

**UNIFORM BY-LAWS
FOR THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA**

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL PRINCIPLES

ARTICLE I

The Coptic Orthodox Church is a church founded by St. Mark, the Evangelical Apostle, in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, in the First Century. Accordingly, the Coptic Orthodox Church is an Apostolic Church which believes that the head of the Church is the successor of St. Mark the Apostle and as such is entrusted by God and the Church to oversee it and to preside over its' Holy Synod which is the highest priestly, legislative and executive authority in the Church. Accordingly, the Coptic Orthodox Church is a hierarchical Church.

ARTICLE II

The head of the Coptic Orthodox Church is the Pope of Alexandria and the Patriarch of the See of St. Mark. The Authority of the Pope and the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church extends to the entire See of St. Mark, both inside and outside Egypt.

ARTICLE III

The Pope of Alexandria, as the successor of St. Mark the Apostle, is the founder of all the churches in North America.

ARTICLE IV

The "General Clerical Council" is presided over by his Holiness the Pope, with priests appointed by him as its members. It acts for the Patriarchate at Cairo.

His Holiness the Pope, may delegate any Bishop from among the members of the Holy Synod to preside over the Council.

The "Clerical Councils in the dioceses" are headed by their Bishops with priests appointed by the Bishop as members of the Council of each diocese.

The "Clerical Council" acts as the Church Court.

ARTICLE V

According to the Constitution and By-laws of the Holy Synod (article 51), "The Synodical committee for the coptic churches in immigration" is formed and presided by His Holiness the Pope of Alexandria from among the members of the Holy Synod, to assist him in marshalling the affairs of the churches abroad.

ARTICLE VI

In accordance with the custom of the Church and the provisions of the laws of the Holy Synod, the Pope is the responsible Bishop of all new dioceses during the foundation period until Bishops are ordained for such dioceses. He is also the head of all Bishops of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the entire See of St. Mark, both inside and outside Egypt.

ARTICLE VII

In the event that Bishops are ordained for new dioceses in North America and the boundaries of such dioceses are defined, it is understood that those Bishops will be members of the Holy Synod bound by its laws and together with the other members of the Holy Synod constitute members of one body in the holy Apostolic Church and specifically in the Coptic Orthodox Church which is headed by the Pope of Alexandria.

ARTICLE VIII

The tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church indicates that there is an important role for the people in the life of the Church. The members of the Church are members of one body and the Hierarchy of the Church is not a type of separation between the head and the members, since all of them are, through the sacraments of the Church, members in one body with Jesus Christ as the Head, gathering all local Churches and all the people of God in every age and place. That is why according to Church traditions and the constitution and by-laws of the Holy Synod Article No. 60, the new bishop who is the head of the local Church (a diocese) is chosen according to the following law:

“A new bishop is chosen after the consent of the people and after they recommend and acclaim him, and also with the approval of His Holiness the Pope of this acclamation, on condition that he fulfil the spiritual and personal conditions to the teaching of the scriptures and church rules. If the majority of the members of the Holy Synod object to this ordination, then it must be stopped.”

In the same manner, a deacon is ordained and hence could be eligible to be a member of the Board of Deacons after the consent of the people of his church and after they acclaim him, and also with the approval of the bishop, on condition that he fulfil the spiritual and personal conditions according to the teaching of the holy scriptures and Church rules. The acclamation is an expression of the congregation's approval of the person selected by the bishop to be appointed to the board of deacons and his elevation in the degree of service to the Church. Any member of the congregation is entitled to submit objections against any person acclaimed by other members. The bishop has the right to reject the acclamation presented by the congregation if he feels that the congregation did not make the right choice. It is the bishop who initiates the process of entrusting the congregation to submit the acclamations. He is the only one with the right to administer the process of selecting the board of deacons and to make the final decision in that regard. The objective of this process is to select those who can assist the bishop in some of his services and they have to be bound by his rules and regulations and cannot take any action without consulting with him and obtaining his approval in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Holy Synod and Apostolic laws of the Church.

CHAPTER 2

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA AND THE MOTHER CHURCH OF ALEXANDRIA

ARTICLE I (This article cannot be changed)

Each coptic orthodox church in North America (whether or not incorporated) is an indivisible part of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria (Egypt) which has as its supreme head the Pope of Alexandria, and derives its authority to function in every aspect from the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt.

ARTICLE II

His Holiness the Pope of Alexandria as the founder of all the Churches in North America, shall appoint priests from the mother Church in Egypt to serve the churches in North America.

Priests could be also appointed whether from among the qualified persons in North America or elsewhere in the See of Saint Mark.

