



St Phoebe Center
FOR THE DEACONESS

Reflections for the 21st Orthodox Church in America All-American Council from OCA Supporters of the Revival of the Female Diaconate

In advance of the All-American Council (AAC) to be held in July 2025, His Eminence Metropolitan Tikhon invited “all communities of the Orthodox Church in America . . . ” to submit reflections on “this moment in the life of the Church: whence we have come, where we are now, and whither the Spirit may be calling us . . .” Knowing that many of our board members, advisory board members, and supporters are OCA, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess (orthodoxdeaconess.org) took this request seriously.

The St. Phoebe Center solicited feedback and received from its OCA supporters on “wither the Spirit is calling us” regarding women in the Orthodox Church. Some respondents chose to remain anonymous; others gave permission to include their names. The St. Phoebe Center compiled the feedback into this report which will be sent to His Eminence Metropolitan Tikhon, the AAC Preconciliar Commission, and published on the St. Phoebe Center website. Three major themes emerged from the feedback:

- Polarization and Demographic Shifts in the Church Today
- Women’s Dignity and Roles
- Benefits of Deaconesses Today

These themes are summarized below, with proposed action items for the OCA AAC. The pages that follow contain the original and unadulterated responses that directly relate to women in the church. Responses or portions of responses that were unrelated have been omitted. The Center thanks the many supporters who sent their feedback, and we continue to pray that the OCA and other Orthodox Churches will work to better honor and lift up women in the Church generally and specifically work to revive the ordained order of deaconess in order to meet the ministerial needs of the church here in the twenty-first century.

Key Themes

Polarization and Demographic Shifts in the Church Today

Many respondents noted that the Orthodox Church today has changed dramatically in the last few decades. Among the concerns was the trend toward the unfortunate polarization of Orthodox communities along American political lines, with little guidance from our hierarchs. One supporter noticed a shift from “a community-model church structure, to an individualistic model,” and lamented the way individual, charismatic, and mostly male voices dominate the podcasting and online Orthodox world.

Another supporter wrote, “We need to ask ourselves why there is an influx of males into the Church but not females.” The St. Phoebe Center agrees; ideally both women and men would be joining the Church. Something is amiss if women are not coming in equal numbers to men, and our community should investigate the reasons for this.

The St. Phoebe Center recommends that the AAC pass a resolution to establish a working group composed of clergy and laity and men and women to examine trends among men and women in conversion (those new to the church) and in retention (those who are not new to the church).

Women’s Dignity and Roles

Many supporters are concerned with how women are perceived and treated in the Orthodox Church. One said that the “biggest problem is the church’s unwillingness to ask the question ‘how can we allow women to have the most dignity possible?’” Others cited teachings that women are “less than, impure,” (ritual impurity due to menstruation or giving birth) somehow unworthy, and therefore not equal to men. The perpetuation of these practices and teachings defies Christ’s teachings and are “nothing short of blasphemy.” Another supporter pointed out that women who call out these un-Orthodox practices are often labeled as prideful, power-hungry, ambitious, and in need of humbling, when, instead, they are women who just want to serve the Lord. The Metropolitan stated that the OCA has a “strong foundation that we can now build upon.” A response to that was that we have to ensure that this foundation truly aligns our practices with our theology.

The St. Phoebe Center recommends that the AAC pass a resolution that asks the Holy Synod to release a statement regarding the dignity of women, their equality with men, and dispelling misconceptions about ritual impurity.

Benefits of Deaconesses Today

Supporters upheld much of what the St. Phoebe Center has educated about and advocated for since its inception in 2013. They specifically voiced the need for a church sanctioned woman to speak

with about sensitive or awkward topics. One person pointed out that women are directed to the parish priest to discuss issues involving domestic abuse, sexuality, and personal issues of gender, but it is often difficult and awkward for them to fully open their hearts to a man, no matter how pastorally sensitive. While it is often said that women can speak to a counselor or another woman in the church, one person said that women need a “trusted authority ordained by the Church for counsel in how to apply Orthodox teachings to uniquely female experiences.” This is not possible with a secular counselor, or another woman in the parish.

