

Holy Ascension Orthodox Church

An Ongoing History

In May, 2006, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) convened the IVth All-Diaspora Council to discuss primarily if the time had come for it to join in Eucharistic communion with the Moscow Patriarchate (MP). Almost half of all the council delegates were either opposed to the proposal or felt it was premature. This opinion was reflected in the Council Resolution, which was approved unanimously by all the delegates, and which stated that unity was desired “in the appropriate time,” after the resolution of such important matters as the continued participation of the MP in the ecumenical movement. It must be added that this resolution was passed only after an earlier version, proposing immediate Eucharistic and administrative union with the MP, was rejected by all the delegates.

Tragically, subsequent meetings of the ROCA Synod of Bishops did not heed the Resolution and plans for union were accelerated, even over the objections of a number of the bishops. Despite protests from within the ranks of bishops, clergy, and laypeople, on May 17, 2007, a large part of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) entered into Eucharistic communion with the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) with the signing of the “Act of Canonical Communion.” A smaller part chose to remain loyal to the historical Russian Orthodox Church and continue the mission of the ROCA. In the St. John the Baptist parish of Fr. Victor Potapov in Washington, D.C., a small group of parishioners who refused union with the MP met with the second parish priest, Fr. Igor Hrebinka, and Reader, Daniel Olson, in the home of one of the parishioners and decided to found a parish based on the principles of the ROCA. It is important to note that 4 council delegates, who were opposed to immediate union, were among the founding members of this parish. While these four delegates did not attend the Council as representatives of St John the Baptist, they were all parishioners at that church. The only official Council delegate from St John's was Fr. Victor Potapov. (The parish Protodeacon, Fr. Leonid Mickle, attended the council as an interpreter.)

They named the parish in honor of the Holy Ascension of Our Lord, as the “Act of Canonical Communion” was signed on that feast day in 2007. The group wanted that day to be distinguished by a positive event and not only by the unfortunate submission to the MP. The group headed by the two clergy members began services in various homes of members of the group, serving evening vigils and Divine Liturgies in living rooms and whatever space could be found. Communication with other clergy and parishes, which had not gone along with the union, was established. Faithful in the Washington, D.C. area learned of the new ROCA parish and began attending services, quickly growing the number of attendees.

In July, 2007, a couple in the parish, Vera and Anatoliy Loginov, made half of their large house available and a chapel was set up in the empty master bedroom. Anatoliy Loginov built an

altar table and a table of oblations, allowing Fr. Igor to establish the altar. An area was set aside for the choir, led by Reader Daniel Olson, and the parish began acquiring the other items necessary for a church. This setting played a crucial role in solidifying the parish. The ability to hold regular services in the same location drew the church members together and attracted new members. Trapezas (lunches) were served after the liturgies and the members felt that with the blessing of God, their new parish would endure.

While at this location, a provisional parish council was formed; with Dimitri Gontscharow as Church Warden, Patrick Brown as Parish Treasurer, and Celeste Englehardt as Parish Secretary. The primary task before the members was to find a more permanent location for the parish, which was not easy, given the high real estate prices in the Washington, D.C. area. Numerous locations were considered and rejected for various reasons. One promising location would have allowed the parish to occupy an entire floor of a small office building in the downtown area of Falls Church, Virginia, right outside of Washington, D.C., but the monthly lease was too high.

The search continued and finally a small space in a commercial park in Alexandria, VA, was deemed suitable for the parish's needs. Negotiations began and a monthly lease payment was agreed upon. On October 16, 2007, the very day that the parish members would have signed a lease for that space, the owner of the Falls Church property called and offered a monthly lease payment that was half of the original proposal. Telephone calls were quickly made and the parish was freed from their contract with the one owner and a 2-year lease with the second was signed. The feeling that God was protecting us was felt by all the church members and deepened further by the many instances in the months to come.

