

1776/The Grand Idea: Door open for more extensive investigation

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The leadership of the Orthodox Church in America has ignored calls for a special audit to determine if millions of church dollars were misspent in the 1990s, but has agreed to look over the books for the past two years.

The church's ten-member Holy Synod of Bishops met in "extraordinary session" March 1 to discuss allegations of financial impropriety and parishioners' calls for an outside financial audit.

The bishops agreed to adopt "best practices" for accounting in nonprofit organizations, but limited across-the-board audits to 2004 and 2005. The bishops also asked for advice on how to make church finances "more transparent, disciplined and accountable."

In an apparent reference to a lay-led revolt over financial practices, the bishops also urged the church to "live as Christians in mutual repentance and forgiveness."

The 400,000-member church, based in Syosset, New York, traces its roots to the Russian Orthodox Church but has been independent of Moscow since 1970.

Former treasurer Eric Wheeler— first in a confidential letter in October and recently on the Internet—alleged that church leaders misspent millions in donations, including money from military chaplains to buy Bibles that were never purchased.

Wheeler said the funds were used, for example, to pay personal credit card bills and blackmail and to pay for lavish dinners and entertainment—most of it "off the books."

"During my years at the central church, I experienced a total abuse of power with no concern for accounting practice nor aspiration for accountability both internal and external," Wheeler wrote in October.

Church officials were unavailable to discuss the bishops' actions, but acting treasurer Paul Kucynda told the *Washington Post* that the bishops "left the door open" for a more extensive investigation. "Doing the independent audit will give them a sense of direction without being judgmental prematurely." -*Religion News Service*