

**Draft**

**Parish Council Guidebook**

**This document is a work in progress. None of the sections have been officially adopted by the Antiochian Archdiocese. Parishes who review these materials are encouraged to field test them and to send comments to the Department of Stewardship at the email address below. Refer to Appendix A in the Table of Contents for topics of sections still being written. Refer all comments and suggestions to the Department of Stewardship at [rnlm@aol.com](mailto:rnlm@aol.com)**

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## Part #2 ... Preface

When the Parish Council Guidebook is published, it will include a preface and a set of acknowledgements. The acknowledgements will refer to the many ways Metropolitan Philip has inspired, directed, and supported the work of Parish Councils throughout the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese. In addition, it is his wise council that has helped us understand and learn to apply the teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church concerning the role and function of the Parish Council.

The following statement by Metropolitan Philip in 1994 sets the tone for virtually everything contained in this Parish Council Guidebook. The full text of Metropolitan Philip's remarks about Parish Councils is included in the appendix of this Guidebook. This excerpt will serve as the Guidebook's preface.

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"The topic which I will discuss with you is the following: 'All Together, We Perform a Sacred Task. There is no room for Them and Us. For in Christ, we are all 'Us.'

This topic is rooted in my message to the Archdiocese Convention which was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1968. In that message, I said, 'For many years, we have been administering our local parishes under a false dichotomy; indeed under a dangerous and unorthodox dualism. We have been preaching two kinds of theology: One for the church upstairs and one for the hall downstairs. We do not believe in this 'upstairs downstairs' theology. Nor do we believe in the existence of two classes in the parish, opposing each other, 'them and us,' clergy versus laity. This kind of dichotomy has caused us many serious parochial problems. Unfortunately, some of our clergy do not think that we need parish councils to help us administer the affairs of our parishes. Moreover, they believe that parish councils are nothing but an American innovation which we should abolish. I completely disagree with this kind of unrealistic and unorthodox thinking. On the other hand, we have parish councils who believe that priest are hired and fired at the whims of parish councils. Furthermore, they believe that the priest takes care of the spiritual matters and they take care of the financial matters. Thus, when the priest is giving his sermon upstairs, the council members are counting the Sunday collections downstairs. I completely disagree with this thinking and this unorthodox practice.

In the Church, there are no spiritual and financial matters opposing each other. As a matter of fact, everything in the Church points to the Eternal, to the Almighty God who is the source of 'every good and perfect gift.' In other words, if the parish lacks the necessary funds to pay its bills, i.e., light, heat, air-conditioning, help the poor, help plant parishes, pay the priest's stipend, etc., it is the sacred duty of the pastor to devote some of his sermons to the financial conditions of the parish and to work closely with the parish council in order to remedy this situation. On the other hand, if the parish has a lousy choir which does not inspire anyone or add any beauty to the Divine Liturgy, and if the parish does not have a well attended and well organized Sunday School, and if the parish does not have a youth group, etc., it is the sacred duty of the parish council to discuss such matters with the priest and make sure that he is cognizant of the spiritual conditions of the parish. Therefore, we cannot separate between spiritual and financial matters in the life of the parish and we cannot have classes opposing each other. Thus, there is no room for 'them and us' for in Christ, we are all 'us.'"

## *Part #3 ... Introduction*

### **A Guidebook for Parish Councils in the Self-Ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

The goal of this guidebook will be to help Parish Councils better prepare themselves to understand and to follow the principles of Orthodox Christian parish governance. To what extent are parishes being governed by Orthodox Christian principles? The Orthodox faithful do not, by and large, live in the cloistered environment of a monastery. They do not teach at or attend seminaries. They do not work in diocesan or archdiocesan offices, nor do they serve full-time in charitable or missionary agencies. Given this reality, the parish is the key environment for most Orthodox Christians to learn about and to know the true mission and purpose of the Orthodox faith. Orthodox parish governance is the best vehicle through which to teach the beauty and the truth of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian within the realm of the secular world.

What is an Orthodox “parish?” How is “governing” the parish a part of, yet distinguishable from, the several other central and proper functions of the parish? How can parishes steer a straight course between, and thus avoid the shipwrecks caused by, the rocks of largely unchecked dictatorships on the one hand and the whirlpools of mob rule by majority vote on the other? How can we properly identify, develop, and honor the Holy Tradition and the Holy Canons of the Orthodox Faith needed to avoid both anarchy and also the trap of legalism? What is the proper relationship between Orthodox priests and parish councils? How can the council be compared and contrasted with other vital parish ministry teams? Given the fact of parish councils in North America, what is the council’s most central function? These are major issues. Our purpose here is to encourage more thought, study, and action on parish governance issues.

Parish governance for Orthodox life is not a “cook book” with step-by-step details on how to govern a parish. Parishes are similar to fingerprints and snowflakes in that each one is different. One size of parish governance does not fit all. Certainly, however, there are some key principles of Orthodox parish governance that are blessings for Orthodox life and universal for all parishes to follow. We ignore key principles of parish governance as being undeserving of our attention at the peril of genuine Orthodox life.

## **Part #4 ... The Parish Council Mind Set**

**Directions:** Give Part #4 of the Parish Council Guidebook to current or prospective Parish Council members and ask them to read it in advance of a council meeting called for the special purpose of discussing this material. Printing the material with an extra wide left margin encourages people to take margin notes as they read. These notes will then serve as discussion starters at the session scheduled to discuss these materials.

### **From the Book of James**

Parish Council members are required to attend council meetings and other official functions in the proper frame of mind. The first chapter of the Book of James helps guide us as to the proper approach to a Parish Council meeting or, for that matter anything we do in our life as Christians. Becoming aware of these words is a first step. Discussion and further study will help council members learn how to act and behave in a manner consistent with these words.

James 1:19-27

“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteous of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

### **From The Word Magazine**

In October, 2002, an article titled, “The Ministry of the Parish Council,” was printed in The Word, written by His Grace, Bishop Joseph. It is recommended that you read the entire article. What appear below are a few main points. They give some practical guidance when trying to find ways to incorporate St. James’ wisdom into Parish Council work. The entire article is reprinted as an appendix to this Parish Council Guidebook.

“A Parish Council member, through the acclamation of the community in which the Holy Spirit resides, has a charisma, a special gift and responsibility to represent and serve the community. This ministry comes forth from God, who is the center of all things. This is why Council meetings are held in the Church, begin and end with prayer, and always are conducted with the priest present. Like organs in a body, each Parish Council member has a special function. All of you have different talents and skills that you bring together to form a single Body. The Council meeting is not an arena in which we do battle with others. We do not seek to defeat our enemies and compete with others. Each vital organ of the

body works together for a common goal and so Parish Council members must support one another. The aim is to speak with one voice.”

“If you desire to serve God and your community, then leave your personal agenda on the sidewalk outside; don’t even bring it onto Church grounds. When you come to Church, your only agenda should be love. And anyone who says, “My way or the highway,” does not have love in his heart. Encourage one another, be patient with one another’s imperfections, humbly admit mistakes and try to keep things organized so everyone can participate. We don’t have time for contests of strength and influence. This is not an arena for old clan grudges or new attacks. It is a place where the vision of the community is woven into a tapestry through your various talents and abilities.”

