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The Identification of Elders in Informal Associations of the Faithful in the Russian Orthodox Church between 1917 and 1943

ABSTRACT: After coming to power in Russia, the Bolshevik government unleashed a widespread terror against the Russian Orthodox Church, which aimed to destroy church life at all its levels. The most severe period of persecution occurred between 1917 and 1943; during this period the institutional church was practically destroyed and the Church was deprived of its unified administration, as a result of which church life took on a local character. Ecclesial life, however, was not fully destroyed, but began to manifest itself more in informal associations of the faithful, who strove to keep in contact with the ecclesiastical institution, while simultaneously maintaining the independence of their inner life. Under these conditions, church associations had their own elders and leaders, most of whom were clergymen, whether priests or bishops. This article is devoted to the study of the phenomenon of eldership within informal associations of the Russian Orthodox Church during the most difficult period of Soviet persecution, i.e., the experience of identifying elders in church communities and brotherhoods. The authors primary attention is directed to the issue of establishing general patterns of extra-institutional identification of elders in informal church associations. Such patterns may have church-wide significance for clarifying the specific contents of pastoral ministry in the post-Constantinian period of church history.
Introduction

Under conditions of unprecedented repression against Russian Orthodox clergymen and active laypeople, which were aimed at the destruction of any form of church life, “non-parish” associations of the faithful became particularly significant for its preservation; these included secret monastic and lay communities, spiritual families, and brotherhoods. The leadership of such communities was generally undertaken by priests who were called within or selected by the communities themselves, often without any formal reception by the institutional church. The task of collecting and assimilating the experience of the confessors of the Russian church in the 20th century implies the study of the practical ecclesial experience and spiritual inheritance of these informal communities and brotherhoods, while the quest to explain a mysterious unity of life in the 20th century Russian church incites us to look for common traits in the experience of such associations of the faithful. The identification of elders is one of the most important questions in church life. As such, to understand and consciously recognize the many ways in which the inheritance of the 20th century confessors is pertinent in our time, we need to collate and study their experience of identifying elders.

The position of leaders within different associations varied, and when no office was present (head priest, abbot, etc.), leaders might go by various names, such as “papa”, “dear one”, etc. In this article we will use the word “elder” to generally designate this ministry, by which we mean to indicate that member of an informal church association who bears greater responsibility for the community as a whole with respect to other members, and who commands the particular trust of all other members. In contrast to generally accepted names for various hierarchical services (bishop, priest, pastor, etc.), the understanding inherent in the word “elder” seems fitting to us, as in accordance with
the order of community and brotherhood life and the characteristics of the spiritual unions we are here considering.

We have chosen to focus on three communities and one brotherhood in this study. All were formed by the faithful themselves — both clergy and laypeople — on the territory of the former Russian Empire:

1. The Liturgical-Penitential family of Holy Martyr Sergij Mechev (1892–1941), which arose out of the community of Fr. Alexij Mechev in 1923, at the Moscow church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in Klenniki; this community had up to 300 members.

2. The spiritual family of Archimandrite Sergij (Saveljev; 1899–1977), which arose in Moscow in 1924, and numbered up to 15 people.

3. The brotherhood of Bishop Makarij (Opotskij; 1872–1941), founded in Cherepovets in 1924. In addition to Cherepovets, spiritual families of the brotherhood existed in Novgorod and Galich. General membership between 1933–1937 was up to 70 people.

4. The community of Fr. Pontij Rupyshev (1877–1939), which arose at the estate of the aristocratic Koretsky family in the village of Mikh novo in the Šalčininkai District of Lithuania, in 1926. The community was founded as an attempt to redress an insufficiency in Orthodox Christian life in a Roman Catholic setting. The community was a work settlement and continues its existence through the present day. During the period that we are considering, membership numbers rose to 150 people.

The source materials for this study are texts written by the founders of these spiritual associations, as well as memoirs and remembrances of community and brotherhood members. Among these we would highlight in particular: a collection of sermons and letters from Fr. Sergij Mechev to his community, written from exile, as well as his memoirs and descriptions of life which are provided in a two volume work entitled “Carry Each Other’s Burdens” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a; Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012b]; the book entitled “The Long Road” (“Dalyekij putj”) [Sergij (Saveljev)] and the “Memoires” of mother Serafima (L.N. Saveljeva) [Memories], which contain testimonies on the “familial nature of the life” of Archimandrite Sergij Saveljev’s community; the attachment to the monograph of A.G. Dmitrenko entitled “For the Holy Truth of Love and Brotherhood: Bishop Catechist Makarij (Opotskij), 1872–1941”, which contains letters from Bishop Makarij and his spiritual children [Dmitrenko]; the collections entitled “The Life and Spiritual Inheritance of Fr. Pontij Rupyshev.” [Zhizneopisanije] and “Fr. Pontij Rupyshev. Spiritual Inheritance. Mikhnov. Memoires.” [Pontij Rupyshev].
Our research covers the period from 1917 (the beginning of the Soviet repressions against the Russian Orthodox Church) to 1943, when the politics of Soviet authorities provided a corrective to the repressive measures against the church with its “second reinstatement” of the patriarchate.

The topic of the service of elders in informal spiritual unions during Soviet times has been but a tangential subject of interest in existing studies [Beglov; Pospelovsky; Shkarovsky; Zegzhda]. Fr. Nikolay Afanasiev discusses the topic of the selection of elders in the Ancient Church in his works, as does Prof. V.N. Myshtsyn. Afanasiev notes that in the first centuries of the church’s existence, the selection of elders was understood to be the church gathering’s discernment of those who had been designated by God for service to the church [Afanasiev, 16]; Myshtsyn also points out the role of the church gathering in the selection of elders [Myshtsyn, 31–32]. Our understanding of the norm for selection of church elders on the eve of the period we are working with in this paper is based upon pastoral theology teaching aids. The authors of these materials from the synodal period considered it very important that a candidate for holy service have a calling to the service in question. Some authors understand eldership to be a gift [Veniamin (Fedchenkov), 44], others understand eldership primarily as the result of obedience and self-correction [Anthony (Khrapovitsky), 54]. From the moment when the church came under persecution, questions of calling to eldership, the selection of church elders, and the role of the church gathering in their selection, become a matter of particular urgency.

