

**Orthodox Church in America**  
**Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania**  
**2023 Annual Assembly Minutes**  
**January 26-27, 2023**  
**St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church**  
**Bethlehem, Pennsylvania**

The agenda and all departmental reports were posted to the diocesan website prior to the Assembly.

Thursday, January 26th, 2023

**SESSION 1**

The meeting was called to order at 4:02 PM with the singing of “O heavenly King”.

**Agenda:** Archbishop MARK presented the agenda and announced several modifications, including the addition of a short presentation from the Orthodox Church Capital Improvement Fund during Session III.

**Credentials:**

- Credentials were compiled by Danalisa Radu and Mat. Mary Reynolds.
  - 1 hierarch
  - 23 clergy delegates
  - 28 lay delegates
  - 4 alternates
  - 5 observers

**Clergy/lay Chairs:**

- **Clergy:** Fr. Martin Browne
- **Lay:** John Buckeye

**Secretariat:**

- **Clergy:** Fr. Silouan Burns
- **Lay:** Daria Cortése

**Nominating Committee:**

- Pdn. Peter Skoog
- Sbn. Gregory Polk

## Hierarch's Message

- Many thanks to Fr. Nikolai Breckenridge and the faithful of St. Nicholas for hosting the Assembly this year.
- **Over the past year, we invested in the lives of the faithful in many ways:**
  - We covered the \$27,000 diocesan cost of the All-American Council without billing parishes to recoup the cost.
  - We provided in-person clergy continuing education and a pre-Nativity clergy retreat for the first time since the pandemic began.
  - The Diocesan Council voted to assist our seminarians at St. Tikhon's and St. Vladimir's.
  - We are subsidizing our two missions: Theotokos of the Lifegiving Spring in Philadelphia, and our newest mission in Gettysburg.
  - We covered the entire cost of the St. Tikhon's Summer Camp for diocesan youth, and will do so again this year for those who need assistance.
  - We have a completely new website for the camp.<sup>1</sup>
- **Clergy health continues to be a priority.**
  - Adequate clergy compensation is critical. Without adequate compensation, we will have difficulty finding and retaining clergy.
  - We must encourage our clergy to participate in the Thriving in Ministry Program for their own spiritual health.<sup>2</sup> Healthy priests will hopefully facilitate healthy parishes.
- **We have the responsibility to plan for the future to the best of our knowledge and ability. *Failing to plan is planning to fail.***
  - We are the first, and probably only, OCA diocese that breaks its census data down by age. Vladyka urged the clergy to print the census by age bracket and discuss it at meetings of the Parish Council and at each parish's annual meeting. The census data is available on the diocesan website.<sup>3</sup>
  - All parishes must focus on the faithful growing in knowledge and experience of their faith through fuller participation in as complete a liturgical life as possible. Adult education and active ministry are also vital, along with growing parishes numerically.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stikhonscamp.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://thrivingorthodox.org/home#TOP>

<sup>3</sup> **The 2022 census:** <https://www.doepa.org/files/Diocesan%20Assembly/2023/Breakdown-of-2022-census-by-age-brackets.pdf>

**Census breakdown by age, 1975-2021:** <https://www.doepa.org/files/Diocesan%20Assembly/2023/Census-Breakdown-1975-2022.pdf>

- **Administration:**

- Parish visits returned to normal this year. His Eminence's visitation schedule is posted on the diocesan website.
- Many, many thanks to Carmen Hodson, our administrative assistant, for the faithful work she continues to do.
- We are blessed with a wonderful Diocesan Council, and Vladyka thanked them for their dedication, collaboration, and diligence.
- Thanks to Chancellor Fr. Martin Browne.
- Thanks to Deans Fr. Innocent Neal, Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk, and Fr. Timothy Hojnicky. Thanks also to Fr. Nicholas Solak for his many years of faithful service as dean of the Wilkes-Barre deanery. He continues to work hard for the Church, and now leads the OCA's Department of Pastoral Life.
- The Department of Pastoral Life is offering a clergy retreat in Chicago from October 17th-20th (Tuesday-Friday).<sup>4</sup> The registration fee is \$500. All parishes should include an appropriate amount for travel to and participation in this clergy gathering,

**Approval of Previous Minutes:** A motion to approve the minutes from the 2022 Annual Diocesan Assembly was made by Fr. John Perich and seconded by Fr. Michael Shepherd. The motion passed unanimously.