“Before you think of finance and business matters, ask yourself, ‘Where are God and His Church in what we are doing?’ Once you answer this question, you will have peace in your decision-making. If you want God to bless this community, then do your best to avoid unnecessary conflict. Should you have a disagreement with someone, settle it outside the meeting and be reconciled. When you advertise your disagreements, you demoralize the entire community. The people who have entrusted this ministry to you ask themselves, ‘Is this what we want? More fighting and bickering?’ The Parish Council can’t do anything!’ This ministry is holy and an extension of the prayer and worship of the community.”

“The responsibility for the material maintenance of the parish falls squarely on the shoulders of the Parish Council. No one can individually handle such a responsibility, which is why you need to work together as a team, a family in harmony. There is a temptation to leave all the problems of the Church to the priest when we cannot reach a consensus on our own. This is wrong. If you leave the priest to stay up nights worrying about whether the bills are going to be paid or if the Council will ever reach a decision on this or that, then you have diverted him from his primary task of caring for the spiritual needs of the community. In the Liturgy, we sing the Cherubic Hymn about laying aside all earthly cares, and the priest is foremost in having to do this so that he may sanctify himself and others.”

“I have faith in Christ, and I believe He will lead you down the right path if you let Him. I also know that your families play an important part in the formula for success in the Parish Council. Your families bear your burdens in a special way, sacrificing their time with you so that you can serve the community. When you are troubled by what goes on in the Parish Council, your distress becomes theirs. So, they too have a special ministry in supporting you with their prayer, patience and perseverance.”

“...what I see as the recipe for success for a Parish Council. There are two ingredients to this recipe: keep it concise and speak with one voice. The first ingredient is the hardest for more experienced council members, especially when I tell them to keep the meeting brief. Don’t beat people up with endless discussions. Go home to your families while you are still able to communicate coherently and enjoy their company, rather than collapsing into bed exhausted and confused. Once in a while, gather as a

council but don't discuss business. Invite a speaker who can help you learn more about the Church or yourselves. Next, remember that the Parish Council is not a democratic body, but a symphonic orchestra. That means you gather to play a single piece of music, not have a group of individual instruments blaring out at once. Endless delays and discussions are futile; what is there to decide once you have heard the Gospel? If you forget God and His message the moment you think of money, you have a problem. Keep Christ in the forefront of your thoughts, and you will have harmony."

"The vision I am asking of you must be a long-term one. It must be something that will endure long into the future, far beyond ourselves. It must inspire those who come after us, lasting after the next election, the one after that, and into the future. It must be a legacy to our great-grandchildren, one that they will be proud of."

## Part #5 ...

### **‘Five Guidelines for Personal Conduct Before, During and After Every Council Meeting’**

**1. Confidentiality** – Feel free to be as candid as you would like during our sessions and our discussions, knowing that what we say and do here will be heard in the context of open and honest discussion by committed Orthodox Christians. We will willingly share everything that we learn here when we return home, but specific comments and specific questions raised during our sessions is what we are referring to when we ask you to honor the spirit of **confidentiality**.

**2. Beware of Gossip** – The Parish Council meeting must take place during the meeting and not in the parking lot before or after the meeting, and certainly not over the telephone following the meeting. Full and open discussion, free from worry about gossip about the exchange of ideas, will make for better meetings and wiser decisions.

**3. Everything is a gift from God** – The expression, “God, why did you do this to me?” will hopefully become, “God, why did you do this for me?” We can easily say that we believe that everything we have in life is a gift from God, but do our actions reflect a literal belief in this tenant of the Orthodox Christian faith?

**4. Listening is the Key** – The dilemmas and challenges our Parish Councils face can be more successfully handled if we learn and apply proven problem solving techniques. There are step-by-step methods that constitute a proven problem solving strategy. Many in the parish community learn these skills in our various career fields, so we must apply these in the setting of our parish life. First and foremost, problem solving begins with the need to define the situation before possible solutions are considered. This definition step involves **listening** carefully to all segments involved in the problem situation in order to accurately assess the various perspectives about the dilemma being faced by the parish. What we think is the cause of a problem might be different from someone else’s analysis. We will never know their perspective unless we consciously and deliberately **listen** with an open mind and a loving heart. Other steps in the problem solving process flow from an accurate and thorough definition of the problem.

**5. Everyone is trying their best** – View everyone here from this positive perspective. We are all working for the same goal, and that is to serve the Lord in the best way possible. Our life experiences often dictate the way we ask and answer questions. Before we judge the comments we hear from our fellow participants, remember that they are doing their best and remember that their comments are made from the perspective of their frame of reference ... their life experiences. At the same time, each of us should be open-minded enough to realize that we can always learn from each other. Most importantly, each of us must be humble enough to know that there is much we can learn about biblical and Orthodox Church teachings. Under the direction of our Parish Priest, we must always be willing to learn and to grow in the faith. Armed with new knowledge, our ideas and opinions will most certainly be different.



## **Part #6 ... Who Serves on the Parish**

**Introduction:** Recruiting parishioners to serve on the parish council can be a daunting task. This guidebook is based on the notion that the goal is not only to find people who are willing to serve, but to find people who are also willing to learn. The goal is to change some of the patterns of behavior of our parish councils, so members must be willing to learn and to grow in their understanding of the role and function of the parish council in an Orthodox Christian parish. Inspiration for this goal can be found in Titus 3: 3-7.

“For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

**Directions:** Read and discuss the information in this segment of the guidebook. Compare the points made to the pattern of recruitment used at your parish to encourage people to serve on the parish council. Without mentioning the names of individual parishioners, encourage participants in this discussion to make a list of ways parish council members at your church typically reflect the ideas described below and ways council members differ from the points made in this section.

### **Who Serves On The Parish Council?**

The Model Constitution for parishes in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America provides for a Parish Council that includes the pastor, some lay members who are elected by the parishioners, and some who are appointed by the parish priest. In addition, it is typical for the choir director, church school director, and auxiliary presidents to be full voting members of the council. Appointed committee chairpersons often sit on the council as non-voting participants. Normally, for the purposes of establishing a quorum at meetings, only the elected and appointed members are counted.

Beyond the basic make-up of the Parish Council, thought must be given to the characteristics of those selected to serve on the council. Remembering the sacred duties involved in this type of service, considering the following characteristics are an important part of the development of a productive and effective Parish Council.

- All those nominated to serve on the Parish Council must be approved by the Parish Priest in order for their name to be placed in nomination. This approval will assure all parishioners that the points and principles concerning Parish Council service outlined in this guidebook and in the Model Parish Constitution apply to each and every candidate.
- Knowledge and understanding of the theology and practices of the Orthodox Church, and the attitude that there is more to learn about the faith. The Parish Council is not the place to teach fundamental theology or to straighten out distorted ideas about the faith. While no one is all knowing, the church member without a good Orthodox Christian understanding will be a hindrance to the effective operation of the Parish Council.
- Good and regular attendance at church services and special programs of the parish and its organizations. The Parish Council is no place for those who have not already

established themselves as faithful members. Drafting someone onto the council who does not already demonstrate commitment through their actions will not likely lead to the development of those habits once they become a Parish Council member.

