

"All is Well at St. Xxxxxx "

The Greatest Danger is the Illusion that 'All is Well'

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Once we happened to thumb through old report packets for past (OCA Midwest) Diocesan Assemblies. A 1995 report from a heritage parish jumped off the page. "All is well here at St. (parish name withheld)." Twenty or so years before the report the parish had been a community of nearly 200 adults - but by the time of the report the parish had declined to less than 70. Through the backward lens of history we know that this parish continued to severely contract for at least another ten years -- though we can report signs of a better future have recently emerged.

All is Well?

How does a parish in obvious "peril" and in the midst of a 30+ year decline offer an "all is well" observation?

Was there a sense that the parish was stuck in negativity and it was time to *accentuate the positive*?

Was there a felt need to *suppress bad news*?

Was the parish blind to its *vital signs*?

We are reminded that C.S. Lewis once noted that "**The greatest danger is the illusion that all is well**".

As we've worked with parishes to help them explore the road to a (hopefully) brighter future we've become fascinated with the *mechanisms of change*. What helps break parishes out of a downward spiral? What keeps them trapped in the momentum of such a cycle?

Here are some of those forces as we've observed them.

Forces ("Anchors") Holding a Parish to the Status Quo

In-grown Eyeballs

A sense that we are here for "us" and we can't learn from others. Parishes with a predominance of this attitude isolate themselves from solutions or opportunities outside their walls -- and "ruttedness" prevails.



While numbers are only a part of the story, by the time of this report the parish was in the midst of long slide that would continue for another 10 years. Yet, the parish reported "All is well".

Limited Budgets

Particularly ministry budgets. Nothing brings fresh ideas to a halt like hearing "We can't afford it".

Hiding Bad News

This often includes "excessive peace keeping" (fear of playing with matches; fear of boat rocking).

Lack of "Intentionality"

Many Orthodox parishes simply do not drive things *forward*. The mind set is "we just come to church" - according to their own limited frequency. This can be particularly true in an older parish - where the last directed effort of note was to build a church -87 yrs ago.

No Sense of Vision/Mission

Or -- multiple competing visions. Both lead to paralysis. Parishes and their leaders need to regularly ask "What are we trying to be? What is God calling us to do" (*See box at right.*)

Gatekeepers

Lay patriarchs or matriarchs intent on keeping things the same may be the strongest anchors. Occasionally the priest fills this role.

Leadership Vacuum

The aging of a parish can lead to an overall torpor and resistance to change -- but more importantly it may create a leadership vacuum -- an inability to pass the torch to a new set of parish stewards who can become responsible and accountable for building a bright parish future.

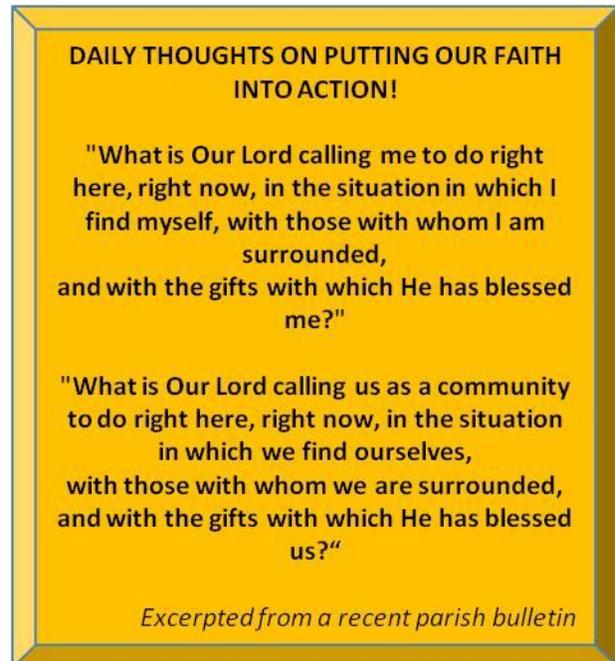
A Change that Backfires

Not all changes are good. Not all good changes are successful. Instead of allowing a failed change to implicitly eliminate all changes -- dig deep to understand how seemingly unsuccessful initiatives could have resulted in better outcomes. Pace? Communication? Dialogue? Multiple steps? Committed core group?

Excessive Nostalgia

Learning from and building on the parish past and heritage can be valuable. Living in the past never is.

No doubt we've missed a few --but that should hold us for now for the "anchors". Now let's identify those forces that can help parishes move forward.



Inner Forces Driving Change

At one time we naively thought that a well constructed "Saturday workshop" could be enough to enliven a parish and reverse troubling trends. However the imposition of good ideas from "outside" is rarely a

recipe for a parish and its leaders to change well worn habits. Parishes can be extremely resistant to outside ideas and stimuli. Instead they persist in what has become familiar and comfortable. As someone once said "When we don't know what to do, we do what we know."