Selection (Calling) to Ministry

The leaders of three of the four church associations were also their founders. The exception is Fr. Sergij Mechev, who received the leadership of the community on Marosejka street, in Moscow, from his father, Fr. Aleksij Mechev [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 36]. We might say that in the majority of the cases we are examining, the primary role is played by an act of grace, in which “God sends down the gifts of the Spirit for ministry in the Church.” [Afanasiev, 8]. The elderships of Saveljev, Opotskij and Rupyshev didn’t require any special discernment on the part of the church community, but were simply obvious as a result of their labours in gathering the community or brotherhood of people
who were in agreement with the paths for spiritual life that these men were offering. In these cases, the communities and brotherhood were the fruits and testament of the elders’ ministry, as in the words of the Apostle Paul: “…for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.” *1.

Fr. Sergij Mechev assumed eldership of the community in which he was a member. Externally, transfer of eldership seems to have occurred as it was generally accepted at that time, i.e. via the inheritance of the parish by the son of the previous parish priest. In reality, however, Fr. Aleksij passed the pastorship of the community to his son in an informal fashion: various reminiscences and memoirs of parish members and Fr. Sergij himself testify to the fact that the inheritance required Fr. Sergij’s comprehension of the change not as a formal transfer of the obligations of the priest in charge, but as a spiritual act of receiving his father’s pastoral “legacy”: “…Fr. Sergij was aware that he had accepted the office, and therefore the parish, not so much as an expression of his will as by the blessing and prayers of Fr. Aleksij.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 272]. At first, the new elder had neither the strength nor the ability to maintain the former level of spiritual guidance provided to the flock by his predecessor. Once he said to one of his spiritual daughters, “I won’t save you and I, myself, will parish with you.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 272] It is known that Fr. Sergij wanted to give up his eldership of the community, understanding that it was difficult for the community to accept and receive him in the wake of Fr. Aleksij, who the elders of Optina recognized as their equal. Nevertheless, believing the choice of his father and accepting eldership as a calling, he continued his labours: “the Lord Himself organized everything differently, and seeing His will for me to continue my ministry in the designation and discernment of others, I continued.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 411]. As is clear, in accepting the decision to retain eldership of the community, Fr. Sergij was being led by more than just his own inner struggle; he was seeking the will of God through relationships with other community members within developing conditions, and the following episode is also an illustration. Shortly after the death of Fr. Aleksij, desiring to unburden himself of the spiritual leadership of the community on Marosejka street, Fr. Sergij set off to Khomilshchi to see Hieroconfessor Nectarius of Optina, but due to various

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*1 1 Cor 9:2

2. Hieroconfessor (Elder) Nectarius of Optina (1853–1928) — the last elder of Optina chosen by its church gathering, a student of Skete Superior, the Venerable Hieroschemamonk Anatoly (Zertsalov) of Optina and the Venerable Ambrose (Grenkov) of Optina.
One of them was Fr. Fyodor Semenko (1902–1975). In 1935 he was ordained by St. Afanasij (Sakharov). From his location in exile in the city of Rybinsk, during 1936–1937 he spiritually fed those who came to Rybinsk and were members of the Mechev community.

The Mechev community was made up of small spiritual families, each of which was headed by a brother or sister more experienced in spiritual life. These were people who “could give spiritual first aid… console, encourage, perhaps sometimes provide advice or support at difficult moments, and guide toward the father.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 45]. In addition, there were those who were responsible for various aspects of community life (liturgy, study of the scripture, bringing children into the church, etc.). During his period of imprisonment, when direct spiritual guidance was exacerbated, Fr. Sergij gave particular attention to training brothers and sisters in the spiritual independence that would help them stay on the path and endure the absence of spiritual leaders:

Don’t search for typical spiritual leadership, these aren’t the times for that; and don’t hope that if you find it, you will find it quickly. Switch to caring for one another, edify each other, get your strength from each other, console each other.

[Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 71].

In 1935, secretly ordained brothers appeared in the community. It was Fr. Sergij’s idea that these brothers would serve as the heads of small groups (of 10–12 people) inside the Liturgical-Penitential family, in order to preserve the community during times of persecution, when the existence of a greater number of associations was practically impossible.

And when Fr. Sergij was seized, and after three years the church was closed entirely, these families (each with an elder at the head — O.K.) gave great spiritual support to members and helped them from getting lost [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 45].

3. One of them was Fr. Fyodor Semenko (1902–1975). In 1935 he was ordained by St. Afanasij (Sakharov). From his location in exile in the city of Rybinsk, during 1936–1937 he spiritually fed those who came to Rybinsk and were members of the Mechev community.
Some of the elders in the community were sisters: as such, Maria Nikolaevna Sokolova⁴ was the elder in one community, and Fr. Sergij blessed the brothers and sisters of that community to go to her for advice as they would to him. Before his death, Fr. Sergij entrusted the leadership of the Liturgical-Penitential family to Fr. Boris (Kholchev).⁵

In Vasily Petrovich Saveliev’s community (future Archimandrite Sergij) identification of elders took place differently. At the first stage, when Vasily’s circle was just coming together, it had spiritual fathers. One of them was Fr. Sergij Goloshchapov (1882–1937), the head priest of the Church of the Holy Trinity at Nikitnikov pereulok, in Moscow. Vasily became the elder of a group of parish youth, and his eldership became clear over time for the circle, and was associated with his obvious choice of a particular spiritual path: “The young people, with Vasily Petrovich at their head, chose a particular spiritual path, the life of a common family... <...> They called it family life...” [Sergij (Saveliev), 11]. In 1927, after a break with Fr. Sergij⁶, Monk Varnava (Gogolev; 1864–1933) of the Skete of the Paraclete of the Lavra at Sergeev Posad, became the spiritual father of the community, though Vasily took on day-to-day eldership of the community.

