

[The Holy Spirit works through Zoom]

UOCC National Sobornist Network – UNSN

UNSN could be voiced as ‘unison’ and there could be regional or eparchial networks for discussion of area specific issues.

Introductory Remarks

During our Zoom calls I have heard numerous questions, comments and observations raised as to why we exist, do we have a right to exist, what are we trying to achieve and what kind of a social organization are we – a group, a committee, a formal organization, a counter-organization within the UOCC of lay persons trying to usurp the powers of the Chancellor - or an informal network of concerned members-believers.

Since I have been involved from the outset in these conversations, I thought I would share my personal views regarding these questions and my observations and comments on the unique opportunities this initiative provides our Church going forward.

How did I get involved in our Zoom calls?

Over the past decades, a network of members - priests and lay persons from across Canada have periodically had discussions to bring forward the best suggestions and undertake initiatives for addressing the challenges we face as an Orthodox Christian community. Currently, our Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada is facing many challenges, but also significant opportunities. The retirement of Metropolitan Yuriy and the upcoming Sobor indicate that significant changes in leadership are coming that will have a profound impact on the future governance of our Church.

Following the Metropolitan’s retirement announcement in February, a small group of five or six lay individuals from different parts of Canada began speaking on Zoom to informally consider the implications for the Church of His Eminence’s decision. As word spread of our discussions, participants from across the entire country asked to join our Zoom calls. As a result, parishes committed to strengthening our Church together began putting forward proposals for consideration by the Sobor. These included facilitating the succession of the Metropolitan (as we did with our Bishops in 2008), supporting the Chancellor with a lay administrative assistant to reduce his load of temporal issues, and reviewing and updating the governance of the Church.

Following the postponement of the Sobor to 2022, these resolutions have now been put to the Consistory Board by some of its members as motions for approval. As we await the outcome of the Consistory Board’s decision, the participants on our Zoom calls, open to all and now consisting of between 40-60 clergy and lay parishioners, have declared that they stand ready to work together with our hierarchs and Consistory Board to securing a sustainable future for our beloved Church.

There is no evidence to support allegations that our calls constitute some sort of secret cabal, that we are seeking to overthrow established Church order or that we want to replace the position of Chancellor with a lay administrator. These contentions are simply not true. We at all times fully respect and comply with all of the constitutive documents and rules of our Church.

Why did I choose to participate?

I am a committed Christian. I love Christ and am committed to living a Christ-centered life. I consider the UOCC my spiritual mother. As any loving child cares about their mother so do I care about my spiritual mother – the UOCC.

According to the essential teachings of our Faith and as stated in *Our Good Shepherd Prayerbook* one of the main 'Spiritual Acts of Mercy' is: "To give good counsel to your neighbor."

We who are baptized unto Christ are called to love by Him. To love is to care and to serve. As members of the Royal Priesthood of the baptized and chrismated it is our responsibility to be concerned and to do all in our power to facilitate the best decisions for our community while at the same time respecting proper order. Furthermore, it is an integral part of our Canadian Church tradition to do so - it is precisely because of their commitment to the historical Kyivan Orthodox Tradition of conciliarity that our pioneers had the courage to undertake the formation of the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada in 1918.

Our Kyivan Orthodox Tradition, drawing on its provenance from her Mother Church, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, has reaffirmed this wisdom throughout the ages. Metropolitan Ilarion in his 11th century publication on 'Law and Grace' clearly demonstrates in honoring Prince Volodymyr for his efforts, that every individual is accountable before God for the welfare of his neighbor. Writing in the 16th Century in an "exhortation for Orthodox Christians," Ivan Vyshenskyi (ca. 1550 – ca. 1610) called for fair and communal elections of bishops and all priests, conducted with the participation of the faithful and the clergy, and only later were they to be recognized by the powerful laity and king. He was convinced that this was the only way to appoint God-fearing and Orthodox candidates. That is why he advised starting the electoral process by checking the life and wisdom of a future minister and mobilizing community prayer to God for making a good decision." (Novak:2017)

Dr. Sagan in his Internet series summarizes the distinctive features of the Kyivan Orthodox Tradition by observing that it emphasizes **the importance of religious experience** – experiencing the transformative reality of the Divine, the importance of following a disciplined spiritual pathway that cannot be substituted by either a model of external formalism or by the abstract rational scholastic model of religiosity of the West. Following a disciplined spiritual pathway means acting – serving as opportunities provide-necessitate.

What is it that we are trying to achieve?

