

Improving Parish Communications Parish Bulletins: *Part 1 Content*

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After attending a workshop on church communications, a priest in our Diocese recently shared the workshop handouts with us. It didn't take long for this statement to catch our attention:

"The bulletin is the second most important piece of Christian literature after the bible."

Oh my! As Orthodox we could offer the workshop leader a vast, rich reading list that challenges the statement. Nonetheless given the topic of the workshop we think you can understand her point.

Bulletin Content Tips

Based on our regular review of 12-15 parish bulletins we offer a few basic comments on bulletin content.

In a companion article we offer remarks about the look and feel of parish bulletins – formatting. That article can be found [here](#).

1. Update Content

Most bulletins and newsletters offer useful content. A few need a content rework in our opinion. If your parish falls in this category, you may want to review the aggregate list of bulletin topical information in appendix A. We also included outlines from two bulletins.

2. Set Goals

Some parish bulletins ramble aimlessly - sort of a parish broom closet.

Good communications start with goals. If you are updating parish communications start by *simply writing goals for each piece of communication* – including your bulletin. Since most communications pieces, bulletins included, have multiple audiences you will need goals for each audience. We offer some suggestions in the box to the right. If you don't like them feel free to tell us... but then get busy writing your own.

3. Say "Welcome"!

Most bulletins seem to come up short on the visitor/inquirer side more than the "regular" side – so we'll focus many of our comments in that direction.

The first step in making visitors feel welcome via the bulletin is to say *"Welcome Visitors"*! That would seem to be obvious– but *many* bulletins omit this step so we had to say it.

Potential Bulletin Goals for Visitors/ Inquirers

For a visitor – whether Orthodox or not, our bulletin should:

- Make it clear this is a church – nothing else -- and there is something different/special here.
- Convey that this is an active community – people *living* a Christian life.
- Aid their worship experience – it may seem unusual
- Make it clear they are welcome and encouraged to explore more at their own pace.

Potential Bulletin Goals for Regulars

For regulars our bulletin should:

- Help them know today's worship order
- Make them aware of upcoming events and how to participate
- Provided spiritual nourishment, teaching and reminders
- Convey parish offerings for various demographics whether parents, seniors, youth, singles etc. or geographic small groups.

4. Convey Guidelines

More difficult perhaps, is to convey other guidelines to visitors - “what they can and can’t do” – particularly with respect to communion. Some bulletins use standard text inserts that tackle this issue well. We’ve reproduced a few at the right. Perhaps these will inspire you toward something that works for your parish.

5. How Will Visitors Read This?

Once past the overt “welcome” continue to think of inquirers who might read the bulletin. They may be asking: “Where is this group’s head?” “What matters to them?” “Where is their heart?” “Where is Christ here?” “Do they take God seriously?” Or simply, “What happens after the service?”

How well does your bulletin answer these questions?

Try reading your bulletin with outside eyes or ask an outsider to read it and give you an impression. (They are not hard to find.)

6. Upgrade Tone & Language

Language is one of the ways we deliver on the goal of making the Church feel different – not of the world. Language is meant to elevate -- particularly in church. “Light” language may *not* convey an atmosphere in which we acknowledge the holiness and majesty of God. Our suggestion would be to aim (a little) “high” -- expect more. Over time the parish will read itself to a higher level. Having said, that we’ve read some bulletin text that we would bet is well beyond the parishes for which they are written.

7. Avoid Jargon

We Orthodox have many terms that are visitor unfamiliar. Some of them are necessary to express the faith. In some areas there is room for spirited debate – for example about the virtues of “Prokeimenon” vs. “Responsorial Psalm”. We won’t go there.

However, we can all look carefully at the use of *local, community acronyms and terms*. When possible write out the acronym and or explain the term. If large chunks of the newsletter seem to speak in a secret code known only to insiders you are likely insulating yourself from potential new members.