The arrest of senior members of the community and their exile, in 1929, seriously changed the external life of the “family”: everyone’s connection was maintained though active written correspondence. The external conditions of their life demanded particular efforts in service of maintaining unity and increasing the family’s spiritual depth. Vasily remained as elder, and gave advice and guidance in life to those who remained non-incarcerated. This, however, demanded effort from all, and acceptance of his advice in everything and all walks of life. For all the members of the community, a serious internal question was increasing their trust in Vasily, who was in prison but always present through letters, in which he characterized the spiritual state of each and pointed to areas on which attention should be focused, etc. At the same time, Vasily gave recommendations on which of the sisters should be elders amongst those who were not in prison.

⁴ Secret nun Juliania (1899–1981), an icon painter and restorer. She was the spiritual daughter of the Holy Righteous Alexij Mechev, then became the spiritual daughter of Fr. Sergij Mechev.
⁵ Archimandrite Boris (Kholchev, 1895–1971) served the Diocese of Tashkent from 1948 to 1971. He was a confessor of the faith, pastor, and preacher. Together with Bishop Ermogen (Golubev) he revived church life in the Diocese of Tashkent.
⁶ After Metropolitan Sergij’s (Stragorodskij) Declaration of 1927, Fr. Sergij Goloshapov joined the “non-rememberers” (“nepominajuschie”). A portion of the parishioners of the Georgia Church followed him though the youth, with V.P. Saveliev as their leader, remained faithful to Metropolitan Sergij.
and demanded the trust and acceptance of this eldership from all. As such, on one occurrence Vasilij asked Evdokia Petrovna Seveljeva to be an elder (1902–1979; from 1932 — her monastic name was Efrosinia); in the family they referred to her as Dushenka. On another occasion he requested his wife, Lydia Nikolayevna Seveljeva to assume eldership (1900–1991; from 1931 she was a nun, her monastic name was Serafima). They were to care specially for the souls and spiritual state of the members of the community, to try to give them advice, and console them. Elders were also responsible for the household life of the community in difficult economic conditions, when it was necessary to help those who were in prison or exile, though the spiritual leadership of the community always remained with Vasilij. Despite his physical distance, his advice was strictly followed: “We strove to act on his every command and all his advice in life. This is how it was for the whole time that we were apart.” [Serafima, 61].

The reason that one or another sister was appointed to eldership during different periods of life isn’t always clear. Sometimes Vasilij gave instructions in his letters about who should be appointed as elders for common life. In addition, when the community was forced to live in separate cities (Moscow, Archangelsk), in each portion of the community there appeared elders, who cared for both the spiritual and material aspects of common life. Among their number were, for example, Irina Ivanovna Sorokina (1904–1988; from 1932 she was a nun with the name Nadezhda). The community, made up of lay people, strove to have the care of clergy, in particular, so as to have access to monastic tonsure. For this reason, members of the community strongly requested the monk Varnava to accept ordination: “We asked him more than once to accept ordination, but he kept refusing” [Serafima, 42]. Only in 1929, did Archbishop Philipp (Gumilevskij)7 ordain Varnava as an hieromonk. In 1935, Vasilij himself was also ordained to the priesthood.

N. N. Nepljuev’s experience of life in brotherhood had an influence on the ecclesial consciousness of Bishop Makarij (Opotskij), who strove for an informal union of church life among the faithful. Moreover, perceiving in this an important aspect of the episcopal ministry, he requested that Patriarch Tikhon make him a catechist-bishop. In the principal brotherhood, however, in addition to Bishop Makarij,
Protodeacon Ioann Pokrovskij and his wife, Maria Feodorovna Pokrovskaja 8 (later made a deaconess by Bishop Makarrij), V. M. Lebedeva 9, L. N. Shtiber 10, and M. N. Aleksandrova 11, also served as elders. Bishop Makarrij’s personal secretary and helper, Fr. Andrej Artamonov 12, was also a member of the brotherhood, though we don’t know if he was one of the elders. As such, while the leadership of all in the brotherhood was constantly held by its founder, at different times the elders were clergy and laypeople, and for the most part these were sisters. Bishop Makarrij considered the founder’s trust of the chosen elder, as a “messenger of the founder’s will”, to be the most important criterion for selection as an elder [Dmitrenko, 330]. In addition, Bishop Makarrij called every member of the brotherhood to realize his own eldership and bear responsibility for the others: “Children! Each of you should place God’s guardianship over those who have gathered together in unity.” [Dmitrenko, 339]. To be a “guardian”, e.g. a custodian of the behaviour of the brothers and sisters and therefore a preserver of the unity and honour of the gathering, and therefore an elder, is, in the understanding of Bishop Makarrij, the responsibility of every member of the brotherhood, independent of what office they hold. The acceptance of holy orders was more the affirmation of an already existing ministry of a given member of the community. As such, for instance, Bishop Makarrij ordained M. F. Pokrovskaya to be a deaconess when he entrusted her with the community of sisters in Novgorod.

Another possibility for how elders can be revealed, in Bishop Makarrij’s opinion, is through variance of opinion inside the community, as in the words of Apostle Paul:

“For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognised among you” (1 Cor 11:19)… (italics, Bishop Makarrij. — editor’s

8. Deacon Ioann Pokrovskij (1880–1932 (31?)) and M. F. Pokrovskaya (1898–?) became acquainted with Bishop Makarrij in 1924 in the Novgorod Region and joined him after his move to Cherepovets. Later they entered a spiritual marriage. They were active participants in the life of the brotherhood.

