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STORY

OCA officials concerned about Alaska diocese [printable version]

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Article published on Monday, February 11th, 2008
By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

A leading official with Orthodox Church in America said Friday that church officials are concerned about the Diocese of Alaska run by Bishop Nikolai, but stopped short of making any official comment about a recent complaint filed with the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the tonsure of a registered sex offender.

"It would be inappropriate for me to comment during an ongoing investigation," Archbishop Alexander Garklavs, a chancellor on the Metropolitan Council said. "We are concerned."

On Feb. 6, Paul Sidebottom, a former missionary with the church, filed a complaint with EEOC alleging sexual harassment and retaliatory discharge, stemming from an incident in Kodiak in May 2007.

Based on a letter Sidebottom wrote to Metropolitan Herman in Syosset, N.Y., the leader of the Orthodox Church in America began an investigation into misconduct within the Alaska Diocese centered on allegations that a drunken Archimandrite Isidore, the Alaska Diocese's second leading bishop, allegedly sexually assaulted Sidebottom and that Nikolai subsequently attempted to cover it.

"In the car ride over (from the airport) and back, Fr. Isidore was in tears," Sidebottom wrote in a letter to Herman describing the alleged sexual assault. "He asked how he had come to his current condition. He said he had once been normal. He loved God. He loved his neighbor. All the while, he was reaching back to touch my leg in an inappropriate way and trying to hug me."

Sidebottom said it wasn't the last time that night Isidore tried to fondle him.

"I was in his bedroom alone with him," Sidebottom wrote. "Then he tried to touch me inappropriately, wanting 'someone to cry with.' Several times Fr. Isidore tried to stand and grab me inappropriately. Finally, he collapsed on his bed."

According to a press release issued by Sidebottom's lawyer, James Spencer with the law firm Kinkle Elkouri located in Wichita, Kan., "The EEOC complaint goes on to allege that Bishop Nikolai and Archimandrite Isidore caused Sidebottom to be fired from his job at St. Herman's Theological Seminary in retaliation for Sidebottom's filing of a sexual harassment complaint with Metropolitan Herman."

Sidebottom, now 31, had been a teacher of religious classes and assistant to the seminary dean at St. Herman's Theological Seminary in Kodiak, a position that he loved.

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"To find myself on Kodiak Island, the beachhead of Orthodoxy in America still stuns my imagination," Sidebottom wrote on the Orthodox Christian Mission Center Web site. "Alaska has been called 'the pearl of great price.' Certainly ministry here takes extra effort, but the blessing is worth giving all that you have."

Nikolai started an investigation shortly after hearing of the allegations, but Herman, concerned about improprieties, wrote a letter to Nikolai requesting that he remove himself from the investigation by requesting a formal investigation by the church.

"Dear Vladyka (Nikolai), it cannot be overstated that the allegations against Archimandrite Isidore and yourself are extraordinarily serious, and now public," the letter stated. "The severity of all issues involved makes it impossible for the matter to be addressed on the diocesan level, or by you and the Diocesan Bishop."

"Therefore, as Primate of the Orthodox Church in America and with full support of the Holy Synod, I request that you immediately remove yourself from any involvement in this matter (by means of official request for assistance) and fully cooperate with the investigation being conducted by the OCA at the national level."

Five days after the letter, on Aug. 14, Nikolai requested the investigation be conducted by the primate's office. Nikolai said the timing was coincidence.

Although a lawsuit is possible, Spencer said that Sidebottom isn't looking for monetary gain.

"Paul is still hopeful that his complaint will be resolved within the structure of the Orthodox Church in America," Spencer said in the press release. "Some will view Paul's decision to file complaints with the EEOC and the Orthodox Church in America as a sign that he is making trouble in the Diocese of Alaska. But Paul is not making trouble - he is merely revealing the trouble that is already there."

The Dushkin tonsure

The Alaska Diocese made more trouble for itself in a recent controversial tonsure of a registered sex offender.

In December 2007, 26-year-old Terenty Dushkin, a registered sex offender who served more than a year in prison for having sexual intercourse with a minor, was installed as a lay reader by Nikolai.