Several respondents noted that a female deacon could be of great service in these instances, and that ordination of deaconesses will “permit women to minister with the full authority of the church, rather than being ‘junior partners’ to ordained men in ministry.” One supporter said that “barring women from serving is not just a judgement on who is worthy to serve, but on *who is worthy in and of itself*, in the eyes of the Church.” Another stated that the Orthodox Church should acknowledge, uphold, and honor the differences that exist between men and women, and that is best achieved by having deaconesses available to minister to the community.

The St. Phoebe Center recommends that the AAC pass a resolution appointing a working committee to study women’s roles—past, present, and future—in the Orthodox Church, and make recommendations at the 22nd AAC on how to best honor women’s unique experiences, perspectives, and skills within the Orthodox Church. This working group could be composed of clergy and laity, both male and female, with diverse expertise in areas including but not limited to early Church history, Byzantine Church history, liturgics, and pastoral counseling and spiritual direction.

Respondents

Several anonymous men and women

Madeleine Nantze

OCA from Santa Maria, CA, Annunciation Church

Anonymous female, lifelong OCA

Jim Edwards, lay delegate to the All American Council 2025

St. Innocent Orthodox Church, Olmsted Falls OH, Diocese of the Midwest

Chungsoo J. Peter Lee

The Descent of the Holy Spirit Romanian Orthodox Church, Elkins Park, PA.

*Dr. Paul Meyendorff
St Katherine Orthodox Church, Kirkland, WA*

*Christina Jatras
St. Mary's, Falls Church, VA.*

Michele Kochoff Platt. I was raised in the OCA at St. George Romanian Orthodox Cathedral, Detroit (Southfield, MI), today (St. Michael's Orthodox Church, Huntsville, AL)

*Karen Brown,
St. Stephen the Protomartyr Orthodox Church, Longwood, FL*

*V Rev Mark Korban
St Jacob of Alaska Orthodox Church
Northfield Falls, VT*

*Ann Marie Mecera
St. Stephen the Protomartyr Orthodox Church, Longwood, FL
Pre-Conciliar Commission Member, 12th All-American Council
Former Parish Council Lay Vice-Chair (20 years) of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, Columbus, OH*

*Rebecca Barone
St. Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church (OCA)
Dayton, OH*

*Danielle Frimenko
Holy Transfiguration in Livonia, MI.*

*Jennifer Sigler, PhD
Protection of the Holy Mother of God Orthodox Church
Falls Church, VA*

Excerpted Reflections Submitted by OCA Supporters of the Revival of the Female Diaconate

I am a convert to Orthodox Christianity, and a member of an outstanding OCA parish in Connecticut. To be a part of the church which Christ founded has been the most life-giving experience for me thus far. Participating in the mysteries of the church has brought tangible transformation to my life that has been a witness to my whole family. With that being said, I am scandalized that the Church which Christ founded treats women as if the ancestral curse has not been cast away. This is one of the greatest harms that the church is currently doing for its witness in our ever-increasingly polarized world.

My wife is a faithful Christian, but not Orthodox. She cites the role of women in the Orthodox Church as reason numero uno (and one of only two reasons) for why she has not yet converted. As I see it, the question of whether women should be ordained to the diaconate is beside the point. The biggest problem is the church's unwillingness to ask the question "how can we allow women to have the most dignity possible?" I think if the church assumed this posture, we would be closer to what Christ has called us to in this redeemed creation.

I think that the bishops of the OCA need to realize that there is both a need and a desire for the female diaconate, or at least some sort of ministry committed to making women feel safe, at home, and valued in the Orthodox Church as a whole.

An anonymous male

Your Eminence, bless.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you and share what is in our heart.