9. Valentina Mikhailovna Levedeva (1891–?), a member of the brotherhood. She made her home in Galich available to the brotherhood and remained as elder during periods when Bishop Makarrij was away. She was arrested twice. Her fate after 1954 is unknown.

10. Larisa Nikolaevna Shtiber (1903–?) came into the brotherhood from the community of Fr. Ioann Yegorov (Leningrad) in 1933. After Bishop Makarrij’s arrest she became elder to the brotherhood in Novgorod.

11. Maria Nikolaevna Aleksandrova (1892–1937) was a former member of the community of Fr. Ioann Yegorov (Leningrad) and came into Bishop Makarrij’s brotherhood in Novgorod in 1935. In 1937 she was arrested and sentenced to the highest form of punishment.

12. Fr. Andrej Artamonov (1890–1976) was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Makarrij in 1924, and until 1926 worked as his personal secretary. He stopped serving in 1971.
Deacon Ioann Savichev was a disciple of the brotherhood. In 1936, he was ordained to the priesthood against the will of Bishop Makarij.

The disagreement spoken about here was over the marriage of one of the sisters to a man outside of the church, which L.N. Shtiber, left as elder by the Bishop during the time of his exile in 1933, did not approve of. According to Bishop Makarij, it was through this disagreement that Shtiber’s eldership became clear, i.e. a clearer and more consistent understanding of the Christian bases for life and the readiness to apply these in everyday practice.

It is likely that Bishop Makarij afforded great significance in terms of ecclesial legitimacy to eldership in the brotherhood, as a result of which an impression developed within the brotherhood that the Bishop’s blessing was required for an elder to begin his/her ministry. This may be one of the reasons that after Bishop Makarij’s death in 1941 and the return of brotherhood members from exile after the war, no one voluntarily took eldership upon themselves. Neither was a priest found for the spiritual nourishment of the brotherhood. These conditions became one of the reasons that after 1942 the brotherhood was unable to continue its existence, despite the fact that in the 1920’s the brotherhood had already developed a practice for identifying helpers who might become elders, independent of Bishop Makarij’s presence in one or another city. At the same time, we know of a case in which Bishop Makarij was critical of the ordination of one of his potential spiritual children, Deacon Ioann Savichev\(^\text{13}\) (1887–1937), because he presumed that the conditions within the church in the 1930’s would mean that a parish priest could not completely fulfil his ministry.

The history of the birth of the community in the village of Mikhnovko (Lithuania) has its own particularities. The lands on which the village is located belonged to the aristocratic Koretsky family. It was they, who in particular, invited to their church Fr. Pontij Rupyshev, who had emigrated from Soviet Russia and had desired in his youth to become a monk, though his life turned out differently. Having received the invitation, he proposed to the sisters, who owned the estate, that its life be structured by the principles of Christian community.

\(^\text{13}\) Deacon Ioann Savichev was a disciple of the brotherhood. In 1936, he was ordained to the priesthood against the will of Bishop Makarij.
Therefore, eldership within the community, as far as we can tell, was not held by a single person. In addition to Fr. Pontij Rupyshev\(^{14}\), the Koretsky sisters, Maria Nikolayevna (?–1978), Varvara Nikolayevna (1896–1976) and Anastasia Nikolayevna (?–1979) were also elders.

Fr. Pontij exerted particular efforts so that the Koretsky sisters might become his successors. For the five years immediately preceding his death, Fr. Pontij was gravely ill and “began to receive the sisters (of the community. — editor’s note) less often, teaching them to reveal their hearts to their elders.” [Koretskaya, 54]. Thanks to this, it seems that the leadership of the community posed no problem following his death in 1939:

After the death of Fr. Pontij, Varvara Nikolayevna and Anastasia Nikolayevna really did take guardianship for the spiritual nourishment of the community upon themselves... helping other sisters in their spiritual lives in cases where clerical rites on the part of a priest were not required... [Shchalchunas, 589].

These were the unmarried sisters, Varvara and Anastasia, on whom the majority of the care for the community lay.\(^{15}\) Fr. Pavel Tomashevskij\(^{16}\), Fr. Pontij’s spiritual son, remained as priest to the community after the death of Fr. Pontij. He “was in complete solidarity with the Koretsky sisters and the tradition of leadership by elders which had developed in the community” [Shchalchunas, 589]. We know also of other elders\(^{17}\), who accompanied Fr. Pontij in his trips to parishes, and to who members of the community revealed their inner thoughts.

The Soviet authorities’ repressions on the territory of the Baltic states were not so harsh and did not last as long as in central Russia, however after Soviet troops entered Lithuania in 1941, the sisters were arrested and sent away from Mikhnovo. The community, however, was not liquidated and was able to continue its existence under the guise of a collective farm. At that time, the elders of the community were Fr. Pavel Tomashevskij and Fr. Pontij’s niece, Aleksandra Maksimovna Tsarik (1906–1964), who had lived with her mother and Fr. Pontij’s sister from childhood. Among the reminiscences of the members

\(^{14}\) In 1921, Fr. Pontij was invited to serve in the village of Mikhnovo, which was built by the sisters’ mother, A. D. Koretskaya.

\(^{15}\) Upon their first acquaintance with Fr. Pontij, Maria Nikolayevna Koretskaya was married and had a daughter. Varvara and Anastasia declined getting married, entirely dedicating themselves to the life of the community at Mikhnovo.

\(^{16}\) Fr. Pavel Tomashevskij (?–1957) lived at Mikhnovo from 1934 and became the spiritual father to the community after Fr. Pontij Rupyshev’s death. From 1942, he was aided by Fr. Konstantin Avdej, a spiritual son of Fr. Pontij who had become a priest.