"This is not a scandal in any way," Isidore said. "The church believes everyone is redeemable. We don't think people are necessarily damaged goods that have to be locked away."

Dushkin was appointed a reader, even though the appointment appears to violate church policy, which states, "No layperson shall commit, attempt to commit, or engage in any act of sexual misconduct."

A reader "is regarded as one of the first steps toward priesthood, the first rank or order of priesthood," said Andrew Jarmus, director of communication for the Orthodox Church in America.

In July 2004, while responding to a domestic dispute, Dushkin's girlfriend, Anna King, told police that he had been having sex with another woman. During the course of the on-site investigation, police discovered that the other woman was a 15-year-old girl. In subsequent interviews, Dushkin, then 22, acknowledged that he knew the girl was underage and that the two had been having an ongoing sexual relationship for three years.

While executing a search warrant in Dushkin's apartment, police found a tape which showed Dushkin having a sexual encounter with King and the young girl at the same time, which investigators believe to have taken place in 2003.

At the time of the tape, King said she was 17 years old and admitted to having a three-year relationship with Dushkin, making Dushkin approximately 19 when their relationship started and King approximately 14. Durshkin was charged with seven counts of sexual abuse of a minor in the second degree, one count of unlawful exploitation of a minor and one count of possession of child pornography.

He was also charged with two counts of sexual abuse of a minor in the third degree, when it was discovered during the investigation that Dushkin had oral sex with another underage girl who was 13 at the time of the encounter.

In a plea bargain, Duskin pleaded guilty to one count of sexual abuse of a minor in the second degree, sexual abuse of a minor in the third degree and unlawful exploitation of a minor.

Isidore, who is one of the subjects of a church and EEOC investigation for sexual misconduct, said that Dushkin's crimes were not predatory in nature and that as a reader Dushkin is under a lot of supervision.

In an announcement by church officials, Dushkin was suspended as a reader effective Jan. 17.

"In accordance with the holy Canon and in concurrence with the ruling bishop of the Diocese of Alaska, Terenty Dushkin, who was tonsured a Reader at St. Innocent Cathedral in Anchorage, AK., on December 9, 2007, was suspended from any and all ministerial duties in any parish of the Orthodox Church in America."

Dushkin, Isidore and Nikolai could not be reached for comment.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reach by email at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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STORY

Orthodox leaders want to move on from controversy surrounding church

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Article published on Friday, February 15th, 2008

By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

Because of health problems, it has been about three months since Bishop Nikolai, head of the Alaska diocese of the Orthodox Church in America, visited St. Herman Theological Seminary in Kodiak. But on Monday afternoon, Nikolai, along with Archimandrite Isidore, made the trip, weathering light snow and heavy controversy.

"Typically I come once a month," Nikolai said. "We were supposed to come (Feb. 9), but of course the flights were canceled. I was supposed to be in Ouzinkie on Sunday, but that didn't work, because this is Alaska."

Instead, a day after arriving, he and his entourage were off to Old Harbor to celebrate feast day with the parish of the Three Saints Orthodox Church.

Nikolai said the medical issues are nothing to worry about.

"Everyone is praying," he said. "That should be enough."

He returned to Kodiak Wednesday and today ordained Gregory Parker as a new deacon before departing.

Parker is one of the growing number of religious leaders Nikolai said St. Herman Theological Seminary is helping to put into communities.

"The seminary is an important part of my diocese," Nikolai said.

It's a fact he's proud of, because before he got to his post, he said, the seminary was in disrepair and there were few religious leaders in the state, especially in the rural villages.

"We had walls falling down," he said. "We had floors that you could knock your foot through. We put a lot of effort into restoring it. The seminary is very important to me."

Once the buildings were livable, he said he opened the doors of the seminary and invited men and women from across the state to study in the multi-year program, during which the men can become ordained.

When the Alaska diocese opened the doors of the seminary, students were given free admission.