The work began to obtain all the necessary permits from the City of Falls Church to allow a church to hold services on the third floor of the office building at 500 West Annandale Road and the first liturgy was conducted on December 16, 2007. The floor of the building had an elevator in the middle, which opened to a hallway with two entrance doors that opened to two areas of offices. One half of the floor had a common area surrounded by smaller rooms and that is where the church was established. Initially, the choir sang in one room, while another functioned as a confessional, while another was the parish book store. The other half of the floor had a smaller common area, where the table for food was set up and members ate in the several rooms adjacent to the common area.

Just as the parish moved in to its new location, one of the companies at which a parishioner worked went out of business. The company had to liquidate its furniture and the parish was able to purchase a refrigerator, a microwave oven, several tables, a large number of chairs, and a large number of kitchen items at a very reasonable price. In a flash, the parish had many of the items it required for its daily operation. The church area was a little cramped, but

the joy of having their own parish and their own space infused all the members and a regular cycle of services began. The 2007 Nativity of Christ was celebrated in the new home and the coming New Year was to be filled with many more of God's blessings.

On February 24, 2008, the parish held its first Annual Parish Meeting. The provisional parish council was confirmed, with Ruth Hinton replacing Patrick Brown as Treasurer, and adding Phillip Rapp to the council. A Brotherhood in honor of Sts. Cosmos and Damian, a Sisterhood in honor of Blessed St. Ksenia of St. Petersburg, and an Auditing Committee were formed. A variety of issues were discussed at the meeting and the decision to renovate the space used for the church was made. In March, 2008, a contractor was hired to remove the walls of the rooms around the church area, opening up about 1,600 sq. ft. of space for the church. Several parishioners met and built a partial wooden iconostasis with Royal Gates and two side-panels. Other parishioners built wooden icon stands. Icons were hung up and the parish had a comfortable space for services, while the other half of the floor was used for meals and the parish school headed by Irene Kotschoubey.

The year 2008 was filled with highlights: Pascha was joyously celebrated in the new space and included a procession around the building; the Most Reverend Agafangel, Bishop of Taurida and Odessa and head of the ROCA visited the parish; Bishop Andronik (Kotlaroff) also visited; the parish had its first infant baptism, its first adult baptism and its first wedding. A fund-raiser for the Haitian Mission, headed by Fr. Gregory Williams, was held and provided valuable support to that cause. The generosity of the parishioners expressed itself repeatedly for various other causes as well. The clergy ranks were enlarged with the ordination of Michael Foster as Deacon, and the tonsuring of Jack Hinton, Seraphim Englehardt, and Konstantin Preobrazhensky as Sub-deacons.

The year 2008 was also noteworthy when our dear pastor, Fr. Igor Hrebinka, was elevated to the office of bishop. In October, 2008, ROCA convened the Vth All-Diaspora Council, with representatives attending from around the world. A number of important decisions were made for the general welfare of the Church, including the naming of Bishop Agafangel as Metropolitan and First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. On the evening of October 23, Fr. Igor was tonsured a monk. During Divine Liturgy on October 24, the laying on of the hands was carried out by Metropolitan Agafangel, Abp. Andronik, and Abp Sofroniy, and Fr. Igor was given the name Joseph in honor of Holy Metropolitan Joseph of Petrograd, a New Martyr and a founder of the Catacomb Church in Russia. Bishop Joseph was given the title Vicar Bishop of Washington, D.C., a fitting office for a cleric who has devoted almost 40 years in service to the Church.

The Nativity of Christ and Pascha were festive events in the parish's life in 2009, as was another adult baptism, and a visit by Metropolitan Agafangel, but in June, 2009, the parish faced

the end of their 2-year lease. Though the parish had been able to cover the monthly expenses, the lease payment was still substantial and the money was not going towards property of their own. A search for a new location was urgently begun. The building where the parish was located had also been sold to a new owner around this time, but with God's protection, the new owner was very happy to have the parish stay on and pay month to month as it looked for new premises.

Again, many different locations were considered throughout the Washington, D.C. area, but real estate prices were still high and beyond the parishes reach. A simple, small church was found, but with a million-dollar price tag. Finally, an office condominium was found in an office park in Fairfax, Virginia. Though only 1,250 sq. ft., it was on the ground floor with sufficient room for the church, and in a building that looked like a small house from the outside. Negotiations began with the owner, Mr. Joseph Adams, a kind, elderly gentleman who had operated a drapery\interior decorating store there for 20 years. He was represented by his daughter, Mrs. Margaret Miller, who was enthusiastic about a church taking over the space.