\(^{17}\) For instance, V. S. Meshkovskaya. We don’t have any information about her.
of the community there is no evidence to how new elders were chosen. Only a mention of the fact that the eldership of A.M. Tsarik wasn’t easy, and that she eagerly awaited the return of the Koretsky sisters from exile.

In contrast to the brotherhood of Bishop Makarij, in the Koretsky sisters’ community people were found who were willing to take eldership upon themselves in times that were difficult for the community. This is probably due to the fact that Bishop Makarij’s brotherhood was subjected to longer and more rigorous repression, as a result of which many of the elders were physically destroyed. After the death of the Koretsky sisters in the 1970s, elders came from amongst the other sisters of the community. We do not know how these sisters were selected, but considering that eldership within the community has been continuous over the course of nearly one hundred years, we can assume that some tradition for selecting elders had developed within the community at Mikhnovo.

The Qualities of Elders in Communities and Brotherhood

The primary quality of an elder in a church community could be called the tendency to collect true and informal spiritual unions and serve within them in the image of Christ, collecting the children of God together. Eldership within the community doesn’t assume a hierarchical differentiation, because the elder also remains a brother: “But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.” In researching the qualities of an elder in community we also look to the affirmation of Fr. Nikolay Afanasiev, who says that the authority of an elder “should flow directly from the personality of the community’s head, and not be created by the ministry in which a person serves.” [Afanasiev, 81]. Eldership in Christian brotherhood is related to the common path, together with readiness to sacrifice that which is one’s own for the good of the whole.

Let us consider what qualities of an elder we can discern on the basis of the sources in our study.

After the October Revolution, Vasilij Saveljev, who was the elder of a group of parish youth, made a decision to take responsibility for the ecclesial situation that had arisen upon himself: “Having entered the

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18. See, for instance, about the “discipline of love” in N.N. Nepljujev’s brotherhood and about the split which came out of an unwillingness to follow this discipline: [Ignatovich, 264–265].
church we have accepted full responsibility for whatever awaited us.” [Sergij (Saveljev), 23]. The readiness to take responsibility for church life and narrow his path made Vasilij an example and inspiration for the others. In 1931, he was tonsured a monk, and soon three other sisters of the community were also tonsured. 19

From the very beginning of his church life, Vasilij strove to serve the spiritual family, putting its needs above those of his fleshly family, revealing the spiritual gifts of the brothers and sisters. 20 Sacrificial love and care for internal unity were the investment which made the community’s growth possible:

And there was also the enormous love of Fr. S[ergij], which helped us all. His worry...about our internal unity was so great and so effective, that it triumphed over any disorder that arose, and without fail lead us forward... [Sergij (Saveljev), 79].

The spiritual responsibility of Fr. Sergij Mechev for the community at Marosejka after his father had passed away was expressed in his decision not to abandon the spiritual family, even despite his weakness: “He understood that he wouldn’t find peace if he left his family.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 211]. In this was both his sacrifice and the discovery of his spiritual path, given that Fr. Sergij saw his spiritual path in keeping unity with other members of the community, without separating himself from them and without considering his priesthood to be a hinderance to close relationships: “...he wanted to move toward God together with his spiritual children and found it necessary to reveal the important elements of his own spiritual path, in consultation with them.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 206]. Fr. Sergij saw himself as a helper (“shepherd”, “herd dog”) within the community:

If we go further with the image of “pastor”, then we can speak of a herdsman or a shepherd boy in Christian life, and even of true and faithful herd dogs.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 211].

Fr. Sergij strove that other elders would be revealed within the community, and tried to identify others who would be able to bear

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19. His wife Lydia was tonsured a nun in the same year, and N. N. Sorokina and E. P. Saveljeva were tonsured in 1932.
20. At the beginning of their common spiritual path, Vasilij left his pregnant wife in order to go on pilgrimage with his brothers and sisters in the spirit, which played an important role for the beginning of “family life”.
21. In the summer of 1925, Lydia wrote to her husband saying: “You called me to this path. You have changed me. Perhaps I wasn’t like this earlier. Or no — I was. In this is the truth in the unfolding and revelation of my soul.” [Sergij (Saveljev), 28].

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eldership, constantly bringing such people “toward and into their pursuit, the pursuit of serving the family at Marosejka” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 239] and calling them to the acceptance of responsibility: “When you see the family (this means the Liturgical-Penitential family. — O. K.), in what do you perceive your service to it?” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 428].

For Bishop Makarij (Opotskij), an elder was a person who collects the people of God around Christ and serves the brothers who are less mature. He referred to his place vis-à-vis Christ in the following way: “…in relation to him I I like to compare myself to a donkey, carrying Christ on his back…” [Dmitrenko, 191]. Since striving for the fullness of life based on community and brotherhood principles demanded dedicated housing for common living, the Bishop’s material sacrifice was particularly important, and after resigning from his post he gave the brotherhood his own house, in Novgorod.

Sacrifice was also characteristic of Fr. Pontij Rupyshev. He gave all the money sent to him by the charitable devout to support the inhabitants of Mikhnovo. The Koretsky sisters, for their part, and despite the protestations of their mother, gave the new community their estate. In instructing the Koretsky sisters, Fr. Pontij said: “If you want to live this way [according to the Gospel], serve people…” [Memories, 390]. And he did the same, himself: “And Fr. Pontij did this, himself — he served people and lived according to the Gospel.” [Memories, 390]. One particular characteristic of Fr Pontij’s pastoral care was his ability to inspire others, and this was directly related to his own growth: “He strove in his own wake, because he always strove to move forward.” [Koretskaya, 36]. The preservation of unity with other members of the community and full inclusion in their life was always of principle importance in this forward inclination of spiritual life:

…A pastor must always be united in Christ with his flock in the spirit of love… with all his being he must “endure and bear, with them, their weaknesses, sorrows and ailments.” (this quotation from an essay of Fr. Pontij is cited in an article by Khondzhinskiy. — editor’s note) [Khondzhinskiy, 625].