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"When I came, there was literally no money in the bank for the diocese," he said. "Everything had been taken and used and we built that up, too. And despite that, I made the decision not to charge students (to attend the seminary). That's still the case. I have never charged one student a single penny to be here."

A major reason behind that decision was to attract more Native Alaskan students. The free admission is also largely responsible for the increase in the number of Orthodox clergy in the state. Nikolai said that when he came to Alaska, there were only 26 priests and now there are 43.

Nikolai said the bottom line is that doing the Lord's work and helping others to do it is what the seminary in Kodiak is all about.

"Our school is a diocese seminary," Nikolai said. "We train our people to go back out and lead their people to Christ and that's what we've done."

However, he said all the good work that he and most of his congregation is doing is being overshadowed by recent controversy, which Nikolai said isn't really controversial at all.

Controversial or not, two issues have served to divide members of the Alaska diocese including those in Kodiak, causing painful moments.

Father Innocent, a religious leader with the OCA in Kodiak, has not been immune.

"This is not the big city," Innocent said. "I have a wife, a daughter who is going to be in high school next year, a younger daughter. It's heartbreaking to realize my daughter picks up the paper and sees her church displayed in this light."

He said he does his best to explain everything to his family because he is open and honest with them.

"We're very forthright with them, but this has repercussions with this community," he said. "Our enemies in this community get magnified."

Still, in the midst of the ongoing strife, the Orthodox Church in Kodiak tries to continue to do what they say God intends, even though at times it has been difficult.

Nikolai said he and his religious leaders will face all problems head-on.

"I don't run away from things," he said. "And the other thing is I won't get in the dirt. I won't crawl or wallow in the mud. That's not the example these students or my clergy should see from me."

Tustury

Probably the biggest controversy to face his administration is the recent tonsure of Terenty Dushkin, a convicted sex offender who served more than a year in prison for sexual abuse of a minor in the second degree, sexual abuse of a minor in the third degree and unlawful exploitation of a minor.

Critics suggest that the tonsure of Dushkin is the first step toward priest's robes.

Yes, Nikolai said, but added it's a long way from being a priest.

"The first rung of a ladder doesn't get you to the top of the building, or the second or the third step or the fourth," he said. "The other thing is that all of my clergy, all my priests are graduates of the seminary. He can't go

back to seminary."

Nikolai said that for all practical purposes, a reader is an alter boy and he makes no apology for tonsuring Dushkin.

"I believe that the message I wanted to send was the fact that there are lots of issues out there, lots of them," Nikolai said. "You can be sorry for what you've done, you can pay the price, you can reconcile with God and man and the church receives you."

He said with no hope of redemption, what's the point?

"The church is about forgiveness," Nikolai said. "We teach Christ's life here. That's what this is all about."

Sidebottom

The other controversy facing the Alaska Diocese is a recent complaint filed with the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission by Paul Sidebottom.

Sidebottom, a former missionary with the church, was working with the seminary when he alleges he was sexually assaulted by a drunken Isidore.

Sidebottom said that after writing a grievance letter to Metropolitan Herman, head of the Orthodox Church in America, he was fired in retaliation.

Nikolai denies the charges.

He said that after discussions weeks before finding out about any of the alleged assaults, Sidebottom's position was slated for removal to save money at the seminary so they could hire a new dean.

"I called Paul three or four times and left him several e-mails," Nikolai said. "No response, no reply."

He said he talked to the head of Sidebottom's mission and said he supported putting Paul somewhere else, either in Kodiak or in Alaska.

Nikolai said he deferred the decision to do away with Paul's position until he made sure the new dean position would occur.

"If he doesn't pan out, we can continue the school with the staff we have, including Paul as part of that," Nikolai said. "On the 16th of July, I get this call from the Metropolitan saying there is this complaint. First time I've heard about it."

Nikolai said Isidore has been cleared of all charges in a report written Dec. 12, 2007.

"He was cleared of everything — everything," he said. "I have a copy of the report. (The allegations were) unsubstantiated. They interviewed seven different people."

Innocent and Nikolai said now they just want to continue the work they are doing at the seminary and in Alaska and hopefully leave these allegations behind so they can carry on God's work unobstructed.