When I analyze why we began our calls and the nature of their content over the past number of months, I come up with the following summary. The conversations provided an opportunity for any participant to:

- Identify important issues facing the UOCC community;
- Deepen our collective understanding of the issues;
- Collectively, through calm and respectful discussion, search for solutions to the issues;
- Through discussion participate in the development of a consensus on 'solution' recommendations; and
- Mandate certain participants to make recommendations to the formal UOCC leadership

Guiding Principles in Working on Achieving the Above Assignment

As I reflected on our Zoom calls, it appears that we have been operating, even if unstated, by the following guiding principles:

- Participation is restricted to members of UOCC;
- Every UOCC member is welcome to participate to the degree he or she chooses;
- From the very beginning our discussions have been open, transparent and respectful of our formal church leadership in that they have involved discussions and the vetting of ideas-proposals with the Metropolitan and including an on-line discussion with the Chancellor;
- We operate on the principle of attraction rather than promotion – we share our hopes and invite others to join us;
- We assume that everyone baptized and chrismated, and thus gifted by the Holy Spirit, has wisdom to share;
- We also assume that we need everyone’s wisdom for the wisest result; and
- Our calls have also operated on the assumption that everyone will hear and everyone’s voice will be heard, acknowledged and validated.

Other Fundamental Process Issues

I firmly believe, and I also believe, that these principles inform the views of other participants - that if we are truly interested in our Church realizing its God-given mission, then **we must not only contribute our best thinking, but we must prayerfully discern the Lord’s leading.**

It is my view that being a secularized church community, we must seriously heed the Lord’s guidance. Psalm 127:1 clearly warns us -

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it, labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.”

Thus, we as individuals need to prayerfully discern and then share what is in our hearts, what we feel the Lord is nudging us to do, **but always with an attitude of tentativeness and openness to discernment by others** – the Body.

I have found the following observations by Dr. Eugenia Constantinou in her recently published book, *Thinking Orthodox – Understanding and Acquiring the Orthodox Christian Mind*, very helpful in maintaining an attitude of humility.

Orthodoxy involves charting a middle course between extremes. Often the truth is neither one alternative nor the other but both. Being Orthodox in mind requires that one accept ambiguity, uncertainty, mystery, and paradox. Perhaps this encourages humility before God. We cannot rely on clever explanations or beloved definitions, and we must accept that we cannot completely explain or fully understand our faith. Therefore, we must rely solely on the grace and mercy of God. Perhaps this allows us to focus less on the mind and more on the heart, which is where we encounter God. (Constantinou: 2020; 6)

Furthermore, these challenging times need our taking seriously the guidance of a recently recognized 20th Century saint – Saint Porphyrios

“The power of prayer is great, very great, especially when done by many together. All are united in common prayer. We feel that our neighbour is as our self. This is our life,

our exaltation and our treasure. All things are easy in Christ. Christ is the centre, all move towards the centre and are united in one spirit and one heart.”

In following this advice the Descent of the Holy Spirit Parish in Regina has initiated a weekly Intercessory Moleben in support of the resolution of issues that are discussed at our Zoom calls. The Intercessory Moleben is broadcast on Facebook and YouTube every Saturday at 6:30 PM CST and the Parish invites our friends from across the country to join us in this effort.

A Potential Blessing for the future

Finally, I see the Zoom calls and their rapid adoption by parishioners, over the last year and a half, across the country as a gift.

We as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Community in Canada are confronted with many unresolved issues that require discussion, review, prayerful discernment, development of a new consensus and action. Our discussions have now evolved into a platform for measured debate and open brotherly and sisterly conversation involving a network of both clergy and parishioners from across Canada.

Given all the intensified socio-technical changes that our world and our community confront, our Zoom calls provide us with a unique opportunity to begin an in-depth discussion of these issues-challenges at the national level. Unless they are discussed thoroughly and a consensus is developed, they could threaten to tear us apart. Zoom calls of smaller groups organized along certain themes could serve as focus groups for a more comprehensive strategic planning process of the Consistory Board.

The following is a brief list of the issues that I recommend for in-depth discussion over the coming months:

- How are we to deal at the national level with the very differing attributes – language use, ethnocultural intermarriages, commitment to Ukrainian identity, socio-economic status - of our local congregations?
- How do we ensure that our children and grandchildren continue to be members of our community?
- What is our de facto identity? Are we a Ukrainian Orthodox Church or are we a Canadian Orthodox Church of the Ukrainian tradition?
- What is the long-term vision of our Canadian Ukrainian Orthodox Church community?
- What must be done to ensure the viability of our parishes in the future?
- Do we view ourselves as being one of the foundational elements of a future Canadian Orthodox Church?
- What is and should be our relationship to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine?
- How can we strengthen our ties with Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople?
- What are the unique gifts of the Kyivan Orthodox Tradition for the post-modern times that we could share with our Orthodox – Christian brethren in Canada?

Lord have mercy on us all!

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- Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, Ph.D. THINKING ORTHODOX: Understanding and Acquiring the Orthodox Christian Mind; 2020.
- Alicja Z. Nowak, Ph.D. Priesthood in the Teachings for the Clergy: On the History of Religious Reform in the Kievan Metropolitanate throughout the 16th and 17th Centuries; 2017.