- Those who serve on the council should already be serving the parish in other capacities. Giving of one's own time and talents and resources must precede working on the council to organize the time and talent and resources offered by others in the parish. Can one who gives minimally participate in programs of encouraging true sacrificial and proportional giving (tithing) by others? Can one who gives little of their own time and talent be expected to inspire others to give more freely of their God given gifts?
- Look throughout your parish for the humble, the unselfish, the faithful in attendance, and those who lead and teach by example. Seek out those whose lives emulate Christ and the apostles, but who do not think of themselves as special or pure. Seek the givers of time and resources. Seek the listeners and the thoughtful persons who possess inner peace. Seek the speakers of a few words that seem to resonate in the ears and hearts of others. Seek the quiet non-complainers who would rather work than create controversy. Seek those who seek the joy of life in the church and who see the best in others.
- Discuss these characteristics and principles and view them as goals that should be set and worked towards over time.
- Collectively, the Parish Council should reflect the various segments of the parish population in terms of gender, age, and background, both culturally and professionally.
- Consider developing a document which can be given to prospective council members in advance of the Annual Parish Meeting where elections are held. Ask all those who agree to have their names placed in nomination sign the document indicating the awareness of and their willingness to follow basic member guidelines. This same document should be used by the pastor when considering those he plans to appoint to the Parish Council. Thanks to St. Mark Antiochian Orthodox Church of Irvine, California, for sharing the document, with some modifications, found on the next page which they use when recruiting parishioners to run for the council. It can serve as a sample which your parish could modify to reflect the traditions of your community.

**Part #6 (continued)**  
**Affirmation of Potential Candidate for Election to the  
Parish Council of**  
**(Enter Parish Name Here) Antiochian Orthodox Church\***

- I understand and affirm that I am willing to have my name placed in nomination for election to the (Parish Name) Parish Council for a regular term of three (3) years.
- I understand and agree that it is vital for Parish Council members to be active in the liturgical life of the Church, including attendance and participation in the Sunday Divine Liturgies, Saturday Vesper Services, Feast Day Services, and other services, including the Sacrament of Holy Confession, and affirm that I will participate in these services frequently and regularly.
- I understand that the Parish Council operates according to the theology and practices of the Holy Orthodox Church.
- I also understand that Council members must set good examples of Orthodox Christian Stewardship, including the offering of time and talents to the church, as well as sacrificial monetary support.
- I understand that the Parish Council holds regular meetings once a month and special meetings as needed, and I affirm that if nominated and elected, or appointed, I will do my utmost to attend every meeting.
- Furthermore, if nominated and elected, or appointed, I am willing to assume responsibility of chairing a standing or special committee, and/or making myself available to be elected an officer of the council.
- I understand that the typical time commitment of a Council member is approximately ten (10) hours every month.
- I understand that my agreement to fulfill the above requirements is a prerequisite for nomination.
- In signing this affirmation, I pledge to fulfill the above requirements to the best of my ability, with God's help.

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Signature of Potential Council Candidate

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Date

\*(This document was developed by St. Mark Antiochian Orthodox Church, Irvine, California)

## **Part #7 ... Roles for Clergy and Laity**

**Introduction:** This segment of the Parish Council Guidebook provides information about the relationship between clergy and laity on the Parish Council. A healthy, loving, and open relationship within the context of an Orthodox Christian parish between the priest and the laity is vital to the establishment and maintenance of a strong church community. The manner in which the priest and the parish council interact sets the tone for the rest of the parish. There is much to learn from Biblical study and from church history about the role of the clergy and laity in the Orthodox tradition. Parish council members need to be open minded when learning about the clergy/laity relationship. Existing practices within any given parish might have developed in ways which are not consistent with Orthodox Christian traditions and teachings. The list of components in this section is in no particular order and is probably not an exhaustive list. Each item should be viewed separately and on its own terms and not necessarily compared to the others.

**Directions:** At a parish council meeting called for the special purpose of discussing this topic, discuss each item listed below. The discussion should be led by the priest, with assistance from the parish council chairperson. Discussing these items should be seen as a first step in an ongoing educational process. When discussing each item, it is crucial to think of real-life examples from your parish's experiences to use as illustrations of each item. Referring to other segments in this Parish Council Guidebook and other available resources will be needed as the parish council further examines this important topic.

**No one is to be excluded from any phase or aspect of parish life.** While the parish priest has a number of important and unique responsibilities that can only be supported in a peripheral manner by the laity, there is virtually nothing in parish life that does not benefit from the mutual cooperation and support of the clergy and the laity.

**The priest is the spiritual leader of the community, and the bishop's representative as the father of the congregation. Therefore he must be involved in all aspects of parish life.** For practical reasons, the priest might be absent from some church functions and activities, but this can never be due to parishioners or the priest feeling that he does not have a role to play in any particular activity, meeting, or program.

**All church practices, programs, and activities must be consistent with the beliefs and teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church.** It is hoped that this statement seems patently obvious to the reader. All can recall hearing, at some time or another, the phrase, "We should run the church like a business." While there is a place for sound business practices within certain aspects of parish life, there is a danger in expressing this viewpoint that in some aspects of parish life, church teachings need not be considered. This is never true. Asking the question, "What would the Lord do in this situation?" is always a relevant question for parish council members to ask when contemplating a decision about any subject.

**The priest provides leadership in teaching the faithful about the beliefs and traditions of the Orthodox Church.** And there are opportunities for these teachings to help us properly and successfully navigate our way through all aspects of parish life, so the role the priest plays as a teacher is always needed. The priest can and should work with and train members of the laity to assist in this task. Respecting and seeing the importance of this role is crucial in the establishment of a healthy clergy/laity relationship.

**The priest is free to speak about all subjects, including money, from the pulpit.** Reinforcing the point that all aspects of parish life must be carried out in a manner consistent with church and Biblical teachings, the validity of this point is clear and obvious. The reason it is included here is because the idea is often expressed that, “the priest should not talk about money from the pulpit.” The manner in which we teach about stewardship in our Archdiocese and simply reading the Bible reveals that how the church uses money and how the laity contributes money is an issue very much a part of the spiritual health of a parish community.

**A parish stewardship or member-giving program should be initiated and maintained through the joint efforts of the priest and the parish council.** This point simply follows from earlier items which state that all aspects of parish life must be consistent with scriptural teachings and church traditions and practices. Stewardship is neither the sole responsibility of the priest or the laity. It must clearly be a team effort.

**Abdication of a role in stewardship by the clergy or by any of the lay leaders diminishes the potential success of a parish stewardship program.** There is simply no choice in this matter. A parish stewardship program must be designed, implemented, and perpetuated by the joint efforts of the clergy and the laity. A reason for making this statement here because there have been times when a priest or the laity have expressed the notion that the stewardship program is the sole responsibility of one or the other. It is clearly the responsibility of both.

