

# “How to Expand the Mission”

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## Introductory Note

Though it was originally written as a reflection for the OCA's upcoming All-American Council in July of 2015, I believe what follows applies to all Orthodox Christians in North America. The theme of mission and evangelization permeates our ecclesial atmosphere. From the beginnings of Christianity, mission and evangelization have compelled the Church to enter the new and unknown. This is seen in the Pauline letters and in the Acts of the Apostles regarding the reception of Gentiles. Guided by the Spirit, this monumental movement on the part of the Church to move beyond the confines of Judaism was fraught with fear, suspicion, and opposition. Yet, in the end, as the Church expanded its mind and heart, Christianity was saved from becoming another Jewish sect as it engaged and transformed its surrounding cultures.

How to expand the mission has challenged and continues to challenge the Church on the national, diocesan, and parochial levels. It would not be an exaggeration to say that virtually every Orthodox church in North America seeks to expand the ministry of the

Gospel. This includes those churches that base their *raison d'être* on ministering to a particular ethnicity. They recognize, in theory if not in practice, the dominical imperative to proclaim the Gospel to all people. Yet, for the Church to expand its mission to and for the life of the world, it must strive to examine itself in relationship to the people it is entrusted to serve and ultimately save. This ecclesial introspection or *μετάνοια* is necessary if the Church is to maintain its credibility among an informed audience that is often justifiably critical of its inability (and unwillingness) to hear and respond to its questions. This ecclesial *μετάνοια* is necessary if the body of Christ is to take upon its shoulders the sin and agony of the world. To expand its mission the Church must renew and therefore expand its mind and heart. —RMA

I

The 18th All-American Council bases its overall theme on the words of Saint Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow. During his ministry in North America (1898–1907), the then Archbishop Tikhon convened the first All-American Council in Mayfield, Pennsylvania, in February of 1907. This council, per-

haps the last significant and prophetic act of Archbishop Tikhon's North American ministry, recognized not only the difficulties but also the many opportunities for the Church to carry out the missionary mandate of the Gospel. Based on the minutes recorded by Saint Alexander Hotovitsky, the vision of the 1907 council looked toward the future. For Archbishop Tikhon, "the defining goal of the council was the question of 'How to Expand the Mission' in order to prepare the way for self-governing, unsubordinated existence and development" in North America.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the Mayfield Council understood expanding the mission to include the unity of the various ethnic Orthodox communities within a united hierarchy and the future establishment of an autonomous if not autocephalous church in North America. Though the Russian Revolution of 1917 together with the large waves of immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean delayed Orthodox unity in America and the establishment of a self-governing local church, the Mayfield Council still remains an important signpost in the history of Orthodoxy in America. It stands upon the vision and labors of missionaries extending back to late eighteenth-century Alaska and points to the granting of autocephaly by the Moscow patriarchate in 1970. This organic development leading to the establishment of the Orthodox Church in America serves to remind us that our autocephaly is a sacred gift that is given to sustain a multifaceted, multi-ethnic demographic bound by hierarchical and sacramental unity. Though our autocephaly continues to challenge the irregular and uncanonical status quo

of jurisdictional pluralism and overlapping episcopal boundaries, the Mayfield Council provides us with the moral support to stay the course of a local church.

Gathered around Saint Tikhon, the Mayfield Council stands as a humble and courageous paradigm to be emulated by those who will gather in Atlanta in July of 2015. Just as world events at the beginning of the twentieth century radically changed ecclesial life here and abroad, our church in America—poor and mainly comprised of immigrants—continued the struggle to carry on and to expand its mission in and for America. Similarly, as the Church will gather in council in 2015, one can only hope that it will seek ways to implement a vision for "expanding the mission" when life here and abroad have placed before its doors unprecedented challenges as well as new opportunities to respond to the ever changing culture(s) of our time. But for this to occur, the Atlanta Council will need to consider other ways to understand Saint Tikhon's vision of "how to expand the mission."

## II

If *how to expand the Church's mission* is to be perceived as more than the development of commissions and programs to bolster membership and revenue, and if the Church is to have a credible presence in our culture, offering it more than a condemning word couched in the language of love, then it is necessary for the Church to *expand its mind and heart*. The task is formidable for it demands a reassessment of how to speak and act in a culture that, while infused with religious pluralism, continues to turn a critical

<sup>1</sup>Gregory Afonsky, *A History of the Orthodox Church in America, 1917–1934* (Kodiak: St. Herman's Theological Seminary Press, 1994), 11.