## SESSION II

### Deanery/Departmental Reports

- Reports were not read because they were posted on the diocesan website prior to the meeting. See reports. There were several comments/questions:
- **Frackville deanery report:** Fr. Timothy Hojnicky provided more information on the Gettysburg Mission.
  - The mission began in a funeral home, holding Vespers once a month.
  - After Pascha, Fr. Timothy received a phone call from Archpriest Leonid Schmidt, inquiring about mission opportunities.
  - Since September 2022, Fr. Leonid has been serving Great Vespers and the Divine Liturgy at the mission every weekend.
  - Fr. Timothy thanked everyone for their support of the Gettysburg Mission and asking for continued prayers.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oca.org/news/headline-news/office-of-pastoral-life-announces-in-person-pastoral-conference-on-october-17-20-2023>

- **Metropolitan Council report:** Fr. John Onofrey asked if there was a plan to address the issue of some clergy not participating in the mandatory pension plan.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, he inquired if the lack of plan contributions from these clergy was affecting the viability of the plan for those who *are* participating.
  - Archbp. DANIEL, the Episcopal Liaison to the Pension Board, is chairing a joint committee to address concerns regarding pension compliance, the status of the plan, and the future of the pension program. Archbps. MARK and MICHAEL are also on that committee, as are three members of the Pension Board, and the Metropolitan Council.
  - Vladyka mentioned the new actuarial firm, and stated that he “will not let them off easily.”
  - Each hierarch received a list of clergy in their diocese who are not participating in the pension plan. However, the lists were inaccurate. Vladyka spoke with Mat. Mary Buletza-Breton, Chair of the Pension Board, about this. No revised list has yet been issued.
  - Both the Holy Synod and the Metropolitan Council approved a 2% increase in pension plan contributions for 2023. These bodies also *discussed* a 2% increase for 2024, but that has not yet been approved.
  - Fr. John expressed his desire for compliance with the pension program guidelines in every diocese, because he believes this was not done in the past.
  - The archbishop mentioned that Alaskan clergy do not participate due to their living situations.
- **Office of Young Adult Activities report:** Fr. John Onofrey expressed his gratitude to Metropolitan HERMAN of blessed memory, to Martin Paluch, and to the countless others who worked diligently for many years in faithful stewardship of the St. Tikhon’s Summer Camp.
- A motion to accept the deanery/departmental reports was made by Fr. Paul Witek and seconded by Fr. John Onofrey. The motion passed unanimously.

### Other business:

- Fr. Nicholas Solak welcomed Mother Christophora, the keynote speaker for this year’s Assembly.
- Mother Christophora is the abbess of the Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration in Elwood City, Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup>
- Mother will address the assembly after Vespers, and will have brunch with the clergy wives on Friday morning.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://ocapension.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.orthodoxmonasteryellwoodcity.org/>

**The Assembly broke for dinner at 4:51 PM with the singing of “It is truly meet”.**

**Evening activities:**

- At 6:00 PM, the delegates attended Vespers, during which seminarian Kirill Tyler Zawatski was tonsured as a reader and ordained as a subdeacon.
- Mother Christophora addressed the delegates after Vespers, and the evening concluded with a wine-and-cheese reception.

**Friday, January 27th, 2023**

**The day began with Hierarchal Divine Liturgy at 8:30 AM.** There were two ordinations:

- Dn. Nathan Clausson was ordained to the Holy Priesthood.
- Sbn. Kirill Tyler Zawatski was ordained to the Holy Diaconate.

**After the Liturgy, the delegates enjoyed brunch. During the meal, the matushki had a roundtable discussion with Mother Christophora.**

**Session III**

**The meeting was called to order at 11:42 AM with the singing of “O heavenly King”.**

**As the credentials were tallied, Vladyka made several remarks:**

- **The St. Tikhon’s Summer Camp** is still the same camp, but it has a new website and directors.
- Heartfelt thanks to everyone who has helped with the camp website and digitizing camp records.
- We currently have over 70 children signed up for the 2023 camp, out of 125 available slots.
- Fr. Michael Shepherd asked for clarification regarding waiving camp fees for diocesan children.
  - Vladyka stated that parishes who are able to cover camp costs for interested children should do so, while the diocese will cover the costs for parishes/families who cannot afford it.
- His Eminence encouraged clergy to post the camp’s promotional flyer in each parish, and on social media. Furthermore, he urged clergy and laity to share this information on social media, and to ask their respective social media followers to share it also.
- The archbishop stressed that the camp is still in need of volunteers, especially male counsellors. We do not ever want to turn interested children away because there are not sufficient volunteers to accommodate them.

- **Vladyka thanked Mother Christophora** and gave her a donation for the monastery.
- **There was one agenda modification:** a short presentation by Fr. Nicholas Solak about the October clergy retreat in Chicago.
- His Eminence asked for a show of hands as to how many people had never seen an ordination before the morning's Hierarchal Divine Liturgy. He emphasized the importance of the "job description" found in the prayers of ordination.

## **Credentials**

- Credentials were compiled by Danalisa Radu and Carmen Hodson.
  - 1 hierarch
  - 29 clergy delegates
  - 25 lay delegates
  - 7 alternates
  - 4 observers

**The next portion of Session III was chaired by John Buckeye, who expressed thanks to Vladyka and the delegates for the pleasant, calm and respectful atmosphere of the past several assemblies. After thanking Mother Christophora for her presence and words, he introduced Mark Linnehan, the diocesan treasurer, and surrendered the floor to him.**

## **Financial Reports & 2023 Budget Proposal**

- These reports were summarized by Mark Linnehan. See reports.
  - The overall financial state of the diocese is very good. Our obligations are current, and we have an increase in assets.
  - We have an outstanding loan to Tom Pickup for the purchase of the Lykens property. The balance as of 12/31/22 is \$13,876.63. The note is due on 8/8/27.
  - Reports were generated using the accrual method of accounting.<sup>7</sup> Roughly \$6,064 of income from 2022 has not yet been received. See the aging report for further information.
  - Net income was substantially affected by additional spending for charitable donations, seminarian support and support for clergy wives, as well as income shortfalls due to waiving fees for the DOEPA Assembly and the St. Tikhon's camp.
  - Our negative cash flow is due to our \$300,000 withdrawal from the Russian Brotherhood and the purchase of a PNC CD in the amount of \$400,000.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Accounting on an **accrual basis** means that income is recorded when we invoice for it, whereas accounting on a **cash basis** means income is recorded when the money is actually received.