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reach by email at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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STORY

OCA head, bishops to meet over torn Alaska diocese [printable version]

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Article published on Monday, March 3rd, 2008
By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

Archpriest Alexander Garklavs, chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, said Friday OCA leader Metropolitan Herman will meet with his bishops early this week to discuss the current situation with the Alaska diocese, run by Archbishop Nikolai Soraich. The church is headquartered in Syosset, N.Y.

"We're concerned and take seriously the communication that we've received and a response will be forthcoming from the church," Garklavs said. "Like in any organization or institution, there's certain protocols and procedures that are followed. That's what will be done."

The metropolitan and his bishops will meet to discuss a flood of e-mails sent by clergy throughout Alaska to Herman complaining about Bishop Nikolai.

"We are unhappy about all that has been brought to light, the controversies of last year and the unrest of the Church in Alaska," stated one e-mail signed by seven Yup'ik clergy of the Kuskokwim Deanery in Southwest Alaska and posted on the Web site ocanews.org. "To serve in fear, rather than to serve in faith and love is not Orthodox."

The Rev. Victor Nick of Mountain Village wrote that village Elders are afraid of Bishop Nikolai and that wherever he goes they scatter.

"The clergy and their wives and children are trembling in fear," he wrote.

On Feb. 23, church leaders issued a statement concerning the torrent of letters and e-mails they are receiving.

"There are indications that serious issues exist that may need to be addressed," the statement reads. "His Beatitude, Metropolitan Herman is aware of the situation and has been in touch with His Grace Bishop Nikolai and members of the Holy Synod."

Bishop Nikolai said he has not been asked to step down.

Bishop Nikolai also said that he has never mentally or physically abused any of his clergy as alleged by some.

"There's never been any abuse in that regard," Bishop Nikolai said. "Yes, I'm tough. There's no question I'm strict. No question about that. There's an order in the church that needs to be followed and I do impose those rules how the church is set up and the clergy are compelled to follow those things."

He said none of the letters and e-mails come explicitly state there has been abuse.

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"If there was they would have written it in there; they would have said something," Bishop Nikolai said.

Asked why there has seemingly been a church insurrection led by a host of clergy, he compared them to rebellious teenagers.

"I liken this to a family where there's an adolescent acting out," Bishop Nikolai said. "I think when you were an adolescent, like I was, we at one point decided our parents are stupid, they didn't know anything, we knew much more and we could do it better. And there's a rebellious part of that too, I suppose."

Bishop Nikolai denied a charge that said he told Alaskan Natives to only speak English.

"English is not my native language either," he said. "I've encouraged (them to speak their Native languages) in the services."

To help address some of the concerns, Bishop Nikolai said that he has called a meeting of the OCA clergy in Anchorage.

"I called the meeting so they could come to Anchorage and discuss their concerns and air their differences with neutral parties present," he said. "It's an open discussion. I think it can be a real healing process."

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reached by e-mail at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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STORY

Russian Orthodox church leaders mum on bishop removal

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Article published on Thursday, March 6th, 2008
By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

For nearly every member of the Alaskan chapter of the Orthodox Church in America, the last 24 hours have been nail biting. On Wednesday, bishops met with the church's leader by telephone, in a special session to discuss the rising tide of open rebellion by clergy within the Diocese of Alaska.

The OCA headquarters is in Syosset, N.Y.

At issue is the growing war between the Alaskan clergy and Archbishop Nikolai Soraich, the leader of the Alaska diocese. It's a multi-sided war whose battlefield has become the Internet and people are surfing in to view the results.

Although the meeting was concluded by early afternoon, no decision was made public as of press time.

Alaskan clergy and parishioners had hoped to see a quick decision. Archpriest Alexander Garklavs said after the meeting a response would be forthcoming. Mark Stokoe said that his Web site, ocanews.org, where much of this war is playing out, had 40,000 readers on Tuesday and 42,000, Wednesday.