His Holiness the Pope has the right to transfer any of the priests who are assigned by him to serve in North America.

In the event a bishop wishes to transfer any priest assigned by His Holiness the Pope to serve in North America, he may do so only with the consent of the Pope.

If a priest is unaccepted by the majority of the spiritual members of his church, the responsible bishop together with the Clerical Council of the diocese take the suitable decision concerning his situation.

CHAPTER 3

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA AND THE DIOCESES TO WHICH THEY BELONG

ARTICLE I

The bishop is the responsible head of his diocese and, in accordance with the laws and customs of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the priests and deacons cannot perform any act without his advice and approval and they are bound by his spiritual and managerial advice. The priests and deacons are accountable to the bishop of the diocese where they are serving. The bishop is responsible for organising their affairs and activities in accordance with the best interest of each church. He cannot render any judgment on any priest or deacon except through the Clerical Council of the diocese. In the event there is no Clerical Council of such diocese, the matter has to be referred to the Clerical Council of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo.

ARTICLE II

The General Board is an advisory body which assists the bishop in determining the needs of the churches in his diocese, spiritual as well as financial.

The bishop presides over the General Board of his diocese. The members of the General Board are the presidents and the secretaries of the boards of each church in the diocese.

ARTICLE III

The bishop of each diocese is the head of the churches in his diocese and is the one responsible for all the churches, the priests, the monasteries and seminaries in his diocese with the exception of the monasteries and seminaries which belong to the Patriarchate. He is also responsible for all spiritual, financial and administrative matters in his diocese and in all of the churches in his diocese.

ARTICLE IV

The bishop defines the relationship between the churches in his diocese and sets up the boundaries of the services of each church. As such, he can divide some of the parishes or combine others. He also has the right to combine several churches in one diocese and to define the geographical boundary of the combined church and the religious organisations attached to such churches, such as monasteries and seminaries.

The Pope of Alexandria is the supreme head of all monasteries and seminaries in the entire See of St. Mark. He has the right to assign these religious organisations to the Patriarchate in Alexandria, Egypt, or to the diocese in which they are located.

ARTICLE V

No new monastery or seminary can be founded except with consent of his Holiness the Pope of Alexandria.

ARTICLE VI

The bishop of the diocese has authority for, and power over, the spiritual, financial and administrative matters in his diocese.

He has the right to dispose of any properties owned by the churches in his diocese for the good of the church.

However in some states or provinces of North America, if a church is incorporated, the state or provincial laws may require more than one trustee for the management of various aspects of a church. In such cases, the bishop as the person responsible for church administration, may, if he so determines, appoint two or more trustees from among the priests or priests and deacons who are members of the board of deacons of the church to form together with himself the legal number of trustees for that certain incorporated church. The board of trustees appointed for an incorporated church is bound by the provisions of these by-laws and it is mandatory that they follow and comply with the provisions of these by-laws. The bishop has the right to appoint a new board of trustees at any time.

Also, if the bishop does not carry the citizenship or the permanent residence permission of the country in which his diocese is located, or if he is not living in his diocese, in such cases whether the state's law requires trustees beside the bishop or not, he will appoint a board of trustees not less than three members (two members beside the president) with at least two thirds of its members

from among those who carry the citizenship or a permanent residence permission of the said country. This board of trustees is presided over by the bishop himself. No sale, mortgage or disposition of any properties of the churches in that diocese can be carried out without the consent of at least two thirds of the board of trustee and the approval of the Board of Deacons. The consent of the bishop is always also needed. This board of trustees will follow the same regulations mentioned before in this article.

ARTICLE VII

In the event a church building and/or related structure and adjoining property is to be sold or mortgaged, the bishop cannot take any action in that regard without the consent of the Pope of Alexandria.

ARTICLE VIII

The bishop or the board of trustees presided by him is entitled to purchase for the diocese, for a monastery, a seminary, or a church in the diocese any real property. No such property can be purchased without his consent.

ARTICLE IX

In the event a church (whether or not incorporated) is dissolved, the bishop decides within his diocese the church to which the property of such dissolved church will be distributed.

In the event no bishop has been appointed for it, the Pope of Alexandria decides the church to which the property is to be distributed in the same country of the dissolved church.

CHAPTER 4

THE BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE

ARTICLE I

In the event a bishop is to be ordained or appointed in any diocese in North America, the boundaries of such diocese shall be defined by the Pope of Alexandria and included in the official appointment which is to be signed by His Holiness the Pope.

If a bishop is to be seated in his diocese, His Holiness the Pope delegates some bishops to seat the new bishop.