**The key to establishing and maintaining a positive relationship among the clergy and the laity is to foster the belief that everyone is trying their best and working toward the same goal.** Certainly there are times when we do not see eye-to-eye with our fellow parishioners or with our priest, but we must remember that everyone is motivated by the same goal to do God’s work and to see God’s church flourish. Taking the time to listen and making the effort to be properly educated about true Orthodox Christian parish practices is the best way to minimize, to heal, and to overcome strife within the parish family. It is all about prayer and about education, and our parish priest is the leader who must help us progress in these two aspects of our lives as Orthodox Christians.

**Since everything done by the parish must be founded in spirituality, and since the priest is the spiritual leader of the parish, meetings of the parish council must always include the priest and the council members.** On page 15 of the Clergy Guide, Third Edition 2011, we read, “The pastor is the presiding officer of every organization in his parish. He should direct efforts to increase parochial income in every good way. He should be an active leader of his Parish Council. The Parish Council chairperson serves on behalf of, and with the blessing of, the pastor.” The practice in most of the parishes in the Antiochian Archdiocese is to not literally follow this guideline, but if our parish truly understands the teachings and traditions of the Orthodox Church, we know that this statement is true. In terms of the parish council, the priest, in the truest sense of church organization, is the chairperson of the parish council. In his role as father, his wisdom, guidance, and training puts him in the position of making sure that all aspects of parish life are properly conducted. While many parishes may not be ready to adopt the literal notion that the priest should be the chairperson of the parish council, our study of the proper role and function of the parish council will certainly lead us to the point where we understand that this concept and practice is truly consistent with church teachings. This is an area where there needs to be much discussion, reading, prayer, and dialogue.

**The keys to building a strong and productive working relationship between the priest and the parish council, and, for that matter, among the parish council members themselves, can be found in the analysis and implementation of these four words: Confidentiality ... Communication ... Consensus ... Education.**

**Confidentiality** – Hold the parish council meeting in the meeting room and not in the parking lot following adjournment. Talk openly with parishioners about the decisions the council makes, but do not feel the need to “gossip” about every comment every member made during the course of a particular discussion leading up to a council decision.

**Communication** – Be aware of the need to practice good two-way communication skills. Be open, honest, and loving in the comments you make to others and be equally open, honest, and loving as you listen to their views. It is so much harder, yet so much more important; to be a good listener than it is to be a good talker.

**Consensus** – Study about the virtues of consensus building. Making decisions by reaching consensus is so much more productive than voting when it comes time to decide both routine and weighty matters which come before the council. It takes time, study, and practice to use this method of decision making effectively, but the results are worth the effort. In the appendix of this guidebook, you will find a brief description of the word consensus. A parish member familiar with the use of this process can be helpful in teaching the Parish Council how to incorporate the use of consensus as a main decision making strategy.

**Education** – Whether you are a novice parish council member or a seasoned veteran, there is so much to learn about what it means to be an effective parish council member in the context of the Holy Orthodox Church. Accepting this fact and working with your priest to design a parish council education program is vital to the success of any parish. The goal of this Parish Council Guidebook is to help foster this ongoing educational process.

## **Part #8 ... Comparison Exercise**

**Introduction:** It is crucial that current and future members of the Parish Council be willing to learn about the teachings and practices of the Holy Orthodox Church when it comes to the proper role and function of this body. Some parishioners, especially those who have previously served on the Parish Council or those who have served for many years on the Parish Council, might be of the mind set that they know, through their years of experience, all there is to know about being a Parish Council member. A climate must be developed that there is much to learn about serving on the Parish Council and the Parish Priest and/or other theologically educated individuals are the best people to lead this educational process. Parish Council members must be open minded to the idea that there may be past practices or behaviors which do not coincide with existing, though long ignored, church teachings and practices.

### **Directions:**

Option 1 ... Ask council members or participants in a parish workshop event, to complete the two sets of questions. The purpose is to suggest to everyone, from the most experienced to the novice council members, or prospective members to think of council work as a ministry that requires study and education, in addition to personal experience and “on-the-job” training. The priest is a good person to lead this Comparison Exercise. He should be ready with a few examples of church teachings about how a parish council should operate to give participants an idea of information they might not be aware of. The purpose of this exercise is not to suggest that only certain people can serve on the parish council, but to show that anyone who serves on the parish council must be open to the idea of training and education into what the Orthodox Church teaches about this ministry.

Option 2 ... If your council would not respond well to using the two survey forms as discussion starters, then the parish priest or the parish council chairperson could use the two surveys as the basis for questions to ask council members about what they think it means to be a council member. The whole idea is to get a conversation going about the need to educate people about the role and purpose of a parish council in the Orthodox Church.

## Comparison Exercise

**Directions:** Answer each question below with information based upon your knowledge of yourself and on your frame of reference. The questions in **Set A** refer to your career, your profession, or your current job. The questions in **Set B** refer to your past, current, or potential future service on the Parish Council.

### **Set A**

1. What is your current job or profession? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How long have you had your current job or practiced your current profession? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Did your current job or profession require any special training or education? \_\_\_\_\_
4. If so, name the college or training program that prepared you for your job or profession?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. If not, how did you learn the skills needed for your current job or profession?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Is there a book or set of printed instructions you read for your job/profession? \_\_\_\_\_
7. If yes, what is the title or how would you describe these printed materials? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Do you attend classes or continuing education training for your job/profession? \_\_\_\_\_
9. If yes, how often and what would you say is the purpose of these programs? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Has a mentor or role model ever helped you in your profession or your job? \_\_\_\_\_
11. If yes, who is this person or who are these people? \_\_\_\_\_
12. If yes, describe the role this person(s) played in your work life? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Set B**

1. Have you, do you, or might you ever serve on the Parish Council? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What office or special assignment have you had, do you have, or might you have on the council?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Did you receive any training or instruction prior to serving on the Parish Council? \_\_\_\_
4. If yes, describe the time, place, and content of this training or instruction? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. If no, how did you learn about what was involved in serving on the Parish Council? \_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Are there books or print materials you read dealing with your work on the council? \_\_\_\_
7. If yes, what are the titles or how would you describe these print materials? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Other than monthly council meetings, do you ever attend classes or training sessions that deal with your work on the Parish Council?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. If yes, how often and what would you say is the purpose of these programs? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Has a mentor or role model ever helped you in your work with the council? \_\_\_\_\_
11. If yes, who is this person or who are these people? \_\_\_\_\_
12. If yes, describe the role this person(s) played in your church life? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Part #9 ... Budgeting Procedures and Practices**

Consideration is being given to include in the Parish Council Guidebook a number of sections dealing with practical aspects of council work. This part looks at the practice of developing an annual budget to monitor parish receipts and expenditures. As with all other aspects of parish life, developing and utilizing a budget should be done with scriptural as well as fiscal guidelines in mind.

