

# Discovering Parish Values

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A recent webinar -- "*Discovering Parish Values - Foundation for Living a Life in Christ*" -- proved to be an extremely popular topic. Presented by Father Jonathan Ivanoff, the webinar was attended by 75 persons from a variety of OCA Dioceses. It outlined the importance of understanding and renewing the attitudes, values, and beliefs that define a church and shape its practices. Many have also viewed the online archive recording --found [here](#) and the slides [found here](#).



## What Are & Are Not Core Values?

According to Fr. Ivanoff, who is rector of St John the Theologian Orthodox Church in Shirley NY, and a long time member of the OCA's Department of Evangelization, core values are *not* statements of faith, belief, or theology, scriptural purpose statements, favorite programs, or strategies. Instead they are;

*"consistent, passionate, scriptural, distinctive convictions that determine our priorities, influence our decisions, drive our ministry and are demonstrated by our behavior."*

## Core Values are Important

Core values are important for a variety of reasons including:

### **Provide Foundation**

When considering new ideas and initiatives in the parish a set of core values becomes the bedrock upon which future visions of ministry are founded. In fact it could be said that parish values are the building blocks of parish vision --the parameters that define boundaries of the vision and the driving force behind the vision.

### **Aid in Averting Conflict**

When you think about it most issues --large and small -- that arise in parishes have at their root an important difference in values among the differing viewpoints. Test this yourself. Think of a recent disagreement within your parish. (Hopefully this will be difficult!) What differing/misaligned values (expressed or unexpressed) might have been at the root of that episode?

### **A Language for Communication**

It stands to reason that a parish that has worked to discern its values --and to continually

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improve them -- has also unlocked a language for communication that can serve it well as it confronts and solves problems.

### **Answers Why We Do What We Do**

"The most accurate indicators of parish's current values are its behavior --and how it spends its money", said Fr. Ivanoff.

#### *Fees for Church School?*

If we charge a fee for children to attend church school --or consistently skimp on education budgets it is a safe bet that in fact we don't truly value the formation of our young people into pious and educated Orthodox Christians.

#### *Cut Charity from Budget?*

If we are ready to cut charitable contributions from the parish budget --or argue against using parish funds for charitable purposes -- it seems reasonable that we don't value that action as part of our parish's life in Christ.

#### *Late to Worship?*

Likewise the parish that says it values vibrant worship -- yet most parishioners straggle into Liturgy late or pinch pirogis or layer baklava in the kitchen while a festal liturgy is served in church --is of course kidding itself.

Such behaviors --whether actions or "budget principles" are particularly transparent to newcomers to the parish. In one parish the hour long debate at a parish meeting about whether to buy a new lawn mower turned off a family of new parishioners to the point they *almost* didn't return. "They debated minor details --while leaving what to us were significant areas of ministry funding unsupported," mentioned the couple. (*We are reminded of a version of Parkinson's Law of Triviality -the time spent on an agenda item varies inversely to the sum of the \$ involved!*)

### **Provide the Courage for Risk Taking**

In our opinion one of the most important qualities of parish leadership is to establish a reasonable "risk profile" for the parish. We're not talking (just) about insurance risks -fire and liability etc. or even financial risk --though each of these is part of an overall view of parish "risk". We're talking more like "ministry risk". "Can we sustain an effort to..." "Do we foresee ourselves trying..." And, most importantly, "Why not?"

When a parish has *not* evaluated or discussed its hopes and vision --based on what it truly *collectively* values, out of the box, innovative (yes, it is OK to be innovative in Orthodoxy!) ideas and proposals are consistently dead on arrival. And, the parish settles in a for prolonged period of ruttedness. New efforts and new approaches become buried in skepticism and torpor. "I just don't think this parish is ready for that" becomes the bromide that keeps everything safe and often limits progress.

Clear, expressed, core values can provide the incentive, intensity, energy, clarity, confidence and enthusiasm for acting on *the hope that is in us*. They become the foundation for better communication, decision making and... *reasonable* risk taking.