There is an expression often used that the Church of Jesus Christ, which we call the Orthodox Church, "never changes". This expression, however, is not entirely true, since in many ways the Church does change—not of course, thank God, in its dogmas, doctrines and teachings of the Faith—but in other significant ways, for many different reasons. So, it seems, the expression that the Church "never changes" is often used by those who want to effect or prevent "change" that is ideologically (not spiritually, or even theologically, in truth) supported or opposed by them.

Men of various backgrounds (undeclared, Protestant, atheist) have begun to attend our churches in droves (not in droves, but smaller groups, at my parish). Many of these men are seeking a "masculine" church that does not have "woke-ism." This is a term levied around by political conservatives, generally, to denigrate social, secular efforts to enforce social norms. What is more concerning is that these people seem attracted to authoritarianism—masculine, naturally—, which they conflate with the "patriarchal" structure of the Church, ignoring the ministerial ("feminine," perhaps?) aspects of clerical duties. Never, of course, did the Lord intend for the offices of clergy to be pursued for ambition or in order to obtain authority over others. However, this is implicit in the desire to view the Church this way.

This trend has moved us as a Church (in America) toward an extreme political bent, manifested in the denial of women's participation in activities, like reading and chanting; discouraging women in pursuit of theological training, or even discussions; telling young girls and young women that they cannot enter the altar by virtue of their sex; and strident outcries when Orthodox people raise concerns about the simultaneous migration of women from the Church, as "feminist diatribes."

The need for a change to counter this trend, which is nothing short of destructive, is imperative, and the change can be on multiple fronts or not. Forgive this urgency and frankness, Your Eminence, but the hierarchy must combat this spirit of the age that has invaded our parishes. One wonders if a similar spirit was responsible for the disappearance of the female diaconate, many centuries ago, and the idea of a deacon as a servant to the needs of the laity.

Your Eminence, I am not trying to create division or scandal by raising these concerns; rather,

I'm trying to do the opposite. I feel that these practical considerations of “scaring away” people who might convert (or already have) should not be the predominant focus. The Orthodox Church is not just a two-thousand-year-old institution, it is the Body of Christ—Christ who saves mankind from itself and the powers of evil in this world. The Scriptures are very clear on the subject of men and women being equals in the sight of the Lord. Teaching that women are “less than”, “impure,” substandard, unworthy and, therefore, not equal to men is nothing short of blasphemy—it defies Christ’s teachings.

The false teachings and negative attitudes toward women have created a new division--which drives women from the Church, because they cease to see a place for themselves at Christ’s banquet table when these attitudes take over in churches. Is this because these women are proud, ambitious “feminists” who need humbling? I don’t think so--they are women who want to serve the Lord.

This issue of women’s role is a spiritual issue, too, which the Church has not fully articulated for our time and experiences. For this reason, our jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church, the OCA, should consider all the ministerial possibilities—including a restoration of the female diaconate, in its old or a newer iteration—to help simultaneously respond to false doctrine, and restore the spiritual life of those who have been disenfranchised within the churches by views that women have nothing to offer their church and their Savior, outside of marriage and motherhood.

Eva Topping stated it much better than I am able to:

At this point, our Church has to decide which of the two represents Orthodoxy’s authentic, sacred Tradition (spelled with a capital “T”). In the process of making the decision, clergy and laity alike must bear in mind Christ’s warning against abandoning the “commandment of God” (entolen tou theou) and keeping “human tradition” (parpdosin ton anthropon) (Mark 7:8). These words of Christ imply a conflict between the two.

Thank you for this opportunity. May the Lord bless us all, and guide you and the other hierarchs in continued wisdom, by the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Lord have mercy on us.

Madeleine Nantzze

OCA from Santa Maria, CA, Annunciation Church

Our Orthodox parish life has clear roles for male leaders of the parish community -- deacons, subdeacons, readers. They are set apart and identified. Not only do parishioners know who these men are, but just as importantly, the men themselves know what role is expected of them in the community, and these men are formally accountable to the priest and to the bishop.