As council members review the points made in this section, notice should be taken to compare places where there are similarities and differences with practices in your particular parish. Again, full discussion under the leadership of the parish priest, as well as the Parish Council Treasurer, should be undertaken to consider ways the budgeting process in your parish can be modified to further the goal of placing all parish work in line with the teachings and traditions of the Orthodox Church.

Amazingly, while Parish Council time is largely absorbed by monthly meetings dealing with financial considerations, very little time is spent in budget development, analysis, and evaluation. In many parishes, development of an annual budget is either not done at all or done in a rather mechanical and passive manner. Budget development should be a very dynamic process approached as a blueprint for gathering and utilizing the material blessings that the parish enjoys. Parishioners can often be heard saying that money is too often spoken about in parish newsletters and bulletins, in sermons, and in letters generated by the church office. From the perspective of these parishioners, the church is always seeking money and seldom seeking the miracles and non-material joys that parishioners hunger for. In a certain sense, these individuals have a point. The church does frequently solicit donations for various worthwhile purposes, but this is only because many of the faithful do not give according to the scriptural guidelines of sacrificial giving or tithing. If these practices of giving were the norm in our parishes, there would be dollars for everything the church would want to do to fulfill its mission in the community.

This point reminds us that a primary goal of the Parish Council is to work toward a continuously increasing number of members who willingly and joyfully give sacrificially of their talents and their gifts. These gifts, after all, are a manifestation of God's love for us and for our families. With this in mind, the budget process in a parish can benefit from considering utilization of these guidelines.

1. Building a parish budget is a good place to see where spiritual and secular practices combine to produce a productive outcome. Examination of a parish budget should reveal a definite agenda that includes priorities reflecting scriptural teachings. Support of charities, support of outreach to the community, and aggressive Christian Education initiatives are only a few examples of what should be part of a parish budget. At the same time, members of the parish or the Parish Council who have business or professional experience building and monitoring budgets can offer their talents when it is time to renew or establish good budgeting practices.
2. A budget should be ambitious rather than minimal. It should be built in a manner which reflects new priorities each year. Finding the resources to accomplish these priorities promotes the ambition needed to make the budget building process vibrant and it reinforces the ideas about how parishioners should approach decisions about their levels of giving.
3. The budget process should be continuous. Parishioner input should be solicited throughout the year in order to have the budget built to reflect a wide range of ideas. Regular budget updates should be distributed to all parishioners throughout the year. Open communication is one of the best ways to develop parishioner awareness and support of parish needs.

4. A review of the budget should take place at least on a quarterly basis. Adjustments can be made to help insure that year-end goals will be met.
5. Contributions from parishioners should constitute the major portion of the budget receipts. Over a period of years, receipts generated from fund raising and other such sources should be a decreasing percentage of the overall receipts.
6. Revenue generated from fund raising should be earmarked for special purposes and not for parish operations. This may be a goal that needs to be accomplished steadily over a period of years. If it cannot be accomplished in the short term, it must be seen as a desired goal which demands steady progress on an annual basis.
7. The whole spectrum of traditional parish fund raising events and activities needs to be reviewed. First, the ultimate goal should be to not rely on any of these funds to pay for parish operations. This is like asking your neighbor to pay your monthly electric bill. These expenses are our responsibility. Second, the revenue generated from fund raising activities and events should be earmarked for special projects, like an Archdiocese sponsored response to a natural disaster, a community charity program, or, under the right circumstances, a parish building program. Third, when parishioners come together for an event or an activity, the goal and the focus should be fellowship, not fund raising. When fund raising is the main purpose, tensions and pressures accompany the event that detracts from the fellowship focus. Our church life should not mirror our work life in terms of the need to make a living for our families. This topic of the proper purpose of parish fund raising activities requires much discussion and prayer within the parish community. Years of tradition have resulted in practices becoming so entrenched that they seem like features of parish life that could never, or should never, be changed.
8. The parish education program about stewardship, sacrificial giving, and tithing should be seen as part of the overall budget process. Progress in this area is vital to the development of healthy budget practices. Contact the Archdiocese Department of Stewardship for any help the parish might need to foster movement toward this type of giving within the parish community.
9. Beware of the notion of parish angels. Who are parish angels? These are individual parishioners whose ability to give large contributions to the parish breeds the notion that others can back off in their giving. All parishioners should base their level of giving on their love of God and their appreciation for the gifts He has given them, and not on what others give or on the needs reflected in the parish budget. Similarly, if a particular parish fund raiser is highly successful, parishioners may react by thinking they do not need to give in support of parish programs. Dispelling this notion is part of the scriptural teaching that giving is based on our faith and not on how much money the church has or how much it needs to operate.
10. Open communication between the parish council and the parishioners is a real asset in the budget building process. Not only will the council be aware of parishioner's thoughts and ideas, but parishioners will be knowledgeable of the realities of the parish's financial condition.
11. If member contributions are an annually increasing percentage of parish receipts and if receipts from fund raisers are an annually decreasing percentage of revenue needed for parish operations, this will help foster not only a healthy parish budget, but also a healthy parish.
12. The amounts of member contributions to the parish must always be confidential and anonymous. This is especially true for the annual donation or tithe of each parishioner or each family.

## Part #10 ... Short and Long Range Planning

**Introduction:** Conducting a parish needs assessment is a practice parish councils might consider useful as they try to incorporate practices discussed in this guidebook. This reading provides some step-by-step methods for conducting this type of activity.

**Directions:** Give this article to a Parish Council member who might be skilled at leading a needs assessment. Have them review this material and then make a proposal to the council about how this activity might be conducted in your particular community.

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The daily/monthly operation of a parish is a challenging, difficult, and time consuming task. Typically, parish councils meet each month to review the church's operation and monitor the financial condition of the parish. The priest works with the council at these monthly meetings and then is there on a daily basis to provide leadership and to see that council decisions are faithfully administered between meetings. A community which has been in operation for some time usually has a calendar of events and programs which repeat year after year. This routine, the monthly operations and the annual events, tend to consume all of the time a council has at its monthly meetings. After all, council members are individuals with busy family and career lives. This circumstance often eliminates time for councils to look at what is often called, "the big picture." An inability to assess parish needs from this perspective can eventually produce problems which find their way onto the council's monthly agenda. The practice of regular, deliberate short and long range planning can be part of the solution to this problem.

Deliberate planning of this type is often referred to as a needs assessment process. Some needs identified through this process of open communication are tasks which can be taken care of quickly or which must be taken care of first, before other tasks can be undertaken. These kinds of issues require short term planning to accomplish. Other needs which are more complex in nature require long range planning. Whether short term or long term needs, if they are arrived at through a process of open communication, chances are they reflect true and accurate feelings of the parish. In addition to using a process which utilizes principles of open communication, the other crucial element required to achieve success are trust and follow through. Parishioners, when asked to express their feelings about the parish, need to feel confident that their responses will be considered in an atmosphere of Christian love and trust. They also need to feel that a follow through mechanism is in place so that all the input from parishioners will be analyzed and will lead to appropriate action.

