

# *The Parish Council on the Front Lines*

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*The president was preparing to exit Air Force One on an official visit. Before exiting the plane he took what seemed like a very long time checking his appearance in the mirror – first his hair, then his tie, and then his suit. When an aid teased him about his vanity, the president replied, “When I go out that door, I’m not just a man – I am the United States of America.”*

In much the same way, parish council members represent their parish and the Orthodox Christian faith. As leaders of the community, parish council members are on the front lines and are able to have a long-term effect on their parish. To serve on the parish council is a ministry and those who serve are called to represent Christ to all whom they meet in all aspects of life.

## **Mission of the Parish Council**

The mission of the parish as defined in the Uniform Parish Regulations – and therefore the mission of the Parish Council – is “...to keep, practice and proclaim the Orthodox Christian Faith pure and undefiled.”

In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Man walked by poor Lazarus every day. The Rich Man didn’t hate Lazarus – he just ignored him, committing the sin of indifference. The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference.

We have been blessed with great treasures of the faith and Lazarus lies at our gate. Lazarus is the visitor that walks through the doors of our church on Sunday morning. Lazarus is the non-Orthodox spouse. Lazarus is the lapsed Orthodox Christian visiting the parish after a long absence. Like the Rich Man in the parable, we often walk right by without noticing, and they eat from the crumbs that fall from our table.

If we believe that in Orthodoxy we have the fullness of the Truth, then we have the great responsibility – the Great Commission – to share it with everyone. As Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of ALL nations.”

## **Ambassadors of Faith**

For non-Orthodox as well as for inactive Orthodox Christians, entering an Orthodox church can be a very uncomfortable, intimidating experience. Research has shown that non-believers attend church at least once each year, and when they attend, they are profoundly affected by their first impressions.

It is also important to note that the percentage of Greek Orthodox Christians marrying non-Orthodox Christians is in the range of 70-90%. Some priests will tell you that it is closer to 100%. If we don’t make Orthodoxy real and accessible to the non-Orthodox spouse, then eventually we will lose the couple and their children.

Often the first person our visitors see is a member of the parish council. Reaching out to those who enter our doors with a handshake, a greeting and a welcoming smile could be the most important missionary work we do. Simply put -- friendliness has eternal implications. Unless people see in us the light and the love of Christ, they will not believe.

## **Choosing Suitable Candidates for the Parish Council**

Parishioners are often nominated as candidates for the Parish Council because of their education, business experience or legal background. The best parish council members are not necessarily those who are business-oriented, but rather, those who are Church-oriented and Christ-centered. To be a good council member, one must be active in the worship and sacramental life of the Church. The best candidates are easy to find – they are in church.

## **We are Conciliar**

The Priest is head of the Parish, and is charged with the guidance of the total Parish program. The parish council consists of the Priest, and the elected lay members, and is referred to as a *board* only when so required by local statute. In internal matters of the Church, we always use the designation of *Parish Council*. This is because one of the identifying traits of the Orthodox Church is that we are conciliar – decisions are made in council.

To refer to the Parish Council as “The Board” is a symptom of our inclination to apply the corporate paradigm to the operation of the Church. Although some tools used in corporate life may also be useful in the operation of the Church, the corporate paradigm falls short and reduces the local church to something less than she was meant to be.

## **Setting An Example for the Parish**

The duties of a parish council member (*UPR Ch 2, Article XII*) include regular attendance at divine services and participation in the sacramental life of the Church, “...thereby setting an example for the parish.” To set an example for the parish will require that we overcome the stereotype of the parish council member who is rarely seen in church. It is easy to be like Martha -- Jesus, the Son of God, came to dinner and Martha spent the entire time in the kitchen “anxious and troubled about many things.”

## **A Commitment to Serve**

In the Oath of Office, the parish council members affirm that they “...will fulfill faithfully and sincerely the duties and obligations required of a member of the Parish Council...” No contract is signed, but a promise is made which rests on the shared commitment of all council members to serve the Church, which is the Body of Christ on earth. We are His hands, feet, eyes and more. To serve on the council is a ministry and a mission. We are called to use the gifts with which we have been blessed to carry out the work of the Church.

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