ARTICLE II

The bishop is in charge of the ordination of the priests and deacons in his diocese, consecrating churches, altars, baptisms, icons and all the instruments of the altar and is responsible for the religious services in his diocese. He shepherds his people as he receives the staff of shepherd from His Holiness the Pope. He shares the Pope in his apostolic services and in ordaining new bishops as he is also a member in the Holy Synod as all other bishops of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

ARTICLE III

The bishop attends the meetings of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church both the regular meetings as well as emergencies, so-long-as he receives notice in sufficient time to travel to the place where the Holy Synod is convening.

ARTICLE IV

The bishop is accountable to the Holy Synod. The Holy Synod being the highest canonical authority in the church has the right to try any bishop, as well as any person who holds a priestly rank or any layman if accused of going against the church or its teaching.

The bishop may be deposed by the Holy Synod in case he is found guilty according to canon laws of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In this case it is understood that his membership in the Holy Synod is consequently dropped, and has no more to carry on his responsibilities as a bishop.

Also the Holy Synod has the right to review the acts of the bishop and take any appropriate action in accordance with the traditions of the church.

ARTICLE V

In the event a bishop dies or the seat of his diocese becomes vacant for any of the reasons mentioned in the laws of the Holy Synod, the Pope of Alexandria will have the right to replace him or if the Pope finds it better he can divide his diocese into any number of dioceses and, to define their geographical boundaries, churches, properties and religious organizations attached to them.

ARTICLE VI

The Patriarchate does not inherit any property, real or personal, left at the bishops death belong to and are bequeathed to their respective dioceses. The Pope becomes the fiduciary of the property left by the bishops until it has been delivered to their successors, taking into account the provisions of the preceding Article of this Chapter.

ARTICLE VII

A bishop could appoint a vicar or deputy for his diocese to be in charge of some of his obligations during his absence or inability to act. His Holiness the Pope of Alexandria may select a vicar or a deputy for any diocese for so long as no bishop has been appointed to such diocese. In some cases, the bishop may appoint a person similar to a vicar or deputy in each church in his diocese as the need may arise.

CHAPTER 5

OBJECTIVES OF PARISH CHURCHES

ARTICLE I

Parish churches shall:

A. Promote a christian way of life according to the faith and doctrines of the Coptic Orthodox Church through:

- (1) Administering the liturgy and the sacraments;
 - (2) The pastoral work of the clergy;
 - (3) Christian education, publication and sunday schools;
 - (4) Spiritual meetings and Bible study;
 - (5) Group activities, such as cultural clubs, sports, religious plays, bazaars, social gatherings, trips and similar activities;
 - (6) Social services to members of the church and others everywhere.
- B. Cooperate and assist other coptic orthodox churches.
- C. Carry on evangelistic and missionary work.
- D. Promote christian unity all over the world guided by the work of the Holy Synod in this respect.

CHAPTER 6

BOARD OF DEACONS

ARTICLE I

Introduction and definitions

A. The board of deacons of each church shall consist of the priest or priests of the church and of deacons selected in accordance with the provisions of these by-laws.

B. According to Biblical teaching and the Apostolic Canon laws, the bishop is the person who is in charge of the affairs of all the churches in his diocese, whether they are spiritual, administrative or financial. No decisions are to be taken or executed by the board of deacons without his permission and approval. The bishop may charge the priests and deacons to assist him in carrying out some of his responsibilities within the common laws of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

C. Each member of the Board of Deacons shall serve for a term of three years or until his successor is duly appointed. (See item J in chapter 9)

D. The church Board of Deacons, by virtue of its member's ecclesiastical status, will work in such manner as to assist the bishop in carrying his responsibilities.

ARTICLE II

Selection of Board of Deacons

A. The bishop, or his duly appointed representative, attends the meetings at which the members of the Board of Deacons are selected. No layman is acclaimed to be a member of the Board of Deacons unless he is ordained as a reader or a subdeacon. The congregation presents the

acclamations to the bishop as well as any objections to such acclamations. The bishop, or his duly appointed representative, attends personally to the writing of the acclamations to ensure accuracy. The bishop selects the members of the Board of Deacons from among those who obtain the consent of the majority of the spiritual members of the church (see chapter 6 art. 1-D) and also from among those who do not have valid objections against them. The bishop selects six or more deacons to serve with him and/or with the priest or priests as members of the Board of Deacons of the church. The board being responsible for financial and administrative aspects only while the spiritual services are entirely entrusted to the clergy. The trustees, if any, are to be appointed by the bishop from among the members of the Board of Deacons as described in chapter 8 article 2.