"That's individual computers," Stokoe said. "For a church of 28,000 paying members — everybody is reading it. That's the most I've ever had."

The battlefield

Is Stokoe, creator of the Web site, a hero or villain?

The answer depends on who you ask in the Orthodox Church, the subject of his nearly daily posts.

If you're the target, then the answer is probably villain.

Bishop Nikolai, leader of the Orthodox Church in Alaska, has described the Web site as the National Enquirer of the Internet, but the archbishop is squarely in Stokoe's sights and has been for more than a year.

However, if you are one of the people who say they are too terrified to come forward for fear of retaliation, he is a hero.

Stokoe said he created his Web site two years ago amid an embezzlement scandal involving a member of the OCA clergy. He said the OCA was aware of what was going on and tried to cover it up.

"Most of the bishops hold that position, and it's not because they are Orthodox bishops. Catholic Bishops handled it the same way during the recent priest scandal. That generation (of clergy) feel the best way to handle a scandal is to hide it," Stokoe said. "Unfortunately, that's not possible these days and it's really unacceptable when you don't deal with

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the scandal, you just pass it along."

Now he's using his site to give voice to the growing number of clergy beginning to speak out against Bishop Nikolai, accusing him of abuse.

The clergy members say the abuse has been happening ever since the Archbishop took over the Alaska diocese seven years ago.

However, what seems to have galvanized many clergy to finally speak out against Bishop Nikolai is a letter sent to Orthodox leaders by seven Yup'ik priests and published on the ocanews Web site.

"There are now some clergy who are afraid to voice their concerns and true feelings to one another and are not united in mind and heart," the letter reads in part. "Most of us are like Fr. Yakov, who, during his presentation at the Assembly in November, was shaking in fear and nervousness. As it is now, we are concerned for the future of the Church, the diocese and her faithful in Alaska. Unchanged, it will continue to be an unhealed wound."

The letter, which calls on the archbishop to resign, prompted many Alaskan Orthodox clergy to write their own letters and speak out publicly.

In an interview with the Anchorage Daily News on Feb. 29 the Rev. Michael Oleksa, archpriest at St. Alexis Church in Anchorage, said a large number of church clergy have reached the point where they can no longer serve with Bishop Nikolai.

"It's the accumulation of years now of what the clergy regretfully but sincerely believe is a matter of personal and collective abuse," he said.

Kodiak resident Raisa Baldwin has joined the fight against the Archbishop.

"We have not lived under the terrible tyrannical menace that (Bishop) Nikolai has imposed on the seminary students or the priests ... they have lived under such terrible conditions," she said to Garklavs in a letter. "Some have even been physically struck. I feel safe in saying that almost to a man, we support the priests in what they say and do, and will back them up in whatever it takes to get this nightmare out of our lives, and restore peace to this land."

It is not just the Alaskan laity that is speaking out.

On March 1, the Minneapolis, Minn., deanery, in the Chicago diocese, which is under the leadership of Archbishop Job, passed a resolution without dissent expressing concern with the growing outcry of Alaskan clergy.

"These issues are having a detrimental impact on all the faithful, not only in Alaska, but throughout the Orthodox Church in America," the resolution reads. "We also unanimously call on our Synod of Bishops to act promptly ... in protecting the victims of abuse, and in moving to bring a new beginning to this distressed diocese."

Bishop Job was not present when the resolution was adopted.

The risk

Part of the reason many have not spoken out in the past comes from the underlying risk of excommunication.

"(Bishop) Nikolai is not a very subtle guy," Stokoe said. "The reason I have the Web site and the reason I put my name on it is I'm in (Bishop) Job's diocese. If I was in any other diocese, I would have been at risk of being excommunicated."

Others haven't been so lucky.

After speaking out against Bishop Nikolai in the Anchorage Daily News, Fr. Aleksa was removed from his teaching position at St. Herman Theological Seminary.

Other changes may be forthcoming.

In an interview earlier this week, Bishop Nikolai likened the uprising to an adolescent acting out.

"Yes, I'm tough," the archbishop said. "No question about that. There's an order in the church that needs to be followed and I do impose those rules how the church is set up and the clergy are compelled to follow those things."