The proposal to situate a church in an office park caused some consternation on the part of Fairfax City authorities and they were reluctant to approve the request. God once again protected his little flock. Mr. Adams and his daughter Margaret are long-standing members of the local community and have many friends at City Hall. They were able to explain to them who the parish was, what type of denomination it represented, and what its plans for the future were. Everyone involved took a closer look and determined that the building to contain the new church was zoned for multi-use and the request was approved.

The parish busied itself with preparing for the move. A book sale\yard sale was held to raise funds and dispense with some of the office equipment, but a large collection of furniture remained. Providentially, Mother Agapia (Stephanopoulos) was in the final stages of acquiring land in upstate New York State for the founding of a monastery, which would include several workshops and a cemetery on the grounds. The property has several well-built buildings standing empty on the site and Mother Agapia was searching for furnishings. A truck was rented and the parish was able to donate a large portion of its belongings to the future monastery; including a freezer, tables, chairs, kitchen equipment, and many other things.

Meanwhile, the purchase of the property continued. The real estate agent Margaret Miller arranged for a loan with a local bank, while permits and approvals were received from the city. The parish settled on the new property on September 29, 2009, and renovations began soon thereafter. A local contractor removed all the interior walls, replaced the flooring, updated the bathrooms, installed a new ceiling and lighting, and painted the interior. The new space looked immaculate and was ready for its new tenants. The week of November 2nd was spent packing

and on Saturday, November 7, 2009, a group of the parishioners completed the move and were able to get the church ready for evening vigil at 5 PM that day.

A parishioner remarked that it was only fitting that the parish, which contains members dedicated to preserving the memory of those persecuted and killed by the atheistic regime of the Soviet Union, would have their first service on November 7, a day of remembrance for all the victims of communism. The next day, Sunday, dawned with a clear blue sky. The small gold cupola in the new church sign over the entrance glistened in the warm sun. The first Divine Liturgy at the new location was served on November 8, 2009. The church was filled almost to capacity and a great joy was felt by everyone. Since then, the parishioners have begun settling in to the new space, determining how best to utilize it for services, trapezas, and classes for the younger members. Thanksgiving 2009 will be marked with the traditional moleben. This time there will be much to be thankful for, in all that the parish has experienced so far, and all that the future holds for the flock. Glory to God!

The year 2010 has been a good one in our new location. We moved things around to make best use of the space and there is room for everyone. Though the church is in downtown Fairfax City, it is quiet on weekends and evenings, when most services are held, and we are enjoying the coziness of our little corner of the world. Our parishioner John Herbst was ordained a reader on January 10, and we had another baptism in February. Pascha was met joyfully and we had a triumphant procession around the entire building. Soon after Pascha, Deacon Father Michael served his final liturgy on April 11. He left for the Convent of St. Nicholas, where he was tonsured a monk and became Hierodeacon Fr. Makary. May 15, 2010, Mary McCarthy converted to Orthodoxy and was baptized. She has a wonderful voice and has been helping in the choir.

May 16, 2010, was a momentous day for our parish. Subdeacon John Hinton, a founding member of our parish and an essential part of its flourishing, was ordained a deacon by Bishop Joseph with Fr. Daniel Meschter in attendance. God bless and many years to Fr. John! Not long after that, on May 23, Reader John Herbst and altar attendant Andrew Frick were ordained as subdeacons. We now have a full complement of clergy to help Bishop Joseph with the services. Glory be to God!

Later in the year, the Herbst family was blessed with another arrival. The parish was honored to have Archbishop Sofroniy, Bishop of St. Petersburg and Northern Russia, visit and tell us about life in his monastery. On the feast day of the Exaltation of the Cross, Metropolitan Agafangel served the evening vigil and Divine Liturgy the next day. He met with the parishioners after the liturgy and answered their questions.