B. The Manner of Collecting the Acclamations.

A preliminary acclamation is prepared and must be signed by at least seven spiritual members of the church. The acclamation is then presented to the bishop for his approval. If approved, the acclamation is circulated to the rest of the congregation to be signed by those who so desire.

C. Notice of Acclamation.

An announcement of the date for acclamation shall be made after the delivery of the sermon on the Sunday at least two weeks prior to the date of selecting the members of the Board of Deacons by the bishop. The announcement is then repeated the following Sunday after delivery of the sermon. In addition, a written notice is to be a fixed in the announcement bulletin in the church at least two weeks prior to the date at which the members of the Board of Deacons will be acclaimed by the spiritual members of the church selected by the bishop.

D. Spiritual Membership.

In order for a member of the church to be considered a spiritual member it is recognized that: participating in the Holy Communion at least once a month and having a Father of confession approved by the bishop together with other conditions mentioned below (item E), are conditions for that consideration. Accordingly, it is necessary to provide membership cards for each church to identify the spiritual members who desire to participate in the acclamation. The bishop has the right to approve the signatures of any spiritual members whether or not they have such cards.

E. A member of the Board of Deacons, a member of any church committee and each spiritual member of the church who has the right to acclaim deacons, priests and bishops should be:

- (1) A zealous Christian Coptic Orthodox over 21 years old;
- (2) Obeying Coptic Orthodox Church rules concerning dogmas, and free from ecclesiastical ex-communication;
- (3) A regular attendant of Church services and meetings;
- (4) Observing confession and at least monthly communion in his church;
- (5) Known of his piety and services to the church; and
- (6) Should not be a member of any other religious organisation.

F. Each person acclaimed and going to be selected by the bishop to membership on the Board of Deacons has to sign the following vow:

“THE VOW”

“I do solemnly vow that I will uphold the doctrines, teachings, traditions, holy canons, worship and principles of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria as well as the Coptic Orthodox Diocese in North America and that I will fulfil faithfully and sincerely the duties and obligations required of a member of the church Board of Deacons, under the leadership of our honoured bishop. So help me God.”

G. The members of the Board of Deacons must be respectable members of the community, free of hypocrisy, with good moral character and spiritual behaviour. They must be observing holy communion and all other religious requirements. They must be over 21 years of age and must be attending the holy masses for at least one-half of the Sundays each year. The bishop will make the evaluation and approve the preliminary acclamations on that basis. Furthermore, the bishop will evaluate any objections presented and determine their accuracy. In his absence, his duly appointed representative will attend to these affairs. The bishop may elect to appoint a committee to examine and make recommendation to him concerning these affairs.

H. It is prohibited that the Board of Deacons contain more than two persons who are related to each other up to the third degree. The bishop has the right to make an exception to this rule in the event he determines that the best interest of the church so requires.

I. It is prohibited that a person be a member of the Board of Deacons of more than one church at the same time.

ARTICLE II

Meetings

A. The Board of Deacons of each church shall meet regularly at least once a month. At the end of each meeting, the board shall set a date and a time for the succeeding meeting. Notice of each meeting shall be given at least seven days prior to the meeting date. The notice shall include an agenda of items to be discussed or requiring approval by the board.

B. A quorum for the transaction of all business is constituted by the presence of one-half of the number of members of the board. Decisions are to be made only by an absolute majority of the members present at the meeting.

C. In case a resolution is adopted by the Board of Deacons and the presiding priest, or one of the priests of the church, feels that it is not in the best interest of the church, he may, with notice to the Secretary of the board, refer the matter to the bishop with a request that he gives his decision in this respect. The approval of the bishop is necessary for the resolution to be valid.

D. In case of the absence of the president from a meeting, resolutions taken in such meeting should not be executed until the president is notified.

E. In case of the absence of any member of the board for three successive meetings without an excuse acceptable to the board, the board may consider his absence as an unwritten resignation and a substitute shall be appointed according to the rules provided in these by-laws.

F. The president priest shall open each meeting of the board with prayer.

G. A list of all spiritual members of the church is to be prepared by the Board of Deacons and placed in the file of the Board of Deacons. A copy of this list is to be sent to the bishop who can adjust the list and approve it. The list can be changed at any time by a decision of the bishop. New spiritual members are added regularly to the list following the same rules.

H. A list of the entire membership of the church is to be prepared by the Board of Deacons following the same procedure set forth in the foregoing paragraph G.

CHAPTER 7

COMMITTEES

A. The Board of deacons headed by its president shall establish as many committees of the church as it determines to be in the best interest of the church and shall appoint the members of each committee from among the spiritual members of the church.