He may be about to enact some tough love in order to restore that order.

An open letter on the archbishop's Web site foreshadowed possible things to come. The letter references the instructions of St. Paul concerning listening to allegations against an Elder unless witnessed by more than two people.

"I hasten to add that the Diocese of Alaska and I in particular have followed these four principles imperfectly," Bishop Nikolai wrote. "I have not sufficiently inspired all of the clergy to lead according to these four principles and I have not always responded quickly enough when members of this diocese have engaged in gossip, indirect and unsubstantiated accusations, and slander."

He also issues a legal warning.

"We again obey the instructions of St. Paul by not taking matters of the church into secular courts for resolution," he said. "We will, per Canon Law, engage the secular courts when we have truly and factually wronged and when the issue is not addressed by normal Church discipline as described above."

Stokoe said that he wasn't worried about a possible lawsuit.

"I would not be afraid to get him in a courtroom where he would have to answer questions," he said.

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reached by e-mail at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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STORY

Alaska Orthodox bishop defies order to leave the state [printable version]

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Article published on Monday, March 10th, 2008
By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

Archpriest Alexander Garklavs, a chancellor with the Orthodox Church in America, confirmed today that Archpriest Eugene Vansuch has decided not to accept an appointment as administrator of the Alaska Diocese, temporarily replacing Bishop Nikolai Soraich.

"I believe there was just a change of plans," Archpriest Garklavs said. "I haven't spoken with him directly, but it sometimes happens, a reconsideration for personal reasons."

On Friday, the Lesser Synod of Bishops ordered Bishop Nikolai, clerical leader of the Alaska Diocese, to leave the state.

The Very Rev. Garklavs said as of now, no decision has been made as Fr. Vansuch's replacement, but a decision could come later today.

"I may be coming up myself," Garklavs said. "It's not certain yet. We're waiting on the bishops to make contact with each other and make an official announcement."

Whoever is named administrator may not have an easy time in Alaska, especially since Bishop Nikolai is refusing to leave.

Weekend developments

Leaders of the church have placed the bishop in timeout like a disobedient child, but the bishop isn't going to his corner willingly. Instead, the bishop refuses to leave saying there is no law requiring him to step down.

The latest development played itself out on the OCA Web site Friday, when church officials posted the ruling of the Lesser Synod of Bishops.

"We inform you that we have received many letters of serious complaint from deaneries, clergy and faithful of the Diocese of Alaska," the letter said. "Not relying on hear-say, yet acknowledging the seriousness of these letters, at your suggestion, all your brother bishops were contacted; and they unanimously agreed that the best course of action for you is that you be placed on temporary leave of absence."

The OCA leader, Metropolitan Herman, gave Soraich 24 hours to respond positively to the letter or he threatened to make the leave mandatory.

Bishop Nikolai came out swinging.

"As a diocesan bishop of the Orthodox Church in America, I formally request that if charges are being brought against me, then canonical standards be followed," he wrote. "I beg you, confront me with my sin and I will repent. But confront me with 'bad press' or an abrasive 'leadership style,' and the most I can do is become a slick politician or politically

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correct bureaucrat ... and that I refuse to do."

Bishop Nikolai also said that how the church handles the current issue is far more important than his leadership style and will likely broadcast a clear and irretrievable message to all Orthodox believers worldwide. He closed the letter by refusing the order of self-imposed exile.

In a written response, the Metropolitan Herman agreed – somewhat.

"I agree that how we respond to these complaints will send a clear message to all," he wrote. "We must ensure that the message sent to the church at large is that all Christians, no matter what their position in the church, are subject to the authority of the Scriptures, our traditions, and the Holy Canons. You are required to leave the diocese immediately."

Bishop Nikolai still refuses to leave.

In an interview with KTUU television in Anchorage he said, "This was my life: This is going to be the rest of my life."

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reached via e-mail at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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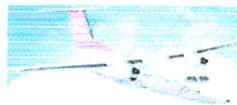
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STORY

Orthodox church names fill-in for Alaska bishop

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Article published on Tuesday, March 11th, 2008
By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

Maintain faith and love.