The following traits may be called characteristic for elders: striving to serve all members of the community, specific people, and fulfilling

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22. Mikhnovo attracted plenty of pilgrims and Fr. Pontij offered spiritual help to everyone.
the evangelical commandment of Christ “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet” *1 over the entire course of life; readiness to bear responsibility for the community or brotherhood as a whole and for every member, making both spiritual and material sacrifices; being in unity of life with the brothers and sisters and sharing everything with them on a common path, building familial relationships in which there are elders and youth, rather than building according to principles of either secular or religious hierarchy.

In the spiritual unions under consideration here, first and foremost their founders were their elders. Their eldership was understood by community members as accepted from above or manifest and spiritually blessed by an experienced leader. Eldership might be passed to another member of the community, under the condition that such person was received as an elder by the gathered community. Whether or not a candidate was in holy orders and whether or not a bishop participated in his/her selection played no deciding role. An elder might directly prepare other members of the community for service as elders. The difficulties that new elders had in being received by the communities points to informal links and relationships between community members.

Reception (Acceptance) of Elders by the Community

The experience of community and brotherhood church life was not well recorded in written form during Soviet times, nor has verbal testimony yet been fully gathered. Therefore, it is difficult to elicit general characteristics for reception of eldership within informal unions of the faithful, and even more difficult to speak of anything like a standard practice for such reception. We can, however, highlight certain practices of reception that are evident in the examples in our study.

At the primary level, reception of an elder was expressed in the gathering [around him] of faithful Christians who shared his vision for a spiritual path and trusted his leadership. Fr. Sergij Mechev began holding classes for the study of patristic literature even while Fr. Aleksij was still alive, despite the fact that he was not, at that point, an elder in the Mechev community. Fr. Aleksij’s spiritual children gathered at these meetings, and the majority of them recognized Fr. Sergij as the heir to his respected father, remained within the community, and became Fr. Sergij’s spiritual children, insofar as they “saw that Fr. Sergij was the son of their dear priest and through him had been

*1 Jn 13:14
nourished by the teachings of the church fathers.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 203]. This doesn’t mean, however, that the reception of Fr. Sergij’s eldership was easy for everyone, and for the most part the difficulties were associated with his lack of experience as a leader and with certain personal character traits. One of Fr. Sergij’s spiritual daughters, S.A. Engelgardt, recalls, “he was lively, jolly, and loved a good joke and even to ridicule, but sometimes he wouldn’t notice that his joke had struck a painful note in the heart of his interlocuter.” [Drug druga tyagoty nosite 2012a, 271].

Therefore, the reception of Fr. Sergij’s eldership was also expressed in the readiness of members of the spiritual family to bear the burdens of their spiritual leader, and in this the mutual responsibility of all community members for their elder, who like all the others was a member of the community.

The reception of an elder is associated with a particular trust he holds from all members of the community. As such, the word of Vasilij Saveljev had deciding significance for “family members”, even though during various periods of the community’s life, clergymen offered it spiritual support. And still it was necessary to tirelessly grow in trust [for Vasilij]. Trust for Vasilij was expressed in willingness to follow a chosen path without straying from it, despite the most difficult of living conditions, even when there were differences of opinion with clergy who were authorities for the community. When I.N. Sorokina was preparing for monastic tonsure, for instance, the deciding opinion for her was Vasilij’s and not that of Bishop Leonid (Antoshchenko), who was arguing that she should not rush toward taking that step. Not all of those who were in Vasilij’s circle followed this common path to the end. We know of at least two members of the community who were not able to accept Vasilij’s eldership, though their fates resolved themselves differently. O. P. Bogojavlenskij, who stood together with Vasilij at the start of their “family life”, left the community probably because of his striving himself to be a pastor, which was inhibited by Vasilij’s eldership [Serafima, 39], and also because he sought an “external form” for spiritual life [Serafima, 39]. Vasilij’s own sister, E. P. Saveljeva (Dushenka) showed un reproachable obedience to her

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23. For instance, hieromonk Varnava (Gogolev), Bishop Philipp (Stavitskij), Bishop Leonid (Antoshchenko).

24. Oleg Pavlovich Bogojavlenskij (1905–1943) left V. P. Saveljev’s community in 1930 to join the closed (until that point) community of the Vysoko-Petrovsky Monastery. He was tonsured a monk with the name of Fyodor and was ordained as a hierodeacon. He was arrested twice and died in prison during the second arrest in 1943. B 2000 he was canonized amongst the Russian new martyrs and confessors.

*1 Gal 6:2
brother in life’s external processes and remained in the community until the end, as one of the elder sisters, shaping her life within the conditions of “family life”; nevertheless, she was unable to entirely accept her brother as her spiritual leader. [Serafima, 177].

The recognition of Bishop Makarij as an elder also came from the gathering of believers around him, who had responded to the word of his lively preaching and the educational discussions that he organized.25 His episcopal office unquestionably aided in his reception, as with other clergymen who entered the brotherhood. The case of L.N. Shtiber shows that reception of lay people as elders when they accepted eldership based on the blessing of the bishop, was complex and came with more difficulty. Bishop Makarij, however, who defended L.N. Shtiber’s eldership and provided grounds for his decision, nevertheless left the brothers and sisters freedom vis-à-vis the question of obedience to her: “I consider Larisa to be wiser than others and for this reason I have proposed that you advise with her. If any of you needs advice, ask [her] advice, but if you expect that you have a greater degree of wisdom [than she does], than live by the authority of your own mind.” [Dmitrenko, 331]. This position, taken by the founder of the brotherhood, bears witness to the fact that it is not the authority of the leader or priest that should be decisive in acceptance of eldership, but free acceptance of the elder upon the basis of trust and sober discernment of his gifts as an elder. Bishop Makarij allows that there may even be those living in brotherhood who cannot immediately recognize a new elder.