Welcome Texts

Welcome Text A

We welcome all visitors to our Divine Liturgy. While Holy Communion may only be received by prepared Orthodox Christians, our non-Orthodox guests are welcome to join us in venerating the Cross and receiving blessed bread at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy.

Another Welcome Text

We are delighted to have visitors worship with us, and we pray that you will be blessed through your participation in our services.

In the Orthodox Church, the reception of Holy Communion is a mark of membership in the Church. Only those who have been united to the Orthodox Church through Baptism or Chrismation, and have prepared themselves through regular Confession, prayer and fasting are permitted to partake of Holy Communion. We encourage visitors to participate in our prayers and hymns and partake of the blessed bread at the veneration of the cross. Literature about the Orthodox faith and this parish can be found in the vestibule. Feel free to ask questions before or after the services. Please sign our guest book and join us for refreshments and fellowship in the Parish Center after Liturgy.

Another

Text similar to one above, then...

Join us for coffee and continued fellowship! If this is your first visit to our parish, we welcome you and invite you to return as often as you are able. For those interested in learning more about Orthodoxy, please contact Fr. _____ about our Entrants Group. Greeters will answer immediate questions you might have.

8. Beware Incomplete Info

A common error found in bulletins is incomplete information. Consider these points:

- When presenting a ministry or activity explain clearly what the ministry does, its purpose, what help they need.
- Don't say "Betty is in charge of xyz" or "the meeting is at Betty's house". Unless nothing has changed in your parish for 25 years, *Betty may not be known to everyone!* Instead show Betty's picture. (Yes this takes time, planning, and work.) Provide her address and even a map to her home. Provide Betty's phone number. Oh yes, what is Betty's *last* name?
- Include start *and end times* on all activity announcements. People are busy.
- If you really want someone to try out an activity provide info on what they should expect – the format, a topic outline. Show a photo of a similar bible study or a past youth activity.
- Put your parish website, physical address, and key phone numbers on all printed material.

9. Say "Thank You"

Few topics express warmth and Christian love better than a sincere thank you. A well placed thank you highlights extra effort, encourages others to offer their gifts -- and conveys zeal and commitment to the visitor. Most bulletins do this well. Now, do it more!

10. Teaching/Reflection

Some bulletins offer *little* actual spiritual nourishment. Include at least one article that teaches or likely, re-teaches an important aspect of Orthodox doctrine or brings to life some aspect of the Liturgy or provides a pastor's reflection.

11. Track "Real Estate" for Non Core Activities

In some newsletters a *significant* amount of "real estate" is used to describe fall bus trips, craft fairs, fashion shows, fund raising, church politics, folk dance lessons, ethnic language lessons, jokes, clip art and an array of other topics that do *not* necessarily represent the core functions of being a church.

Might this blur things for current parishioners or contribute to a club mentality on a weekly basis? Could this be a barrier for an inquirer?

12. Easy on Fund Raising Content

Go easy on fund raising information. Having happily cut, baked, sugared, packed and sold a gaggle of Christmas cookies in our time we see nothing wrong with well orchestrated parish fun(d) raising efforts that focus on a worthy cause and build community along the way. But be aware that serious inquirers sometimes come with an aversion to a fund raising mentality.

A few months ago we facilitated a meeting between two diocesan parishes that were considering merging. One was a traditional "metropolia era" parish with a clearly "cradle Orthodox" mentality. The other was primarily made up of converts. THE kernel issue that defined the two group's differing visions of parish life was *fund raising*. One group thought it essential. The other anathema!

13. Tell Stories of New People

To make it clear that your community embraces new parishioners, and to help with the incorporation process, there is no better way than to occasionally *tell about new people*. If converts tell something about their transition – how they got here and, more importantly, what they found. For existing Orthodox new to the area use their choice of your parish to express the important qualities that make

your parish vibrant. (Assuming they had a choice.) Even if their stories are not necessarily rich and compelling all readers are reminded of a growth mentality.