<sup>8</sup> Purchased with the money withdrawn from the Russian Brotherhood, plus some operational savings.

- **Bottom line:** Total Liabilities and Equity has increased by \$10,490. Bank accounts are reduced by \$76,174. Investments are increased by \$97,027.
- Many thanks to Jennifer Bzik for her support with auditing and QuickBooks.
- On behalf of the Diocesan Council, Mark Linnehan moved to accept the financial reports and budget proposal. The motion was seconded by Dn. John Shingara and passed unanimously.

## Old Business

- Vladyka remarked that the diocese collaborated with the Wilkes-Barre deanery to offer a retreat on stewardship by Bill Marianes called “Igniting the Flame”).<sup>9</sup>
  - During the retreat, Mr. Marianes stated that the average Orthodox parishioner contributes between 0.3% and 0.8% of their income to the Church.
  - He suggests adding a full percentage point to that every year until a parishioner reaches the goal of 10%.
  - Several DOEPA parishes have engaged Mr. Marianes to help them strategize for the future.
  - His Eminence expressed that he hopes that each deanery will host a similar presentation.
- John Buckeye thanked Mark Linnehan for his excellent budget presentation.

## New Business

- **Clergy synaxis:** Fr. Nicholas Solak gave a brief presentation on the upcoming clergy retreat in Chicago.
  - The event is open to *hierarchs and priests only*.
  - The \$500 registration fee includes lodging and meals. *Travel costs are not included*.
  - The retreat will be held at the University of St. Mary on the Lake Conference Center in Mundelein, Illinois (a northern suburb of Chicago).<sup>10</sup>
  - Fr. Nicholas played a short promotional video featuring Metropolitan TIKHON.
  - Fr. Nicholas urged clergy (and His Eminence) to register for this event, and requested the laity to encouraged their clergy to do so, and to incorporate the cost into their parish budgets.
- **OCCIF presentation:** Pdja. Katherine Vitko provided delegates with information about the Orthodox Church Capital Improvement Fund.<sup>11</sup>
  - Pdja. Katherine expressed gratitude for the support OCCIF has received via both investments and prayer, and gave a brief history of the organization.

<sup>9</sup> <https://stewardshipcalling.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://usml.edu/conference-center/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://occif.org/>

- OCCIF provides Orthodox financing for Orthodox projects.
- It helps mission parishes obtain loans, which is otherwise extremely difficult, and provides solutions to help Orthodox institutions get out of bad/predatory loans.
- Financing with OCCIF means the Church collects interest, rather than banks. OCCIF uses that interest to help fund other loans for Orthodox institutions.
- If an application receives a response of “not yet”, that does not mean “never”. OCCIF will help formulate a plan to secure an approval.
- No OCA parish has ever defaulted on a loan from OCCIF.
- There is no minimum loan amount.

### **Election**

- There is was one vacancy on the Diocesan Council for the position of Lay Member at Large.
- The election was facilitated by Fr. Martin Browne.
- Sbn. Gregory Polk nominated John Buckeye. The nomination was seconded by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, and John Buckeye accepted the nomination.
- Calling for and receiving no additional nominations, Fr. Martin Browne moved to close the nominations. The motion was seconded by Fr. Stephen Vernak, and passed unanimously.
- John Buckeye was unanimously elected via general acclamation.

### **Next Assembly**

- The next Annual Diocesan Assembly will be held on January 25th-26th, 2024, at Christ the Savior Orthodox Church in Harrisburg.
- **Floor question: Why do we always hold the Assembly in January?**
  - **Answer from Fr. Martin Browne:** There are two primary reasons. First, our financial books close in December, so meeting in late January provides adequate time for the information on those accounts to be accurately assessed and reported, while still being fairly recent. Second, we have never had to cancel or reschedule a January Assembly due to inclement weather, which we have had to do several times in prior years when it was held in November/December.

### **Final Remarks**

- His Eminence thanked Fr. Nikolai Breckenridge and the faithful of St. Nicholas for hosting the Assembly this year, and providing delicious food.
  - Fr. Nikolai responded that although his name is always attached to the parish in these circumstances, the bulk of the labor was done by the faithful, and he expressed gratitude to those parishioners who were present.



**A motion to adjourn the Assembly was made by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky and seconded by Fr. James Weremedic. The motion passed unanimously.**

**The 2023 Annual Diocesan Assembly was adjourned at 12:36 PM with the singing of “It is truly meet”.**

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Fr. Silouan Brown, clergy secretary**

**Daria Cortése, lay secretary**

**DRAFT**