Participants at the first All-American Council in front of St. John's Church, Mayfield, Pennsylvania, 1907. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Orthodox Church in America.

eye toward Christianity. By no means is the Orthodox Church in America spared this public scrutiny. In spite of our small numbers, our Church has assumed a noticeable posture in the public square that varies little from that of Christian fundamentalists. Consequently, the biblical, patristic, and liturgical pillars of our tradition are being toppled by a hermeneutic that precludes dialogue, nuance, and change.

Should this closed hermeneutic—which has made its way to seminary classrooms, parish ambros, and synodal proclamations—continue to spread, the Church will steadily lose its ability to listen and respond to the questions of the day. If the Church is to stem the polarity of ideas and opinions growing within itself, and if it is to be the presence of Christ in society, then it can no longer allow its mission to be impeded by fear and ignorance. Within and outside of the Church, questions are being raised relative to issues that were once considered, from a theological and pastoral perspective, outside the realm of reexamination and reevaluation.

No longer can the Church expect its faithful and the wider public to accept

its decrees, exhortations, and admonitions, which often ignore sophisticated and refined theological scholarship, science, and technology. If the Church is to “expand its mission,” it can no longer turn away from, ignore, or condemn questions and issues that are a priori presumed to contradict or challenge its living tradition. Among the most controversial of these issues are those related to human sexuality, the configuration of the family, the beginning and ending of human life, and care for the environment. If the Church is to “expand its mission” then, in and through the Holy Spirit, it must be able to *expand the understanding of itself and of the world it lives in*.

The ministry of Christ, who is “the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 8:13), cannot and has not been proclaimed by only resorting to what has been said in the past. So long as the mind and heart of the Church accept the fiction that all questions pertaining to God, human life, and society have been raised and answered in the past there can be no possibility to expand its life and mission. More specifically, when the Church is oriented only to the past, it cannot be the Church of the Kingdom which is to come.

### III

If the Church is to expand its mind and heart then each of its members—clergy and laity—is compelled to expand his or her mind and heart. Unless there is a renewal of those comprising the Church, the Church's very *catholicity*—that is, its *quality of life and faith*—are jeopardized, inasmuch as those called to have “one mind and heart” cease to allow the Truth to grow within themselves. Often the inability to grow in the Truth leads to a course of mutual exclusion and division.

A closed mind and a hardened heart cannot repent and ultimately prevent a union and communion of persons. A closed mind and heart also lead to a type of faith that is bereft of Divine energy and life. This, in turn, creates an ecclesial environment that is myopic, oppressive, fearful, and self-contained—the very antithesis to *catholicity*. “The human aspect of the Church is never fully conformed to the divine model. The Church must not cease to make itself catholic. But this is possible only because it is essentially catholic in its Lord... The main problem to resolve is always that of recreating the catholic and full mind...”<sup>2</sup>

Without an ongoing process of repentance among its faithful, the Church

will be unable to articulate the “mind of Christ” here and now. This bold concept of Saint Paul, “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), can easily be misconstrued now, as it was among some of the Corinthian Christians of the first century. To possess the mind of Christ is not to be understood as a static mode of consciousness that can only repeat what was said in the past. The mind of Christ is inexhaustible, and therefore human consciousness and awareness are eternally dynamic, ever expanding, ever extending into the divine mystery. “Speaking the truth in love, *we are to grow up in every way* into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 3:15).

With the expansion of the Church's mind and heart, what is of the past can be augmented. Consequently, Holy Scripture can continue to be interpreted and clarified. Patristic writings can continue to be reassessed and even corrected. Liturgical texts can continue to be composed while existing texts can be revised. With the expanded mind and heart of the Church, the ministry of Christ will be able to expand through the creative operation of the Holy Spirit. This will allow the Church to maintain its authentic voice, the voice of Christ, as it expands its mission for the life of the world and its salvation. ✱

<sup>2</sup> Georges Florovsky, “Le corps du Christ vivant” in *La Sainte Eglise Universelle: Confrontation oecuménique* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1948), 34.



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