

Yes! We Want to Grow!

By Joseph Kormos, Archdiocesan Parish Development Ministry Leader

In ten years of working with Orthodox parishes, we can't remember encountering a parish that did not say it *wanted to grow* numerically. *"How long do you want your parish to live? Forever! Do you want your church to grow? Yes!"*

Yet growing numerically is *not* straightforward. As we read in the epistle to the Corinthians, "I (Paul) planted, Apollos watered but God gave the increase." (1. Cor. 4:6.) We are not always directly in control of numerical parish growth.

Instead we are asked to spiritually prepare and water the soil as the Body of Christ. This spiritual growth encourages us to lay a foundation for future generations, to grow in our faith, to share our faith, and to welcome others into the church. With such Christ-centered effort, God may *eventually* bless us with an increase.

Well Worn Grooves – For the Past

Though we *say* we want to grow, most parishes are operating in well worn-grooves. We 'do what we've always done': Sunday only liturgy, picnics, fundraising sales, dues, and men's and women's clubs. Some are still trying to recapture the 'good old days'. As someone once said, "If the past arrives, we'll be prepared!"

This level and type of commitment may have enabled parishes to maintain themselves in times of large families, whose children grew up and stayed in the area. But in today's mobile, secularized society, helping our parish to flourish requires opening our doors to non-Orthodox and Orthodox who are new to the area. These are people who likely have different needs and expectations.

A 'New' Model and a Nudge

Without over simplifying the situation, growing Orthodox parishes today are attracting new people with a model rooted in: holiness, sacraments, service, and apostolic zeal. People are attracted to the Orthodox faith when they see energetic worship beyond Sunday mornings, charitable ministry and budgets, open hospitality to strangers, serious generosity of time and treasure, and warmth and love.

Most parishes in our Archdiocese are working at their own pace toward that new model. However, the gravitational pull of "what we've always done" often holds us back. Often we require a *nudge*. This is the role of the Parish Development and Growth Committee.

Parish Development & Growth Committee

Rebecca Danchenko

Intercession of the Virgin Church, Carnegie PA

Chrisia Johnston

Holy Resurrection Church, Belle Vernon PA

Alexis Parshook

St. John the Baptist Church, New Kens. PA

Kira Meholick

St Nicholas Church, Dubois PA

Kristie Mertz

St Nicholas Church, McKees Rocks PA

Fr. George Johnson

St. John the Baptist Church, Conemaugh PA

Fr. Andrew Nelko

St. Nicholas Church, Weirton WV

Joe Kormos

Parish Development Ministry, Chairperson

The Parish Development and Growth Committee

The new Archdiocesan Parish Development and Growth Committee has the goal of increasing the impact and footprint of our existing Parish Development ministry efforts. This team brings together the experiences of various clergy and laity from numerous Archdiocesan parishes – small and larger, growing and plateaued, newer and older, urban and rural - to shape efforts of our Parish Development Ministry.

A Theme for Consistent Parish Effort

As our first action, we've selected a two year theme (see box nearby) designed to stimulate and reinforce attitudes toward parish growth and Christ-centered action within parishes across our Archdiocese. Our theme is broad enough for *any parish* to find a way to expand its commitment to Living a Life in Christ in the modern world.

Identify and Commit to an Action Project

With the identification of the theme, we encourage *all parishes* to identify and undertake a serious project to strengthen their parish with purposeful and intentional effort.

Making Hard Decisions on Our Future

Making an effort sometimes requires us to make hard decisions to prepare us for the future, and to act on those decisions.

One of the hard decisions is to focus on only one thing. Trying to act on every opportunity or problem can't possibly work. We ask that each parish to honestly consider their parish life in the three sub-theme areas of:

- **Growing in Faith:** Education, formation, worship, and community building
- **Sharing our Faith:** Proclaiming Christ in our life, words and service, In-person and online.
- **Welcoming Others:** Showing hospitality to guests and strangers. "Moving over" for new ideas of parishioners with different needs and attitudes.

Then select ONE important area of effort to be undertaken over the next 18-24 months.

You Can Do This!

Building a Bright Parish Future:
*Growing in Faith, Sharing Our Faith,
Welcoming Others*

QUESTIONS FOR PARISH DISCUSSION

General

1. Of the focus areas below which area would be most beneficial for us to focus on to establish a bright(er) parish future?
2. What is our parish good at? Can we become "great" at what we're "good" at?

Education/Growing in Faith

3. What are the benefits of a deeper understanding of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian?
4. What questions am I asked by friends about our faith? Am I satisfied with my answers?
5. Is reading or attending classes the only way to grow in our faith? What other methods/approaches can help our parish to grow in faith?

Sharing Our Faith

6. How do we as a parish communicate who we are and what we stand for? Can we improve this?
7. Do our neighbors know that they are welcome in our church? Or, are we seen only as a source of ethnic food?
8. Do we invite friends, relatives and neighbors to church?

Hospitality

9. How many guests visited our parish in the last (e.g.) 6 months? Was that more or less than the previous period?
10. What do we think they were looking for? How would they evaluate that? Did they return?
11. What are the experiences of a visitor to our parish?
12. Is our parish welcoming and friendly? In what ways yes? No? What conversational approaches can we learn for welcoming inquirers?
13. Do we effectively help new parishioners to find a role that fits their gifts and talents?

What Can You Do?

If you are a parish priest, take this opportunity to encourage and stimulate new effort. Talk with your parish council and various ministry groups.

If you are on the parish council, or an interested parishioner, make sure your parish participates. Undertake a serious parish conversation and identify your initiative. See the box nearby for discussion questions. Look at the article in this issue titled “What kind of parish do we prefer?” Once you select a project make it official by submitting your project on the Archdiocesan website.

Help is Available

More information is available via the Archdiocesan website in the form of FAQ documents and potential project ideas. Also, the Parish Development and Growth Committee can help in the project selection process and will provide tools, practices, encouragement and suggestions for any parish.

In the words of C.S. Lewis, “The greatest danger is the illusion that all is well.” Most parishes wait too long.