There are wise, experienced Orthodox women in parishes, who play spiritual mentorship and leadership roles, but it's all informal and thus I am not entirely sure who these women are in my parish. Figuring out who they are requires guesswork and word-of-mouth. Women's spiritual leadership in my parish appears to happen without clergy knowledge and without any accountability

to the priests or the bishop. (I do not mean to say that anyone is hiding anything, just that this is the status quo when women's spiritual roles in church are all off-the-books.) A non-Orthodox visitor or prospective convert could conclude, from an observation of my parish's life, that women do not play any spiritual leadership or mentorship roles in the Orthodox church.

It is my impression that many of the Orthodox Christians who oppose, or are hesitant, about the female diaconate see reviving the female diaconate as risky. I think the status quo, where women's spiritual ministry in parish life occurs entirely outside any formal scheme, is risky. People seeking spiritual mentorship or counseling from women struggle to find it. The mentorship, leadership, and counseling that Orthodox women do in the parish is informal, undefined, and outside of any accountability structure to make it answerable to the church as a whole.

Women's service to the church is not fully recognized or incorporated into the church. I think reviving the female diaconate would go far to resolve this issue.

Anonymous female, lifelong OCA

To my brothers and sisters in Christ who will attend the All American Council: I write to express my conviction that the Spirit is calling us to approve the ordination of women deacons in the OCA, for the following urgent reasons:

The ordination of women deacons is *not* a break with Orthodox tradition. On the contrary, it is the *revival* of a tradition that was widespread throughout the first millennium. This tradition began in New Testament times, as is clear from St. Paul's commendation of the deacon Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2. The ordination of women deacons is also mentioned in other authoritative documents from the first millennium, including the canons of the Council of Chalcedon, the Apostolic Constitutions, and the Codex Barberini.

The ordination of women deacons will promote the church's mission of making new disciples.

I'm convinced that the Orthodox Church would attract more women if we ordained women deacons. This is an urgent matter, since the Orthodox Church has not attracted nearly as many women converts in recent years as male converts.

The ordination of women deacons will permit women to minister with the full authority of the church, rather than being "junior partners" to ordained men in ministry. This will be a tremendous help to women who serve in a variety of ministry roles, such as hospital and military chaplains.

*Jim Edwards, lay delegate to the All American Council 2025
St. Innocent Orthodox Church, Olmsted Falls OH, Diocese of the Midwest*

I'd like to propose for the 21st All American Council that ordination of female diaconate be restored immediately by declaring at the level of "All American Council" that the ordination of female deaconesses is necessary, as the need to do so is dire in the Church.

Chungsoo J. Peter Lee

The Descent of the Holy Spirit Romanian Orthodox Church, Elkins Park, PA.

1. The OCA is facing a looming clergy shortage, at the same time that many parishes are experiencing significant growth.
2. The result is over-burdened priests.
3. An obvious solution is restoring a functional diaconate with real pastoral functions, beyond just liturgical ones.
4. In restoring the diaconate, serious consideration should be given to restoring the female diaconate.

Paul Meyendorff

St Katherine Orthodox Church, Kirkland, WA

There have been an abundance of discussion/ articles on why young men are converting to the faith in droves. What is not being discussed is why young women are not converting to the faith or about women leaving the faith. I and others believe that the female diaconate would support the faithful in the church, especially women. There are many pastoral issues that the church leadership are not aware of (or willfully ignoring) that are affecting many women in the church today. There is rampant misogyny both from laity and those in ordained ministry (online and in person). Women are routinely treated as less than men even though it goes against what the Orthodox Theology teaches (e.g. Gen. 1:26–28, Gal. 3:26–28). Having a female diaconate would promote the use of women's gifts in the church today, help to dispel myths that are prevalent in the church today and help to meet the ministerial needs of many of the faithful.

Christina Jatras

St. Mary's, Falls Church, VA

I am in support of deaconesses.