The pronouncement of vows when entering Bishop Makarij’s brotherhood should also be related to the process of reception. During this process, a candidate was asked to express his/her agreement to accept the eldership of the brotherhood’s current elders.26 Acceptance of the elders was the pledge of new members to the elders of the community, without which spiritual unity of the members of the particular community and of the whole brotherhood, in general, would have been placed at risk.

The reception of eldership in the community at Mikhnovo has some very particular qualities. On the one hand, we see the readiness of the

25. Among the first to respond to the call of Bishop Makarij were Protodeacon Ioann Pokrovskij and his wife and Fr. Andrej Artamonov and his wife. Together with Bishop Makarij they held educational meetings with parishioners, and later Protodeacon Ioann and M.F. Pokrovskaya became founders of a brotherhood in the locations of their exile (1927–1930) — Galich.

26. Those who pronounced vows said the following words: “…I sincerely recognize them as personal mentors in the word of the Lord, as spiritual fathers, rebirthing me and transfiguring me for new, holy life in brotherly love, recognizing them as my pastors and leaders, leading me into eternal life…» [Dmitrenko, 139].
church wardens, inviting the priest into their church and changing their life to structure it upon Christian principles, and on the other hand we see the readiness of Fr. Pontij to share this life with his hosts, having trusted in their striving for greater wholeness and open church life. Fr. Pontij’s eldership was recognized at first by the Koretsky family, and then by those devout who collected [around them] from other regions of Lithuania and Poland, thanks to his preaching. After Fr. Pontij’s death in 1939, the Koretsky sisters themselves became elders in the community, and their eldership raised no doubts amongst the residents of Mikhnovo, insofar as they saw the sisters as heiresses of Fr. Pontij; those devout who later joined the community accepted its rules of order and, accordingly, the current elders. The sisters themselves related to the necessity to become elders in the community in different ways. Varvara Koretskaya, who didn’t feel the strength of eldership in herself, nevertheless accepted it, more likely than not out of trust in Fr. Pontij: “But, believing in Fr. Pontij’s words to the extent that God would help her, she began her labours.” [Koretskaya, 35] And this is how her obedience was justified, as a result. In 1936, Metropolitan Panteleimon (Rozhkovskiy) 27 visited Mikhnovo and described his impressions of the visit in the following way:

This is where it would be fitting to send, at least for a month, our theologians and candidates for the priesthood. O that they might breathe the spiritual atmosphere here and learn how to live with the people, so as to help them become Christians. [Panteleimon (Rozhkovskiy), 448].

It’s important to note that the members of the community strove to preserve the eldership of the Koretsky sisters. After the death of Fr. Pontij, the acting Archbishop, Kornilij (Popov) 28 began to send clergy to Mikhnovo for control over the life of the community. 29 However, the residents continued to see the Koretsky sisters as elders, running to them for advice and spiritual help. As a result, Archbishop Kornilij was forced to declare the whole affair null and void, given than he was unable to subordinate the community to clerics who were external to the community, itself. 30 In this way, despite the fact that the relationship

28. Archbishop Kornilij (Popov) (1874–1966) was named the bishop of Vilnius and Lithuania in 1945.
29. Life in the Mikhnovo community caused church authorities to be suspicious of a cult of personality around Fr. Pontij, usurpation of the Koretsky sisters and of their self-delusion. Younger sisters being in charge of spiritual leadership of older sisters gave rise to particular dissatisfaction.
30. This incident is noted by the bishop in the diocesan report for 1947. See: [Shchalchunas, 589].
of the church hierarchy to the lifestyle of the community at Mikhnovo was ambivalent, the residents continued with the life they had begun based on communitarian principles, together with elders chosen from their own.

Conclusion

In summarizing the conclusions of our short study of the experience of identification (election and reception) of elders in three communities and one brotherhood in the period between 1917 and 1943, let us try to draw some conclusions, first taking note of what is common to all the cases in our research group, and then noting aspects which are unique to each community or brotherhood.

1. Authentic and living unions of the faithful based upon community and brotherhood principles are not as much the result of external organizational efforts, as the result of informal efforts of Orthodox Christians to build a life together, based on Gospel principles. This [sort of] gathering of the church was impossible to restrict, even under conditions of direct persecution and destruction of the institutional church. This being said, the task of preserving the church community or brotherhood in different periods demanded special common care, but sometimes also compromises in terms of external forms of life. The degree of compromise was determined with a clear understanding of Christian principles for life and a common spiritual tenacity for preserving them, maintained firstly by the elders, but then by all the brothers and sisters, together with them.

2. The ministry of elders in communities and the brotherhood, and especially that of the founders, is a witness to their special gifts of gathering the faithful and of pastorship particularly characterized by the building and maintenance of trusting personal relationships of members not only with the elders, but also by the strengthening of personal connections between all the brothers and sisters on the basis of Christian love. The urge toward community and brotherhood life for the founders of the communities in our study was not directly related to their priestly ordination and wasn’t an accessory to holy orders. The path to community and brotherhood life for Vasilij Saveljev, as we see, began before ordination, and Bishop Makarij was ordained a bishop only after becoming a convinced advocate for life according to the principles of brotherhood.