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## From Values to Core Values

As we listened to Fr. Ivanoff we came to appreciate the important differences between "values" (which every parish has in one form or another) and true core values. It seems to us that the journey to core values involves three transitions:

- **Shared** -- From personal/randomly agreed upon to convictions collectively shared by most in the parish.
- **Holy** -- True core values are holy. Often this involves a transition from current values based on secular topics or principles to values that express the fullness of the Gospel. Which of these values could be held by (e.g.) Kiwanis club -or PTA etc. Which can only be done by a church? By an Orthodox Church?
- **Lived** -- In discerning core values it is important to differentiate between aspirational values -ones that are holy and shared but not enacted and values that are also lived. These values that are truly "baked in" to the parish culture and expressed by behaviors, attitudes and the way we solve problems.

## Questions for Discovering Core Values

Discerning core values for a parish --particularly a parish that has little past experience with dialogue -- can be tricky. Fr. Ivanoff suggested breaking into two or more groups, and discussing some of the following questions: (we've added a few of our own)

- To what are we committed?  
As persons/individuals? As a parish?
- What is God calling me/us to do here?
- What are things like when they are at their best here? How do we evaluate that? What criteria do we use?
- How do we spend our time in this parish?
- What behaviors, methods, procedures, policies would be exhibited by an Orthodox Church that has stated \_\_\_\_\_ as a core value?
- What are we "against"? What behaviors would you/we simply not tolerate in this parish?
- What ideas have we rejected in the past? Why...
- Consider two decisions that the parish has made recently. What was the basis of those decisions? What does that action reveal about our values
- What is the purpose/ mission of our parish? (Who are we? What do we do? Why do we do it? Who do we do it for?) Given that purpose what should such a community value?
- What values are expressed by today's epistle and gospel?



*Parish Core Values need to be shared. Determining if values are shared broadly, requires conversations, often structured, in small groups.*

- What values are demonstrated at our Parish annual meeting? Our parish council meetings. What important Christian values are (often/occasionally) not observable at these sessions
- Does our budget express our priorities and values?
- What sacred cows exist in our parish? What topics are undiscussable?
- What stirs us to action?
- What do we want our parish to be known for?
- What are we passionate about?

Once groups have considered a few of these questions, complete statements like "We are committed to..." or "We value...". Then reconvene the small groups, share the lists and work to:

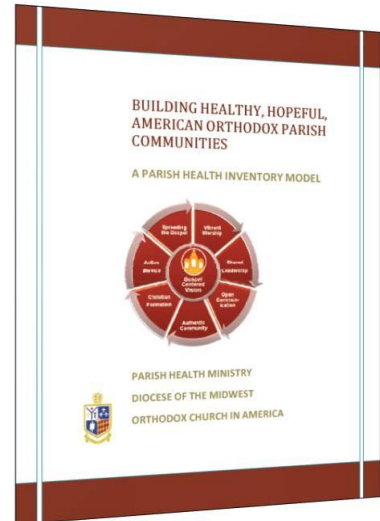
- Build consensus on 5-6 values that have *"arrived" and taken root*.
- Identify a few items for which a number of people show energy --but clearly are not shared by all or are shared but not lived. Keep them on a list of emerging values, or *"values in progress"*.
- If you identified items that revealed conflict and disagreement those could be put on a list of *values causing gridlock*.
- Create a list of ideas/*values in anticipation* - future issues not yet begun to be addressed.

Revisit these lists in the future to see how the the values landscape may have progressed - or regressed.

## Parish Health Inventory

Another good approach to discerning parish values would be to take the parish council, or an adult study group, or even the youth group and work through a chapter of the [Parish Health Inventory Model](#) at each session. Many items in the inventory are values like in character. Nominate 2-3 values from each chapter that the group says it shares. At the end of the eight segments of the inventory, collect the aggregate list and pare it down to the top five or six shared and lived values.

Need help? Call.



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