

First national conference on **ORTHODOX SCHOOLS** confirms yearning to promote Christian learning environment

Story by Judy Yacio
Photos by Clarence Duncan

As participants sat in St. Peter's Booth Hall or in the various classrooms where presentations and breakout sessions were held, the hunger permeated the sessions — maybe “electrifying hunger” is a better description. Orthodox Christians in the United States are indeed hungry for an Orthodox lifestyle for children in an educational setting which sustains Christian beliefs and values. There exists an overwhelming desire to allow teachers to teach and children to learn – to avoid having the school environment being consumed by behavioral issues.

The first national Conference on Orthodox Schools, funded by the Virginia H. Farah Foundation, welcomed participants from 19 different states. St. Peter's Classical School in Fort Worth, Texas and St. John of Damascus Academy in Santa Barbara, California, were co-hosts in association with the Orthodox Christian Education Commission: Orthodox Independent Schools Project. The June conclave, held at St. Peter's Orthodox Church in Fort Worth, Texas, ended with participants asking for a second national conference to be held next year. Father John Cassar, parish priest of the Mother of God Church in New Jersey, said he will begin pursuing the possibility of hosting a follow-up conference next year.

Of the 19 states represented, there were 16 different schools that sent participants, according to Karen Duncan, coordinator of the conference. Of the more than 80 attendees, only four or five were non-Orthodox. People traveled to Texas from Alaska, Florida, California, New York and New Jersey to name only a few states. Duncan worked closely with the Very Rev. Anthony Miller, St. Peter's rector, as well as Bryan Smith, headmaster of St. Peter's Classical School in Fort Worth, and Annie Fisher, secretary at the school. The emphasis of the conference was to share and discuss how to start and maintain Orthodox Christian schools.

Comments from evaluations told how the “conference combined many resources/encouraged discussion/exposure to approaches.” One attendee said the days were filled with “practical ideas and experience,” while another said that “perhaps the most useful aspect...was the opportunity to meet in the flesh so many other people who are interested in Orthodox schools.”

Another person said the gathering was supportive “in so many ways. David Hicks' presentations were especially helpful to articulate vision and give practical ideas.” This person found Father Anthony Scott's explanation of the different types of boards and ideas for forming a board very helpful. Individuals used their evaluation forms to request specific workshops of interest for future school conferences.

A reception was held the first evening, with the official opening of the conference beginning June 8th with Matins led by Bishop Basil Essey, Antiochian Orthodox Bishop of Wichita and Mid-America. His Grace also presented the homily at the Friday Vespers and spoke to the group at that evening's dinner.

Subjects addressed included philosophy of education, classical learning, accreditation, and professional development opportunities for Orthodox schools, as well as fund-raising strategies and strategic planning along with board and curriculum development.

Presenters included Father Anthony L. Scott, president of Stewardship Advocates (www.stewardshipadvocates.org), who conducted workshops on fund-raising and strategic planning. Father Anthony holds a Master of Divinity Degree from St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary. After many years of parish service, Father Anthony worked as the Chief Advancement Officer of St. Vladimir's Seminary, and has worked extensively as a consultant to various national,

international and local 501c organizations within the Orthodox Church, providing counsel on board development, fund-raising strategies, capital campaigns, volunteer management, fund-raising position analyses, feasibility studies, grantsmanship and strategic planning in the nonprofit environment.

Dr. Vigen Guroian and David V. Hicks were also key presenters.

Dr. Guroian of Culpeper, Virginia is presently Professor of Theology at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland, has published more than 150 articles in books, journals, and encyclopedias, and has authored nine books. His June 8th evening address spoke of the importance of morality taught through fairy tales, and kept the after-dinner group enthralled with his *Pinocchio* reading as he presented “Tending the Heart of Virtue.”

Mr. Hicks, vice president for Academic Affairs of Meritas LLD, a Florida-based company that buys and operates PK-12 college preparatory schools throughout the world, shared his knowledge and experience from his 26-year career as an educator. He currently heads the Meritas School in Florida and North Broward Preparatory Schools. He has served as headmaster of four other independent schools throughout the nation. He earned his Master’s degree in philosophy at Jesus College, Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. He has also studied Russian at the University of Moscow. During his various leadership positions in the education field, Mr. Hicks raised approximately \$100 million, master planned four campuses, and renovated 15 major buildings. His conference presentations included addressing two separate aspects of the philosophy of education.

Bryan Smith summarized the need for the conference: “The Orthodox Church has always viewed education as a thing much broader and much more comprehensive than mere schooling. Scripture tells us to raise our children in the nurture — *paedeia* — and admonition of the Lord. This concept of *paedeia* was explained by St. Gregory Nazianzus as bringing one’s self through a study of the scripture to conformity with Christ by means of imitation.” Smith contends that “schools can be structured in their content and in their methods to complement the broader project of Christian *paedeia*.” He concluded, “It is just this hope that led Christians throughout the cen-

turies to establish schools they deemed compatible with the proper formation of young people; and it is this same hope that is moving more and more Orthodox families and parishes to start their own schools today in America.”

Participants expressed gratitude for “the most wonderful hospitality, flow, ease” of the conference. Several were openly complimentary of the great work and leadership provided by Bishop Basil and St. Peter’s parishioners for hosting this landmark event.

His Grace Bishop BASIL, left, takes a few moments to discuss conference matters with Bryan Smith, headmaster of St. Peter’s Classical School in Forth Worth, Texas.



Warren Farha, proprietor of Eighth Day Books in Wichita, left, finds much to discuss with Father Anthony Scott, and His Grace Bishop BASIL. Warren and other conference attendees offered a wide variety of materials for participants to purchase for establishing and maintaining Orthodox schools.



David V. Hicks shared his 26 years of experience with participants. He has headed four independent schools throughout the United States.



Dr. Vigen Guroian kept nearly 100 participants and parishioners enthralled with the real story of *Pinocchio* and the moral values taught through fairy tales.