That was the message sent by Archpriest Alexander Garklavs, chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, to Alaskans, in an effort to begin the healing process.

Fr. Garklavs was appointed administrator of the Alaska Diocese on Monday. He replaces Archpriest Eugene Vansuch, who declined the appointment over the weekend.

An administrator was appointed for the diocese after the church placed Bishop Nikolai Soraich on mandatory leave of absence and ordered him to leave Alaska while church officials investigate accusations of physical and mental abuse and abuse of power.

"Archpriest Alexander Garklavs, in addition to his responsibilities as chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, is hereby appointed as the administrator for the Diocese of Alaska, effective immediately," Metropolitan Herman, leader of the OCA in America and Canada wrote in a letter published on their Web site. (Bishop Nikolai's) name is not to be elevated at any service and he has been released of all responsibilities in the administration of the diocese and St. Herman's Seminary."

Garklavs said because Bishop Nikolai is refusing to leave Alaska, he's not sure when he will come up, but hopes by next week. Until then, he had a message for members of the OCA in Alaska.

"Remember that the church is larger than the sum of its parts and therefore the church is larger than the Diocese of Alaska," He said. "We are very concerned about everybody in Alaska, from Bishop Nikolai to the most recently baptized child, and just as soon as possible we hope to be there and we hope we can maintain their faith and love at this time."

Garklavs said his appointment is just the first step of the healing process. The investigation into the allegations is another, and while he's here he will be traveling and listening to members.

However, he said that couldn't begin until the bishop leaves Alaska.

"Bishop Nikolai has not been prejudged," he said. "There is no prejudgment on him, his character or his administration. Rather, I would say the church is attempting to investigate the situation in Alaska in an impartial and objective manner, which really cannot be done while Bishop Nikolai is in Alaska.

Garklavs said that an official communiqué to the clergy of Alaska would come out later today.

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He said hopefully the situation would be resolved soon so that the church and its members can put this situation behind them.

"Churches are not exempt from problems that exist in the world and so we're here facing this difficult and painful situation," he said. "We're called on to try and see this in a spiritual light as our Lord would. I can't quite predict the future, but we're Christians, we have our faith, we have our Scripture, we have the Bible, we have church tradition."

Bishop Nikolai could not be reached for comment. A phone message on his answering service said offices were closed this week in observance of the first week of Lent.

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reach by e-mail at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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STORY

Bishop orders Alaska clergy not to obey national leader

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Article published on Wednesday, March 12th, 2008
By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

The Orthodox Church in America is in chaos as the power struggle between church leaders and Alaska Diocese leader Bishop Nikolai Soraich continues to unfold.

The eventual winner of the struggle will receive as a prize Alaska, the birthplace of the OCA in America with its nearly 100 parishes, missions and institutions, more than 40 clergy and 25,000 members.

The latest development adding to the confusion is an open letter by Bishop Nikolai to the clergy of Alaska ordering them not to obey Metropolitan Herman, the OCA leader.

On Friday, the Metropolitan informed the Alaskan clergy that Bishop Nikolai had been placed on a mandatory leave of absence and to cease the commemoration of the bishop.

"You have received instructions (albeit through Internet postings and newspaper reports) from His Beatitude Metropolitan Herman to cease the commemoration of your Bishop in the Divine Liturgy," Bishop Nikolai said in his letter. "Let me be clear: all clergy of the Diocese should continue the current practice, maintain the commemoration of their Diocesan Bishop in the celebration of the Divine Services our Church, and not accept as canonical or biblical recent innovations announced by Metropolitan Herman."

In his letter Nikolai argues the church does not have the authority to remove him from his position without first going through procedures outlined in the Church Canons, established in the 4th century during the First Ecumenical Council.

"The church protects the voice of all Orthodox persons who are accused," the Bishop said. "The church has determined the voice of the accused will be heard before judgment is passed. The means by which the church has protected the voice of accused persons are The Holy Scriptures and Canon Law ... not by public opinion or by the 'investigations' of committees."