A parish council's decision to conduct a needs assessment must begin with the council's acknowledgement that they, as a group, may be unaware of some parish needs or may be unaware of how parishioners feel about certain situations within the community. This realization is crucial if the council is to approach the needs assessment with the open mindedness and trust required for a successful effort. This discussion will help insure that principles of good listening are used when conducting the assessment. Good listening involves making an initial observation, recognizing feelings, and using the information gathered. These principles do not include responding to the ideas and views shared during the initial stages of the process. It is important that parishioners feel they are being heard by the council when they are being asked to express their feelings. This notion of being heard will be enhanced if council members refrain from responding to every suggestion and comment. There will be time during the latter stages of the process for response and discussion.

Once the decision is made to conduct an accurate needs assessment, the process can take many forms. Written surveys, general parish meetings, discussions at parish auxiliary meetings, or area/neighborhood meetings are some of the formats which can be utilized. The format used should be selected based on the particular characteristics of each parish. Any process, however, should be set up around these four crucial questions.

What are we (the parish) doing now that we should continue doing?

What are we doing now that we should stop doing?

What are we doing now that we should change?

What should we start doing?

Parishioner responses to these four questions will provide the body of data from which the short term and long term goals or needs will flow. If the principles of trust and good listening have been successfully incorporated into the process, these four questions will no doubt produce a large number of responses.

Now that this data has been gathered, it is time for the council to implement the follow through process so crucial to the program's success. Parishioners need to feel that there is a "pay off" for the effort they made to contribute their ideas. Initially, all of the data gathered from parishioners should be published. Each person needs to see that their ideas are among those being considered. Next, meetings should be held to discuss this data. Again, these could be general parish meetings, parish auxiliary meetings, area or neighborhood meetings, or a written response form containing all of the data collected. This part of the process will probably develop into a series of meetings or steps during which all of the data will be discussed. Eventually, certain ideas will come to the forefront as true and accurate reflections of short and long term parish needs.

Consideration of a needs assessment program quickly reveals that a process of this type can be quite time consuming. Is it worth the effort? If ideas stated in the opening paragraph of this piece are valid, the answer is clearly yes. If the choice is between taking the time to systematically and deliberately assess parish needs or simply going through the monthly routine of conducting parish business without specific regard for short term/long term needs, then the choice is obvious. Since a process of this type is a planned activity, it follows that a degree of training is required to enhance the chances of success. A parish council would be wise to find a member of the parish who has knowledge and experience in the development and implementation of needs assessment process. Very often people in their business or professional lives utilize these particular skills. Finding a parishioner with this skill to lead this process would be a valuable procedural step. This person would then work closely with the Parish Priest and the Parish Council Chairperson to organize and implement the needs assessment process. As always, the involvement of the Parish Priest is vital in this kind of a project. An option would also be to find a qualified member of a neighboring Orthodox or non-Orthodox parish to help with this process. In addition, this would be an excellent method of demonstrating practices of good stewardship. The giving of our time, our talents, and our resources comprise the actions upon which we demonstrate our commitment to our faith in God and in the Orthodox Church.

## **Part #11**

### **Voting at Parish Council and Annual Parish Meetings**

Much of the information in this Parish Council Guidebook can be divided into two categories.

First, scriptural teachings pertaining to Parish Councils in Orthodox Christian Parishes

Second, secular practices and procedures commonly used in Orthodox Christian Parishes

One of the fundamental points this guidebook attempts to establish is that none of the secular practices and procedures routinely employed in parishes should ever compromise scriptural teachings pertaining to parish governance. Experience has shown that parishes suffer from two lapses in terms of how its parish council operates.

First, there is often a lack of awareness within the parish that there even exist scriptural teachings pertaining to the establishment and operation of the Parish Council.

Second, even when information about this realm of parish life is taught by the Parish Priest or by lay leaders, there is a tendency among some within the laity to dismiss this as “non-Orthodox” and to fall back on the often repeated myth which says, “the Parish Council should run the parish like a business; the priest should take care of what goes on inside the church building and the Parish Council will handle everything else.” To be sure, there are sound business practices that should be incorporated into parish practices as long as they are not applied in a manner which contradicts scriptural teachings. Here again, the Parish Priest and informed lay leaders, are the best people to consult when studying any suspected conflicts between scriptural teachings and secular practices.

The topic of this section of the Parish Council Guidebook is designed to again address the dilemma of the “upstairs/downstairs theology.” Remembering Metropolitan Philip’s guidance referenced in the Preface to this document, “For many years, we have been administering our local parishes under a false dichotomy; indeed under a dangerous and unorthodox dualism. We have been preaching two kinds of theology: One for the church upstairs and one for the hall downstairs. We do not believe in this ‘upstairs downstairs’ theology. Nor do we believe in the existence of two classes in the parish, opposing each other, ‘them and us,’ clergy versus laity.” The goal in this section of the Parish Council Guidebook is to open a dialogue between Parish Priests and their Parish Councils about the vital and inescapable connection between scriptural teachings and practical operations when it comes to recruiting Parish Council Members, voting at Parish Council Meetings and at Annual Parish Meetings, and the procedures to follow when organizing and conducting the Annual Parish Meeting.

### **Voting in Orthodox Christian Parishes**

The practice of voting in Orthodox Christian Parishes typically takes place during monthly Parish Council meetings and yearly at the Annual Parish Meeting.

**Parish Council Meetings** - Typically, the voting members of the Parish Council include the elected and appointed members of the Parish Council. There are parishes who consider the various organizational leaders within the Parish to be voting members of the Parish Council. These include the organizations for men, women, young people, and teens. In addition, the choir and church school directors are often considered members of the Parish Council in some communities. In addition, there are the various committee chairpersons who are expected to attend Parish Council meetings, but who, typically, are not considered voting members of the Council. Other than the elected and appointed members of the Council, local parish tradition will dictate whether or not there are any other voting members of the Parish Council. It is also customary in Orthodox Parishes that the elected and appointed members of the Council are the only Council members counted to determine if a quorum exists at each meeting. As noted in the section of this part of the Parish Council Guidebook titled, “**What about the role of the Parish Priest in Parish Council and Annual Parish Meetings?**,” the Parish Priest serves as the direct representative of the Bishop, and as such is the head of all parish organizations. For practical and procedural reasons, the Priest typically does not “chair” monthly Parish Council meeting or the regular meetings of parish organizations. In addition, the Parish Priest does not vote at these meeting. However, in cases where actions conflict with scriptural teachings, the Parish Priest must act to nullify the actions of a Parish Council or parish organization which seeks to contradict scriptural teachings through an action or decision.

**The Parish Annual Meeting** – The Model Parish Constitution requires parishes to conduct a parish-wide meeting at least once each year. In addition, the Constitution stipulates other circumstances, such as when a parish is considering using parish funds to purchase property, when parish meetings are required. There is a requirement that these meetings be preceded by the timely mailing of written notice to all parishioners announcing the date, place, and agenda of the meeting. It is also standard practice that all parish-wide meetings be presided over by the Parish Priest, or by someone he designates to handle this duty.

