

A Study of Orthodox Parishes in America

The Work of Alexei Krindatch

Alexei Krindatch is an Orthodox sociologist and the Research Director at the Patriarch Athenagoras Institute of Orthodox Studies in Berkeley CA. Mr Krindatch recently concluded a number of studies of Orthodoxy in America. This spring he was recently invited as a guest lecturer for a week by the sociology department at Denison University in Springfield OH its annual colloquium. Since some lectures were open to the public and being that Springfield is a modest drive from our extensive Parish Health Ministry headquarters building (!) in Cincinnati, we drove up to sit in on two lectures.



Alexei Krindatch

Overall Study

On day one Krindatch, a knowledgeable Orthodox Christian and parishioner in the OCA's Diocese of the West, discussed his overall study of attitudes of Orthodox Christians toward a variety of topics based on a survey and face to face discussions in OCA and Greek Orthodox Archdiocese parishes. The full study is available [on line](#) and makes interesting reading.

The following are a few brief items from the report and from Mr Krindatch's lectures:

Parish Weaknesses

Respondents see the major weaknesses of their American Orthodox parishes as: "self-isolation" from their local 'non-Orthodox' neighborhood communities, finding enough volunteers for various chores in a parish and the feeling of being bound by the established routines of church life.

Converts and Cradles Equally Optimistic

Those who grew up in the Orthodox Church and those who converted to Orthodoxy in the later stages of their lives are equally optimistic about the future of their home parishes.

Conservatives More Optimistic

Persons who defined their theological stance and approaches to Church life as "conservative" are *firmer believers* in the future growth of their parishes, while persons saying that they are theologically "moderate" or "liberal" were somewhat more inclined to predict decline in members of their parishes."

Likewise those Orthodox describing themselves as theological "conservatives" or "traditional" are more likely to describe their home parishes as being "vibrant, active and alive" than the respondents who defined themselves as either "moderate" or "liberal."

Most Important

91% of respondents see "liturgy and sharing in Eucharist" as the most important aspect of parish life which attracts members to their parishes. This far exceeds any other factor.

Priest Skills and Weaknesses

In general, Orthodox laity positively view the skills and qualifications of their parish priests. With regard to 10 out of 17 areas of pastoral work, more than two thirds of the respondents said about their parish clergy that they are "confident and experienced in this area."

However, only about 50% of respondents qualified their priests as "confident and experienced" with regard to "social outreach into local community" and "fund raising and financial skills."

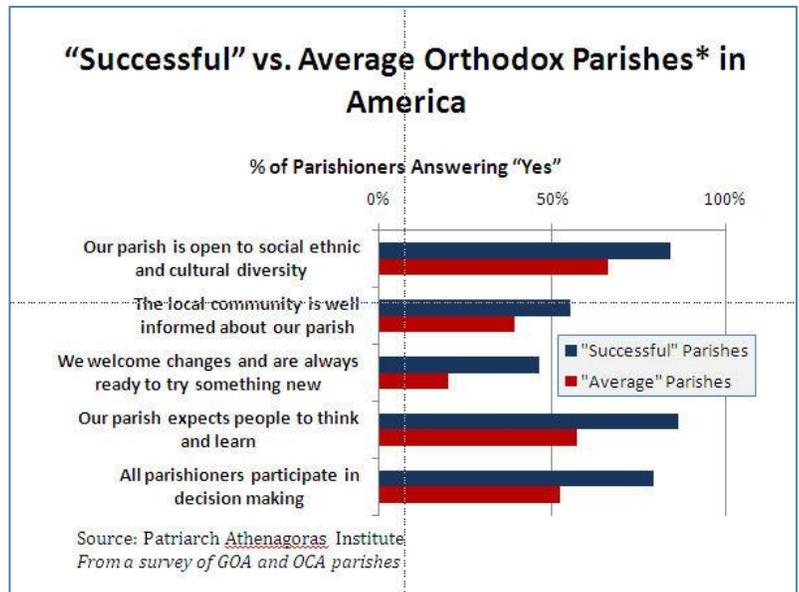
Leading worship, teaching and 'prayer guidance and spiritual role model' are seen by Orthodox as the most important qualities of priests. Setting goals, casting vision, administration and training people for various ministries are seen as markedly less important.

Five Factors that Define a "Successful Parish"

After completing the above study, Mr. Krindatch was engaged by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese to identify qualities of "successful" parishes based on further analysis of his existing data from both OCA and GOA parishes. He posited key attributes of "success" and related those qualities to a subset of questions on his survey. By identifying those who answered "yes" to all questions (13%) he isolated a control group of "successful parishes". Answers and attitudes from the control group were compared to the answers from "the remaining 87% of the respondents to draw conclusions about the differences between successful and average parishes.

Krindatch posited that successful parishes are those that "pursue stewardship as a way of life" and "have abundant programs for youth". Readers may find this view of success to be a bit narrow -- many may have structured the criteria a bit differently. Nonetheless the conclusions from this study are interesting. Krindatch found five factors that were distinct features of successful GOA and OCA parishes in America:

- Openness to diversity in parishioners
- Connectedness to the local community
- Welcoming innovations in the parish
- Encouraging critical thinking
- Collective decision making in the parish.



The Parish Conversation

The above five points can make fruitful conversation in parishes. Try these questions to seed the discussion:

Openness to Diversity

- ✓ In what ways is our parish open to diversity among parishioners?
- ✓ Do we have barriers to accepting new and different people and their ideas into the parish and into the parish life?



Good conversations begin with good questions

Connectedness to the Local Community

- ✓ What are the examples of our connectedness to the local community in our parish?
- ✓ Are there 1-2 ways in which this aspect of our parish can be strengthened?

Welcoming Parish Innovations

- ✓ What changes in practices and approach have we made in our parish in the past three years?
- ✓ Why did we make them?
- ✓ How did they take place?
- ✓ What was effective and ineffective?

Encouraging Critical Thinking

- ✓ How do we treat new ideas in our parish? How do we look for new ideas? How do we deal with persons on the margins of the parish?
- ✓ What do we do to encourage a thorough review of our life as a Christian community?

Collective Decision Making

- ✓ How do we make decisions in the parish?
- ✓ What is needed to help make good decisions and to help those good decisions take root and bare fruit?