The announcement comes at the holiest of time for the Orthodox Church, the first week of Lent, further adding to the confusion. Many offices are closed in celebration.

Battle lines are being drawn through every parish in Alaska, but it's too early to tell where clergy allegiance lies.

However, an indication of which way the Kodiak clergy lean may lie in a recent insert in the parish bulletin of the Holy Resurrection Cathedral.

The insert, given to all members of the church, restated Bishop Nikolai's

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reasons for not taking a leave of absence and offered guidance.

The announcement cites some of the same references Bishop Nikolai did in the bishop's initial letter of refusal, but also said it is important to be aware of the Canons that apply to the situation.

Specifically, Canon 74, which requires a bishop be summoned three times to the synod to answer charges against him, was cited. As was Canon 2 which forbids diocesan bishops from intruding, liturgically serving without a blessing, or meddling in the affairs of another diocese.

Bishop Nikolai called a press conference for today at the Russian Orthodox Museum in Anchorage. In the release, the bishop said he would respond to all questions concerning the canonical crisis created in the Diocese of Alaska by Metropolitan Herman and other bishops of the OCA. Information presented at the press conference was not available as of press time.

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reached by e-mail at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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STORY

Bishop, OCA in open battle over Alaska diocese

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Article published on Thursday, March 13th, 2008
By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

The battle for the Russian Orthodox Diocese in Alaska continues into its ninth day today with the disputed Alaskan leader, Bishop Nikolai Soraich, still refusing to leave Alaska as ordered.

On Wednesday, Bishop Nikolai called a press conference to reiterate that he would not step down, accusing Orthodox Church Leader Metropolitan Herman and the Lesser Synod of Bishops of causing the current crisis by not following proper church protocol.

"For the first time in the history of the church in North America, a lesser synod has attempted to effectively depose a bishop and to place an administrator in authority over an entire diocese," the bishop said in his opening statement. "This non-canonical innovation is not only a moral threat to the church in Alaska, it is a mortal threat to the Orthodox Church throughout North America."

He said the threat is whether the OCA will decide important issues according to Scripture and the Canons or will issues be resolved as public opinion.

"If the call for me to vacate my office had been the result of decent and orderly process based on Holy Scripture and Holy Canons of the church, I would have exited Alaska immediately."

Until then, he said he will not leave Alaska until he is deposed.

The dispute heated up another degree yesterday as clergy and supporters closest to the bishop spoke to the media for the first time. Archimandrite Isidore, who is at the center of his own troubles, told the Anchorage Daily News that the OCA is seizing on the internal strife to remove a bishop they have had long-standing issues with.

Bishop Nikolai said he didn't know why he is being targeted.

"You know, I can't speak for what's in another person's heart," he said.

He said that his strict adherence to rules had made him a target inside Alaska.

"When I came to Alaska, it was a pretty loose diocese," he said. "There were 26 priests here and I think eight of them were suspended, and it was pretty loose over the years where they pretty much wanted to go where they wanted to go."

Meanwhile, Archpriest Alexander Garklavs, the newly appointed administrator of the Diocese of Alaska issued his own statement Wednesday in a letter published on the church's Web site.

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"By the decision of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America ... His Grace, Bishop Nikolai has been placed on an indefinite leave of absence," Fr. Garklavs wrote. "Should Pastoral or other ecclesiastical issues arise, we ask that you address them to our office, until further notice.

"(Bishop Nikolai) has also written that you should continue to acknowledge him as the Diocesan Hierach. These uncanonical actions are extremely harmful, for the clergy and people of the Diocese of Alaska as well as for the entire Orthodox Church in America."

Fr. Garklavs was appointed as administrator of the Alaska Diocese earlier this week after Archpriest Eugene Vansuch declined the appointment. Fr. Garklavs said that he hopes to come to Alaska next week.

First Alaskan magazine contributed to this story. For a full transcript of Bishop Nikolai's press conference go to thetundradrums.com.

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reached by e-mail at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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