14. Use Photos

Yes, you've read this before in our recent website article. Try an occasional "New at St. XYZ page." Include a photo of new person(s) along with their address etc. Format the page so that it can be easily inserted as a quarterly update to your parish directory.

If you mention "coffee is available after liturgy" realize that the decision to go to coffee hour may be difficult for some. Perhaps a photo providing an advance idea of the environment may encourage visitors to stay.

15. Multiple Writing Contributors

The priest who recently attended the workshop on church communication mentioned that not only was he the only Orthodox person, all other participants were lay members of "Communications Ministries" of participating congregations.

Not everything that goes in a bulletin or newsletter needs to be written by the rector. Certainly the final typing or layout certainly need not be done by the priest.

From the Youth Director's Desk...

What better way to demonstrate that your parish values the talents and gifts of its lay members than to include an important evangelization or 'good work' story or a perspective on a recent book about the Orthodox faith from a lay person.

Find One Thing

We've offered a number of thoughts. Many, perhaps most, of these are known to you. A few may be new ideas. Whether known or new all we ask is that you look for *one improvement action* and put it in place. (Then of course we'll ask you to find a second... and on it goes!)

Improving a bulletin will not in and of itself bring vibrancy to your parish. But a less than effective bulletin could be one of the many ways your parish is losing participation through ineffective communication.

If you have further suggestions on improving bulletin content or layout please feel free to contact us at parishfacilitator@midwestdiocese.org

Joseph Kormos is the Parish Health Facilitator for the Diocese of the Midwest.

Appendix A:

Examples of Bulletin/Newsletter Content from Around the Diocese

- Upcoming schedule of services
- Variable content for today's Liturgy
- Coffee hour schedule
- Greeters and readers this week/next week
- Known to be hospitalized; deaths; Prayer lists
- Thank you notes
- Articles with updates on various parish ministries
- Articles on Lives of Saints for the week
- Stewardship corner; pledge updates; post monthly/weekly budget vs actual
- Named donations for the month for various special funds
- Church school: what each class is studying
- Choir notes
- Parish council corner: where we need your help
- Officer nominations
- Upcoming Parish projects; status
- Plans for a parish Major Cleanup day
- Youth program
- What's new in our gift shop; in parish library
- Book reviews
- Parish calendar
- Photographs of newcomers, or parish 'veterans'
- Activities happening in other OCA Parishes in region, Orthodox parishes in area; other churches in town; community organizations; concerts; lectures
- Focus on a mission parish in the Diocese/area
- Meetings/events for various parish clubs
- Interesting website or web articles
- Social events listings
- Ads from local businesses
- Fund raising efforts ("please buy this...", "we need help with...")
- Folk dancing, various ethnic related events

1. Bulletin Outline: Parish A

1. Today's schedule
 - a. Who has coffee hour, church clean up; meetings/activities after church
2. Variable worship material
3. Birthdays anniversaries, hospitalized
4. Parish announcements – events, major happenings. In one recent week it included:
 - a. Explanation of nativity fast
 - b. Monthly charity project
 - c. Thank you received for various efforts by the community
 - d. Update on an adult ed. Group
5. Schedule for upcoming week

2. Bulletin Outline Parish B

1. Masthead
 - a. Names phone numbers, email addresses of parish clergy and choir director
 - b. Parish web site address
2. Variable worship material
3. Saints Biography
 - a. A brief description of the life of a saint or feast – normally of the day or of the past week
4. Welcome : Standard welcome greeting for visitors, communion, how to find more info about parish etc.
5. Birthdays, hospitalized, deaths
6. Calendar for week
7. Coffee hour, readers, greeters, ushers for next week
8. News, Notes, Announcements, Reminders
 - a. St Nicholas day event Announcement
 - b. Church school activity update
 - c. Volunteers requested for fund raising activity
 - d. Volunteers requested for seasonal charitable event
 - e. Notes from recent parish council meeting
9. Pastor's Reflection