At the Annual Parish Meeting, a review of the parish’s past year is presented. Financial and organizational reports are prepared and distributed in advance of the meeting, along with the parish budget for the coming year and information about the slate of candidates for election to the Parish Council. It is considered good practice to send these reports and materials to all parish members prior to the Annual Meetings in order to make discussions during the meeting more informed and transparent.

Voting at the Annual Parish Meeting is reserved for parishioners who participate regularly in the sacramental and temporal life of the parish and who are eighteen years of age and older. For practical and scriptural considerations, it is the Parish Priest who determines the list of, “members-in-good-standing,” and these individuals are allowed to vote on matters such as approving the reports presented at the Annual Parish Meeting and electing the new members of the Parish Council.

Within these required practices, there is a good deal of latitude that individual parishes can follow in setting up and conducting their Annual Parish Meetings.

- The date of the meeting varies due to the fiscal year calendar the parish establishes in its constitution.
- Some parishes are in the habit of holding the meeting on a weekday evening and others schedule the meeting following Divine Liturgy.
- Some conduct the meeting in the church and others in the hall.
- Some plan the meeting around a meal.

**What about the role of the Parish Priest in Parish Council and Annual Parish Meetings?** – Our Parish Priest plays many roles in our local communities. Among his list of important and sacred responsibilities is his role as teacher and father. His commitment to the faith, his ordination, his theological training at seminary, and the accumulated wisdom that

comes with years of experience all combine to prepare him for the calling God has chosen for him to follow.

In the Orthodox Church, the study of scripture and the teachings of the Church Fathers tell us that the Priest is the spiritual father of the community and the on-site representative of the bishop. In this role, the Priest is the head of all parish organizations, including the Parish Council, and the Priest never votes at Parish Council Meetings or at Annual Parish Meetings. Everything about the life of the church and the work of the church is prescribed in scriptural teachings and in the study of church history. With the guidance of our bishops and our parish priests, all typical situations in which voting is used to make decisions can be more properly handled with study, prayer, and by opening minds and hearts to the teachings found in scripture. Following this tradition, voting would never be needed within the context of Parish Council Meetings or Annual Parish Meetings.

Yet, our church exists in North America and North American secular traditions are steeped in the value and usefulness of voting. The church does not ignore this reality and embraced it long before the nations of North American were founded.

Conciliar and Hierarchy are two words which live and work together, side-by-side, in the Orthodox Church. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his book, Church, World, Mission, "The Church is conciliar and the Church is hierarchial. There exists today a tendency to oppose these two qualifications of the Church, or at least to emphasize one over the other ... The Trinity is the perfect council because the Trinity is the perfect hierarchy." Conciliar refers to a council of equals who work collaboratively and cooperatively to make decisions and to establish direction. Hierarchy is that beautiful component of Orthodoxy which teaches us about the oneness which exists between clergy and laity, between God and His creations.

In 1 Corinthians 12:20-26, we read:

"But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."

Understanding the Orthodox meaning of conciliar and hierarchy is a perfect example of one of the roles our Parish Priest plays in the life of our local church. It takes time, study, prayer, and faith to appreciate how the Parish Council and the Parish Priest work together in harmony. They both represent vital components in the life of the Orthodox Church and they both are intended to work together in synchronized harmony, living life according to God's will. Hierarchy does not mean the priests and the bishops dictating to the laity and conciliar does not mean the laity taking a vote and telling the priest "we have voted to overrule you in this matter."

Again, Fr. Schmemmann writes, "The Trinity is the perfect council because the Trinity is the perfect hierarchy ... The principle of hierarchy implies the idea of obedience but not that of subordination, for obedience is based on a personal relationship whereas subordination is, in its very essence, an impersonal one. The Son is fully obedient to the Father, but is not subordinate to Him. He is perfectly obedient because He perfectly and fully knows the Father as Father. But He is not subordinated to Him because subordination implies imperfect knowledge and relationship and, therefore, the necessity of 'enforcement' ... Hierarchy, thus is not a relationship of 'power' and 'submission' but of perfect obedience of all to all in Christ ... For this reason, all contemporary attempts to limit the 'power' of the clergy or to give the laity a share in this power are based on an indescribable confusion."

Michael T. McKibben's 1990 book, Orthodox Christian Meetings, was consulted in the preparation of this section of the Parish Council Guidebook. Reading books such as this,



studying the Bible, and dialoguing with your Parish Priest are steps Parish Council members must take on a regular basis to heighten their awareness of the scriptural foundations for understanding the role of the Parish Council in the Orthodox Church. Education is an ongoing process, just as this Guidebook has been prepared with the expectation and the hope that it will inspire more and deeper study, prayer, and dialogue.

## **Recruiting Parishioners to Serve on the Parish Council**

Part #6 of this Parish Council Guidebook is titled, “Who Serves on the Parish Council.” A variety of characteristics are listed here which qualify a person to serve on the Parish Council. Providing this kind of information is helpful, but where do we find individuals like this in our local communities? Furthermore, are these kinds of people willing to serve on the Parish Council? And then there is the reality of existing parish practices and traditions which create a culture that drives the process of selecting Parish Council members.

How does your parish go about finding people to serve on the Parish Council? There are probably as many answers to this question as there are parishes in the Antiochian Archdiocese.

- Establishing a nominating committee and asking them to contact, interview, and recruit candidates is another, and probably very popular, option.
- Putting out a call to the entire parish and asking parishioners to call the Church Office to suggest people they would like to see serve on the council is another approach to use to recruit candidates.
- The priest and other church leaders identifying parishioners with talents which are well suited to service on the Parish Council and talking to them about this ministry years before they are asked to consider serving on the council.
- Following an unwritten rule which says the Council members should represent certain constituencies within the parish is another traditional practice observed in parishes throughout the Archdiocese.
- Putting the names of all parishioners eligible to serve on the Parish Council into a “hat” and drawing out a name for each open seat is one way to select new Council members.

Options such as these, and perhaps others, are all part of the fabric of our Archdiocese. This topic, however, is no different than any of the others addressed in this Parish Council Guidebook. The answer to the question, “How to recruit parishioners to serve on the Parish Council?” is part of the overall message which says the answer can be found in scripture. It is no mystery that parishes which operate smoothly, parishes where the people are spiritually nourished, and parishes where the norm is open, friendly, and Christ-centered interaction are parishes where likely there are no problems when it comes to finding people to serve on the Parish Council. Going back to Part 6, reading the characteristics mentioned, and discussing whether or not your parish is cultivating an atmosphere where these descriptors flourish is an important step to take if finding council candidates is an annual challenge. If fellow parishioners in your community are reluctant to serve, there must be a reason. People lead busy lives everywhere, yet we know that we make time for those things which matter most in our lives. Nothing should matter more than our faith and the welfare of our church. If our parish is operating well, it follows that parishioners will want to devote time and effort to continuing this progressive environment.