3. Lively care for the church gathering and trust in the community and brotherhood was the guarantee of informal acceptance of the
founders and/or successors to the founder (in the case of Fr. Sergij Mechev) as elders. Priesthood helped them be accepted but was not the main criteria for their elderhood. The authority of clerical rank was not the only criterion for being accepted as elder by all the members of the community in any one of the cases in our study. Clerical office played a greater role at the beginning of the path, though subsequently personal and pastoral traits of the elder had greater significance. At the same time, a respectful attitude toward clerical office, church worship and the sacraments were of unquestionable value and a source of holiness for all the communities and the brotherhood in our study. A connection with the canonical church structures was also significant for the life of these informal unions, though not decisive in determining the character of their internal life.

4. Eldership in informal associations of Christians was not unitary. Dependent upon external and internal life circumstances, the elders of our communities and brotherhood blessed other brothers and sisters for elderhood, both clergy and laypeople. Here, even a person’s clerical status was not a determining factor. We note that the leaders of these unions of faithful were even interested in “distribution” of responsibility, insofar as they were concerned for the preservation and growth of all brothers and sisters in unity on the basis of openness, trust, and the desire of all to “respect the other more than oneself”. *1 The question of personal authority didn’t exist for the elders of communities and the brotherhood.

5. It’s obvious, that the founders had a particular gift and call from above, which they strove to embody, although they didn’t immediately achieve this in practice. In all the cases that we have looked at, this internal striving of the founders to form and grow informal unions is traced. Even for clergy, who in one or another way served church liturgical services, the priority was to gather people, as they understood their pastoral ministry specifically within their desire to embody the gospel image of “love one another” *1 in church practice.

6. The process of passing on or inheritance of eldership from the founders of our unions of believers also attracts our attention. Eldership was passed on to members of the unions, both brothers and sisters, e.g. to those who knew the life of the communities and the brotherhood from within and were put forward for ministry, also from within. Eldership within informal unions didn’t take a mandatory form, and attempts to institute external leadership (at Mikhnovo, for instance) didn’t have positive results. On the other hand, the absence of an elder amongst those members of Bishop Makarij’s brotherhood

*1 Compare: Phil 2:3

*1 Compare: Jn 13:35
who remained alive after the repressions and the war made it impossible for the members of that community to come together and renew the life of their brotherhood. This underscores the importance of the service of elders and of their function as gatherers, rather than as commanders.

7. Often the ministry of eldership was inherited by sisters (the Saveljev “family”, Mikhnovo, etc.) who executed their “ministerial affair” no less responsibly and fruitfully, of which we have witness even from clerics, including Archbishops. This fact is practical confirmation of the possibility of the charismatic ecclesial ministry of sisters. In everyday ecclesial consciousness, the service of sisters is linked only with monasticism, though the examples we give in this study convincingly demonstrate that the service of elder sisters in the church is not limited to monastics.

8. On the one hand, reception of eldership can be seen by the very formation of a group of faithful as expressed in everyone’s decision to remain in the community or brotherhood and show obedience to the advice and recommendations of the elder. On the other hand, reception of eldership is also seen in the subsequent history of these unions, when the necessity arises to take decisions between individual and common life, between personal interests and the interests of the brothers and sisters. In this way, the reception/acceptance of eldership aided in the clarification and deepening of an understanding of Christian principles of life in community and brotherhood, in the elucidation of the laws of the life of the Church as the Body of Christ, and in the strengthening of spiritual unity.

9. Each of our informal unions had, of course, its own, particular practices for elder’s identification, given its specific spiritual path and historical circumstances, as well as particular composition. For our study of informal unions during the period in question, we chose to look at those whose leaders were clergymen, though even based upon these examples we see convincing evidence that church communities can be founded by laypeople, as in the case of the Saveljev “family”. Subsequently Vasilij was ordained a priest, though for the purposes of our study it is important to underscore that his pastoral abilities did not flow out of his ordination. Probably the opposite is true — his pastoral ministry is what brought him into his ministry as a priest.

10. Thus, each of our informal unions of faithful had its specific fashion of identifying the elders, who might be either clergy or laypeople, brothers or sisters. The choice of elders and distribution of responsibilities between them depended upon the tasks at hand for internal
life, as well as upon external conditions. The reception of eldership in communities and brotherhoods had a non-legal character, as well as its own paradoxes and contradictions. Disagreement with the elder did not always lead to the member in disagreement leaving the community (Evdokia Saveljeva), on the other hand sometimes it was a reason for a split (Oleg Bogojavlenskij).

11. In conclusion, it is important to note that the experience of informal unions of the faithful during Soviet times provides great perspective. Within the as of yet undisclosed experience of the Russian confessors of the 20th century, there remain many questions which are important for the future church. We see particularly their striving for fullness of Christian life and the embodiment of principles of Christian freedom and love, which were expressed differently in each of the cases in this study. The elder generation from the Saveljev community were tonsured as monks, and in this way solved the problem of the interrelationship between bodily familial relationship and spiritual relationship (Vasilij and Lydia were husband and wife, and Evdokia was Vasilij’s sister). It is possible that this decision influenced the mentorship of Hieromonk Varnava (Gogolev). The members of the Mikhailovo community, on the other hand, who maintained a strict ascetic lifestyle, distanced themselves from monasticism and didn’t take vows but preserved the open borders of their community, being more oriented toward faithfulness in terms of internal principles rather than external forms. In Fr. Sergij Mechev’s Liturgical-Penitential family, there were priests and monastics and laypeople. Another significant question is the ministry of mission for the communities and brotherhood in our study: on what basis and to whom did the members of these unions preach the Gospel, and how did they receive those people who responded to this preaching? The question of the interrelationship between informal unions of the faithful and institutional church hierarchy is also relevant, given that its disallowance causes a hinderance of development in church life in contemporary conditions. The experience of the Russian confessors of the 20th century, who not only accepted death from their repressors but also developed church life under conditions of repression, needs to be further collated and studied, so that ecclesial consciousness can be further enriched by its many forms and daring searches for fullness of life in Christ.
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