Michele Kochoff Platt. I was raised in the OCA at St. George Romanian Orthodox Cathedral, Detroit (Southfield, MI), today (St. Michael's Orthodox Church, Huntsville, AL)

What an exciting and opportune time we are living in to be a witness to the influx of converts to our Orthodox faith! What else can be done to educate our Orthodox parish? To start, every OCA church would do well to encourage education about the revival of the female diaconate in their own parish. This can be done through an invitation for a representative from the St. Phoebe Center Board to come and speak and answer questions parishioners may have. Many times the rejection of this opportunity is based on lack of knowledge, misinformation and an incorrect assumption of the role of the female deaconess. We should be made aware of the benefits that the female diaconate could provide for our church through considerate and thoughtful discussion amongst our parishioners.

Karen Brown, Parish Member of St. Stephen the Protomartyr Orthodox Church, Longwood, FL

As a parish pastor I have seen the need many times for a revival of the female diaconate. There are issues that women often come to me as a priest to discuss that involve domestic abuse, issues of sexuality, and personal issues of gender. They come to me as a trusted clergy appointed by the church. Still it is often difficult and awkward for them to open their hearts fully to a male. It would be a great service to the church as a whole, if there were female deacons who, as recognized appointees of the Church, were available for this type of need. It is true that there are non-ordained women who can help, but this is not the same as having someone who is recognized as being appointed by the Church.

Additionally, we have a shortage of deacons, including in my own parish, which could be filled by women who are called to this service and who are properly trained for it. It would be an inspiration for our young women and girls to see female deacons.

I would respectfully ask our bishops to consider whether the Holy Spirit is calling the Church to consider this issue so that this need may be fulfilled.

Sincerely,

V Rev Mark Korban

St Jacob of Alaska Orthodox Church

Northfield Falls, VT

The Metropolitan speaks of the OCA having a 'strong foundation we can now build upon.' I believe that 'strong foundation' has to be one that aligns our practices with our theology. There are practices

that unfortunately do not do this. For one, as a patriarchal Church, we must be committed to take a look at Christ's examples and Words and see if our practices are in alignment with them. There are many priests and bishops who proclaim that women cannot come into the altar because of ritual impurity. Yet, this Jewish law/practice was abolished when Christ healed the woman with the flow of blood, and when Paul the Apostle wrote, "There is neither male nor female" in Galatians 3:28. We allow immature boys into the altar yet forbid mature, pious, worthy women. What's more, some parishes do not allow women to hold the communion cloths for the same reason of ritual impurity. These practices are an abhorrent misuse of our faith and should be courageously addressed.

Education

The Study Guide suggests examination of some fairly superficial educational ideas and programs, while there are much deeper issues we must also pay attention to. When it comes to a woman's place in the Church, our seminaries must stop teaching only a partial/skewed history of the female diaconate, in which they focus on the baptism of women as her main duty while leaving out the many other roles she held that are still so relevant and necessary today. Our bishops, in being held accountable for upholding the Truth, should then instruct their clergy on the full history and duties of the female diaconate, and they themselves should stop speaking only a partial truth when asked about the female diaconate. Our bishops must also speak out against the hatred, anger, and bearing of false witness that those calling themselves Orthodox Christians voice, particularly on social media, when it comes to the place of women in the Church.

Where is the Holy Spirit calling parishes to be in the next five years?

There is a great need for pastoral care in every parish. Because the Church is a hospital, clergy should be required to have at least two units of CPE (clinical pastoral education), and in addition, a worthy woman(en) should be identified in each parish and given basic pastoral care training in order to assist the priest with pastoral care. Clergy should be cautioned to avoid sensitive and potentially awkward conversations with women and should refer these women to a qualified woman in the parish. This practice would bring in the unique talents, experiences, and gifts of women in helping other women, help reduce potential double abuse by clergy, and help reduce the number of sexual misconduct cases.

May God guide our work in all areas of the Orthodox Christian faith, and give us courage and strength as we make difficult decisions in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior!