## Part #12

### Peacemaking and Reconciliation within the Parish

This section of the Parish Council Guidebook originally appeared as an article in **The Word, June 2011, “An Archdiocesan Ministry in Peacemaking and Reconciliation,”** by Anthony S. Bashir & Rev. Fr. John Mefrige

**Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)**

Pastors, parishioners and parish councils often find themselves in conflict with each other; conflicts that arise from misunderstandings, differences in interests and values, competition for position and power, and sinful actions. St. James teaches that conflict and quarrels are caused by the preeminence of our desires and passions. When left unfilled these demands and passions lead us to resent and accuse one another, conflict arises and the result is enmity and our separation from Christ (James 4:1-10; Sande, 2004).

The inordinate attachment to our differences and demands often lead us into conflict with one another. These differences and desires for control are self-centered and divisive seeking only their own satisfaction, often at any cost. And when satisfaction is not achieved, disappointments arise leading us to make more unreasonable demands of others, to judge others for not fulfilling our desires or doing what we think is right. We act in divisive ways, and finally punish or retaliate toward others through our actions, e.g., accusations, arguments, gossip, hatred (Mefrige, 2010; Sande, 2004). Conflict has a painful effect on each and every one of us, wounding and tearing at the fabric of oneness in Christ Jesus.

When conflict is present in a parish and is not addressed in a skillful and spiritual manner, the conflict becomes erosive and has grave consequences for both pastors and parishioners alike. Great harm can come from prolonged and contentious conflict. However, conflict offers us an important opportunity to serve other people as stewards, to grow through these practices toward a union with Christ (theosis) (cf Rom. 8:28-29; 1Cor. 10:31-11:1; James 1:2-4) and to give glory to God (Sande, 2004).

In the resolution of conflict, we trust in God’s compassion and mercy and take responsibility for the role we have in the conflict, allowing ourselves to be restored, and genuinely seek peace and reconciliation, forgiving each other as Christ has forgiven us (Matt. 18:15-20; Eph. 4:1-3; Phil. 2:1-5). We consider the words of the Prophet Isaiah when he says, “O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us (Isa 26:12).

God loved us so much that we were reconciled with him through Christ Jesus and redeemed from our estrangement (John 3:16-21). St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans (Romans 5:11) states “we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” Consequently, there is an urgent need for peacemaking efforts and reconciliation within our everyday lives and within the life of the Church.

In fact, peacemaking and reconciliation are essential ministries of the Church. A ministry of peacemaking and reconciliation and its practices are committed to building up the body of Christ and His Church (Matt. 18:15-20). The mission of this peacemaking ministry focuses primarily on teaching practices that bring about the resolution of conflict through reconciliation. This resolution of conflict allows forward movement through forgiveness (Col. 3: 13-17) resulting in communion where there once was conflict and enmity.

In June, 2010, His Eminence, Metropolitan PHILIP, approved the creation of a ministry for peacemaking and reconciliation within the Department of Lay Ministry of the Archdiocese. Since then, several of us (Fr. John Mefrige, Dr. John Dalack, Fr. Timothy Ferguson and Anthony Bashir) have sought professional training in peacemaking and reconciliation within spiritual communities. Our approach is grounded in the teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church and incorporates scriptural and patristic teachings. With the approval of His Eminence, we have begun to work with a few parishes focused on their desire to once again be reconciled one to the other and let their “light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

This ministry is an initiative in support our Hierarchy, our clergy and our churches. The goal is to implement a healthy and spiritually process that focuses on conflict resolution and therefore on reconciliation. At this time, the Department is preparing to offer professionally trained crisis intervention teams to assist local parishes embroiled in destructive conflict. It is our belief that the Orthodox Christian mediator is an unbiased person who serves many functions that include convener, facilitator of communication and understanding, trust builder, model, generator of alternatives, reality tester, and witness.

When our department is invited to a parish and given permission to intervene by the Metropolitan, we will follow a specific process that includes an assessment of the current conflict and determination of readiness for intervention. Our mediation efforts follow a specific process: ground rules are established, opening statements are made, stories are heard, problems identified and clarified, solutions explored, and agreements made (Peacemakers Ministries, 2009). Consequently, conflict coaching and conflict mediation have distinct phases that incorporate the Scriptures as well as the Church Fathers in an open, fair, and honest dialogue leading to reconciliation and forgiveness.

We ask your full support of this greatly needed ministry. Sande (2004) admonishes us to “Ask God to give you a longing to see a culture of peace in your church that reflects the love and power of His Son. If He gives you that longing, hard work awaits you, but great blessing also in store, for Jesus’ promise in Matthew 5 is absolutely dependable: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God (p. 297).”

As this ministry grows, we will want to recruit and train qualified individuals within each of the Diocese so as to build a team of well-prepared Orthodox Christian mediators who will be available, as needed, for peacemaking and reconciliation initiatives. We will work through the Metropolitan’s office so that we might be in contact with the local bishops to assist us in identifying potential, qualified members for this department. Our goal is to create a department that works in harmony with diocesan representatives who are prepared and trained in this ministry to the Glory of God. If you are interested in this ministry or have specific questions that we might address, please be in touch with us at the following emails.

[anthony\\_bashir@emerson.edu](mailto:anthony_bashir@emerson.edu) or [frjohnmefrige@aol.com](mailto:frjohnmefrige@aol.com).

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## Appendix A ... Additional Topic Possibilities

**The topics below represent notes from work sessions on the Parish Council Guidebook. The ultimate goal is to develop a Guidebook that is complete enough to serve the needs of parish councils in the Antiochian Archdiocese. As new sections are written, they will be posted on this web link for parishes to review and evaluate. Please feel free to contact the Department of Stewardship at [rnlm@aol.com](mailto:rnlm@aol.com) with comments on the items listed below or to suggest additional topics to be included in the Guidebook.**

Orthodox Church Governance ... Parish Council in the Orthodox Christian Tradition

Why we call our priest “father”

Who should know who gives what amount?

Why call it “parish council?” Why council “chairperson” and not council “president?”

Council members freely discuss all issues, then stands together once decisions are made.

Develop a letter of congratulations from the bishop and send it each year to each newly elected council member. Helps reinforce proper understanding of council service.

Special role of council chairperson

Guidelines on how to conduct a council meeting ... priest and/or chairperson

Model for the working relationship between the priest and parish council

Brief case studies to illustrate certain situations in real parish terms

Do council members “represent” segments of the parish community or do they represent God?

Would it be advisable to include a section about clergy compensation in this guidebook?

How to plan an annual Parish Council orientation retreat

Linking this parish council guidebook to the existing priest guide

Relationship between the Parish, the Diocese, and the Archdiocese

## Appendix B

# CONSENSUS

Consensus is a form of group decision-making based on general agreement, not on voting.

- It is a win-win solution
- It provides ownership of ideas by all team members

Unanimity is not the objective. Consensus is reached when all members of the team, including the leader, are willing to accept an idea or concept as the best choice for the entire team.

- I believe that you understand my point of view.
- I believe that I understand your point of view.
- Whether or not I prefer this idea or concept, I will support it because it was reached openly and fairly.
- I can live with this decision

Silence is interpreted as agreement.