B. The Board of Deacons shall be notified of the actions and decisions of each committee.

C. Decisions of committees will not be put into effect unless they are approved by the Board of Deacons.

D. No committee may conduct any form of financial transactions or be permitted to establish bank accounts unless authorised by a decision of the Board of Deacons.

E. The annual budget of each committee will be established by the Board of Deacons.

F. In the event of the absence of any member of a committee for three consecutive meetings without an excuse acceptable to the committee, a substitute may be appointed by the Board of Deacons.

CHAPTER 8

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOARD OF DEACONS

ARTICLE I

The Board of Deacons shall consist of:

- A. President
- B. Vice-president
- C. Secretary
- D. Treasurer
- E. Members

The Board of Deacons shall consist of the priest or priests of the church plus six deacons and one additional deacon for each additional priest in the event more than one priest is assigned to the church.

ARTICLE II

At its first meeting, the Board of Deacons of each church shall meet with a bishop or a person duly delegated by him in writing at which meeting the bishop or his delegate shall select the vice president, the secretary and the treasurer on the basis of acclamations made by the members of the Board of Deacons. In addition, he may choose to act as president of the Board of Deacons or may appoint as president the most senior priest of the church or any of the other priests of the church.

The bishop, after signing the structure of the new Board of Deacons, will call all present members of the board to sign after him to ensure their acceptance to carry the responsibilities assigned to them and their consideration of all what was performed and approved by the bishop concerning the board. Absent members should sign at the nearest next meeting of the board.

In states where trustees are required for the church according to the state's law, the bishop shall appoint those trustees from among the priest or priests and deacons who are members of the board and were attending its first meeting presided by the bishop.

ARTICLE III

An auditor is to be appointed by the bishop. His rights and duties are to audit the financial accounts of the church.

CHAPTER 9

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE BOARD OF DEACONS

A. The president shall preside over all board meetings. In case of the presence of the bishop, the later shall preside over the meeting. Either the bishop or the presiding priest can call for an emergency meeting if he determines a need therefore. The president holds the right to attend any committee meeting ex officio.

B. The secretary of the Board of Deacons shall send a letter of authorization approved and signed by the bishop, to a bank to open a dual signature account for the church with names of the members of board authorized to sign.

C. The president, as head of church and by virtue of the ecclesiastical authority vested in him, shall guide and oversee the total church program, and is ultimately responsible for the whole life and activities of his church.

D. The vice-president shall, in the absence of the president, perform the duties of the president.

E. The secretary shall keep record of all meetings of the board. He shall be the executive officer of the board in all matters which have been determined by the Board. He shall prepare with the president the agenda before each meeting. He along with the president, represents the Board of Deacons of the church in the General Board of the diocese. If the president of the board is the bishop, the church can be represented by the vice-president and the secretary in the General Board.

F. The treasurer shall have charge of all income and expenditure of the church. Cash, money orders, or cheques are to be deposited in the church bank account. Separate accounts may be opened to cover different activities. All accounts should be operated under the signatures of the president, the treasurer. In case of absence of any one of them for more than two weeks, the vice-president shall sign for the president (if absent) and the secretary shall sign for the treasurer (if absent).

G. The treasurer is to prepare the annual financial report within four weeks after the end of the fiscal year, which is from July first to June thirtieth.

H. The church Board of Deacons is to attend regularly the Divine Liturgy and to participate in the sacramental life of the church thereby setting an example for the congregation.

I. Upon the expiration of its term, the Board of Deacons shall surrender to the succeeding Board all church records, including memberships lists, minute books, bank books, cheques books, financial records and all other property of the church. Such transfer shall be effected by an appropriate letter of transmittal.

J. In the event any member of the Board of Deacons or of any committee deviates from faith and christian behaviour or violates his fiduciary obligation towards the church and his attendance to his duties as member of the Board of Deacons or a committee, complains may be addressed to the bishop for his investigation. The bishop has the right to remove a member at any time and select a successor to him in accordance with the regulations contained in these by-laws. Likewise, if the Board of Deacons deviates from the customs of the Holy Apostolic church, the bishop has the right to remove the Board and to select a new board.

K. In the absence of duly appointed trustees pursuant to Article VI, the Board of Deacons, properly constituted, shall have all of the rights, powers and obligations of such trustees (including the ability to sell assets and manage the financial affairs of their church), subject to any authorization of the bishop required hereunder.

CHAPTER 10

AMENDMENTS

These by-laws may be amended at any time by the Synodical committee for Coptic Orthodox Churches in immigration headed by His Holiness the Pope. The local churches or the General Boards of dioceses may send proposals to His Holiness the Pope of Alexandria recommending changes in these by-laws. The said committee will decide whether to amend the by-laws or not and to determine the suitable amendments.