Ann Marie Mecera

St. Stephen the Protomartyr Church, Longwood, FL

Pre-Conciliar Commission Member, 12th All-American Council

Former Parish Council Lay Vice-Chair (20 years) of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, Columbus, OH

Three years ago, I helped form a liturgical service program for girls at my parish. The girls cut bread ahead of the Liturgy, they assist with the collection, they bring the bread to be blessed by the priest

during the Theotokian, and they pass out antidoron after communion. On certain feast days, the girls, whom we call Myrrhbearers, process with the altar boys during the Little and Great Entrances. (The girls do not enter the altar space.) The response to this program has been phenomenal. In the past year alone, we added four girls to our ranks. Adults in the parish continuously compliment the girls on their enthusiasm and commitment, and it is beautiful to watch the girls grow in love for the church and one another as they help each other, learn together, and serve.

Yet more is needed. If it is appropriate for the girls to process with the altar boys on feast days, why isn't it appropriate for every service? There is no theological basis why they shouldn't, and the empty responses given by clergy only serve to highlight the conspicuous difference in the way we treat our boys and girls. Our girls ache to be seen and valued. When the church declines a reasonable request to participate, the girls feel the weight of this rejection at the core of their worth in the church's eyes.

Liturgical participation by girls needs to be actively supported and championed at the highest levels, both clerical and lay. Our girls need to be treasured and valued with actions and not only words. At every instance where it is theologically permissible, girls should be invited into the Liturgy, not excluded from it.

Rebecca Barone
St. Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church (OCA)
Dayton, OH

The female diaconate will bolster and uphold the traditional distinction between the roles of men and women maintained by the Church Fathers and by Orthodox Church teachings. By educating, training, supervising, and saying "Axios!" to women to serve the Church as deacons, the Church will demonstrate that there is a needful distinction between men and women in the modern world.

Women have roles unique from men in both the service of the Church and in the secular world. Because of the differences between men and women, females often need to reach out to and confide in another woman for counsel, advice, care, and insight into how to do God's work in the diverse and challenging situations of the 21st century. Many situations are experienced only by women, not by men, and females cannot always receive counsel from a male priest or deacon in a time of uncertainty or difficulty. Women/girls of all ages need a trusted authority ordained by the Church for counsel in how to apply Orthodox teachings to uniquely female experiences. By ordaining women to service, the Orthodox Church will acknowledge and uphold that there exist distinct differences ordained by God between male and female, that male and female lived experiences differ, and that God works through both male and female members of His Church to spread the Word of Truth.

Danielle Frimenko
Holy Transfiguration in Livonia, MI

My hope and prayer is that the Church leadership continues to seek new ways to engage the gifts of women doing ministry in the Church. For example, we now have many Orthodox female chaplains providing care for patients at end of life; the chaplains are formally endorsed, but have no formal inclusion in broader meetings or conferences. They are not listed publicly. Perhaps they could be engaged as a resource for parish life; they could teach lay people and clergy about end of life ministry and grief support. Similarly, we have Orthodox birth doulas; if we had a centralized way to find them (like a directory), that would be a great resource for couples in the church. We would like to see the women in these professions included in the greater pastoral conversations among leaders in the Church.

Anonymous

Mission: In our parish, we frequently see men join *without their wives* or (female) significant others. For some reason, the ladies stay away. Why? The influx of young men is being discussed as a draw to “masculine Christianity”, and maybe there’s something in that: Men want stability, rigor, tradition. We have all that. But women *also* want stability, rigor, and tradition. Are they staying away because, at an Orthodox liturgy, it looks like there’s no place for women in the Orthodox Church except for cooking at the coffee hour?

Education: There are topics for catechesis and adult education that women need instruction on and men don’t. Yet catechesis and adult education are typically conducted by priests, deacons, or at minimum, a qualified lay theologian. Sure, women theologians could conduct these classes in their local parishes—but how many parishes have a female theologian? If we had deaconesses, however, there would be properly qualified women in parishes to teach these topics.

Philanthropy: The more deacons we have—of any sex—the more of this we can support, no?

Jennifer Sigler, PhD
Protection of the Holy Mother of God Orthodox Church
Falls Church, VA

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