How can parishes get out of bad ruts?

However, parishes (and other organic systems) *can* change quite readily in response to *inner forces*.

Through our own observations and our readings here are a few inner mechanisms that can rattle a parish --unfreezing expectations and disturbing its false equilibrium.

Serious Study and Powerful Questions

Sometimes a discussion in a bible study or adult class can spill over into a broader parish conversation and lead to an appetite for renewal. An ad hoc discussion informs a "Why can't we?" mentality. The probability of this is enhanced when a particularly relevant topic is chosen. "What should a Christian community be like? What are its values and behaviors?" Start with Acts 2:42-47. If you need more we think there is a lot to be learned from the [Parish Inventory Model](#).

"Environmental" Change

While most effective changes usually need to be "our idea" they may germinate from an (external) environmental change. Perhaps there is a change to neighborhood demographics or economics -- implying a needed response by the parish. Perhaps a new apparently "successful" neighbor church springs up across the street. While the first reaction may be to *bury our head* -- occasionally this new environment may cause parishes to engage. Again the question "What is our Lord calling us *as a community* to do *right now* --in this situation," is hard to beat.

Grants

An outside grant of a small amount of cash can remove internal obstacles to achieving a modest forward moving action. Grants require accountability and can help silence (or at least 'soften') the "we can't afford it" crowd.

New People

The potential for change created by a new priest is obvious along with the potential for new dynamics available from a second priest or even by engaging a parish administrative specialist. We've seen positive results from all. Sometimes a change in lay 'faces' can be almost as significant. The departure of a core lay person due to death, job transfer or being "fed up" can cause introspection or send the parish scurrying to plug holes - perhaps discovering new gifts in the process. Conversely the arrival of new people -- so long as they're not treated as a "source of funds" or simply new "workers" -- can spark change. One priest told us that that the arrival of a single family -- with their differing experiences,

behaviors and practices from another parish has been the single most important factor in his parish's reawakening.

Shared Unhappiness of Leaders

A little leaven *can* leaven the whole lump. We've seen parish situations where one or two credible, respected lay persons get serious about change. They step up and conclude "We're heading in the wrong direction and we're simply not going to let that happen here". The question "What will happen to our church if we keep doing the same thing over and over?" can be helpful.



Attendees at the OCA's Parish Ministry conference are clearly interested in learning from the speaker -- and from one another.

Exposure to Something Better

"Shared unhappiness" can be clarified when leaders get a glimpse or vision of *new results*. Results that fit so *powerfully with the parish's inward sense of mission* as to disturb old comforts and make the status quo untenable. It may be group attendance at a conference (or even a webinar) or a visit to another parish. A "benchmark" exchange designed to learn, "How does this other parish do it? How have they built this ministry? How have they ..." helped one parish begin their push to get "unstuck".

Face Facts -- Publish Some Data

English author Samuel Johnson noted that, "The view of the gallows clarifies the mind." Unfortunately in withering parishes that view seems to be constantly cloudy. Nobody wants a continual flow of negativity but

As of Jan 1	3 yr Trend?	Satisfied? (Y=Yes / N=No)
to the real conditions in the parish	this	no

Use the Vital Signs Summary Sheet to document a spectrum of parish habits in concrete form to help people "Face Facts"

occasionally its

time to face facts. Gather key data --

not opinions but verifiable facts -- to help people understand the true parish situation. (Use [this doc.](#) as an outline.)

This can be particularly important in declining situations. Parishioners tend to think of their parish as it was --not as it is. We recently visited a parish to give a talk. My wife who accompanied me asked a nice lady at coffee hour "How large is the parish". Though the liturgy had been attended by about 70 people, she replied "Oh, about 250." The parish, which had been shrinking slowly from about 250 in the late 80's, now numbered 58 adults.

Worship Changes

Most priests and parishes have a number of desired, desirable, fully Orthodox worship modifications they've had on the back burner. Move that choir out of the choir loft. Change the music to make it work for your current situation. Engage a broader cross section of the parish in liturgical responses. Engage

children. Worship changes --particularly those on Sunday -- are noticed and experienced by all and reinforced weekly. They can help a parish learn that "we *can* successfully adapt to new situations.

In 2012 We Have Little Excuse

None of the above change drivers is enough on it's own -- but they can begin a journey. *Some* of these "mechanisms" were available to St Xxxx in 1995. But *all of them and more* are available to us *now*. In 2012 we have little excuse for long periods of parish decline without serious renewal efforts.

In the words of one experienced priest we know: "Coasting is steady, steady is stagnant and stagnant is dead".

So...don't coast! Particularly downhill.