appears as if there some hiding going on and that there may be more dirt to come out.

What Do We Do Now?

Bishop Nikolai of Sitka, Anchorage and Alaska said near the end of the joint MC/Holy Synod meeting, in which we heard a litany of Fr. Kondratich’s alleged wrongdoings by Sarah Gold, that “this isn’t just the work of one man.” I agree. This happened over a period of nearly ten years. It was a culture that

facilitated and allowed these things to take place. There were things done that should not have happened, and there were things not done that should have happened. What I am personally most saddened about is the lack of remorse or apology of the men who have been or are our leaders at Syosset. None have stood up to say, "I am at fault. I have allowed this to happen, I did wrong. I saw it coming. I could have done differently, forgive me." Instead there is plenty of silence and self-defense and finger pointing.

Until there are a number of people who had the responsibility come forward with the courage to tell their story, apologize and ask forgiveness, then I don't think this crisis will fully come to an end for a long time. It is a shame that in our Church, an institution with a core message of repentance, confession of sins, righting wrongs, forgiveness and mercy, that we have leaders of various capacities who can't seem to come forward and admit any wrongdoing, passive or active, whatsoever. This is a bad example to the faithful, the faithful need to hear and see this, the faithful are the sheep that need protection - not the other way around.

Except for our investigative attempt to bring the culture of wrongdoing to the light (now in a sort of limbo) and our corrective measures to make wrongdoing a little harder, the Metropolitan Council truly does not have the scope of authority to protect the sheep. But we know who really does...

Opportunity For Tithing?

There may be a target of opportunity that this crisis has given us. This because there has never has there been such cuts in spending at Syosset as there are now. And so there may never be an opportunity like this again for perhaps a somewhat favorable reception of our powerful message of tithing and proportionate giving in support of the Central Church Administration. Later, as the OCA budget begins to bloom again, I fear that there will be less and less receptivity to the possibility of tithing. The head of the Council's Finance Committee, Fr. Matthew Tate, and the head of the Audit Committee, Mary Caetta, are both from the Diocese of the West (Mary is the DOW treasurer). Their Diocese is an ally of ours on this issue. With the support of our delegates and with active coordination and input from our Archbishop Dmitri and our treasure Milos Konjevich, we may finally be able to make some real headway on this issue going into the next All-American Council.

Respectfully Submitted,
Fr. Philip Reese