

# The Triple Digit Parish Anniversary

## *Heritage Parishes: Nostalgia or Leaning Forward?*

*Joseph Kormos, Parish Development Ministry*

Many Orthodox parishes will mark 100th anniversaries soon --or did so in the recent past. These are important milestones worthy of celebration. Often, however, we find that anniversaries can engulf a parish in a wave of unproductive nostalgia about *the way things were* and *the good old days*. A reasonable question is, in the midst of celebrating --banquets, program books etc.-- *can the parish somehow baptize the occasion to lean into the future?*

Here are a few suggestions to turn your major parish milestone into an opportunity to explore new possibilities:

### Ask Good Questions

Few practices can propel a parish forward more effectively than learning to discuss (this includes listening) some key questions. Some of our favorites:

- *Who owns this parish?*
- *What is God calling us to do --at this time, in this place, with these resources?*
- *Are we satisfied with the status quo in this parish?*
- *What holds us back? What limits our parish from being what we want it to be? What are our constraints and limitations?*
- *Can we begin to conceive of our parish in new better -- even more Orthodox --ways?*
- *What is working well? How can we do more of it?*



*Can we harness the natural nostalgia of major parish milestones? Can they provide an opportunity to look forward --while remembering past accomplishments?*

We've mixed a few more good questions in below.

### Put a Face on It

There is one question we *can* always ask a parish group and expect a consistent answer. "*How long do you want this parish to live?*" is always rapidly answered: "*Forever!*" by every community.

Yet "forever" becomes abstract and often devolves to '*at least until I'm gone*'. Try replacing "forever" with a target time frame - "a second hundred years" - and then *personify* the next century. Realize that in one hundred years the *great grandchildren of the parish's youngest baby* will be heirs of today's efforts to build and strengthen the parish.



*Building a parish to last a 'second hundred years' asks parishioners to behave as stewards in service of the needs of the descendants of this new servant of God. His great, great grandfather (above) laid a good foundation. What foundation are we putting down?*

Too often we make parish decisions to appease *our* needs. During anniversary periods we think back (often superficially) two, three, perhaps four generations. In addition, think *forward*. *What kind of foundation do parish stewards need to build for*

the parishioners only one generation from now to be well served?

## Look Backwards to Look Forward

Parish history narratives are a staple of parish anniversaries. Yet most narratives miss the point --or rather turning points - of parish life. Consider:

- *What can past parish challenges and crises teach us about: Faith? Hard work? Handling crises? Taking risks? God's love and mercy?*
- *How does our personal financial status compare with those who built or founded this parish? Who is more affluent? What sacrifices did they make?*
- *What are the top 3-4 events or trends that shaped the parish in the last 25 years? (Extra credit: Answer this without including building projects.)*



Sometimes themes *can* be helpful. This parish selected "Respecting the Past -Embracing the Future". Instead of burying it in a booklet the timeline fills an active hallway.

## Mission and Vision

Many positive things can and should be remembered about early parish pioneers. Yet their sense of purpose and vision was expressed in vastly different times and circumstances-- much of which may not fit today's reality.

It may be time to rethink your vision. A mission/vision discussion of 5-10 years ago is likely due for an update. The naturally reflective nature of a milestone anniversary can create the right mood for this topic. One parish is planning a series of focus groups with various parish segments to collect inputs. For other approaches see the article: [Vision Toolbox - Crafting Your Parish Vision](#).



Anniversaries can be a good time for a parish to learn to look in the mirror!

## Shared Values

To truly understand purpose and vision we need to understand what we value --together as a community. Anniversaries are great times to have such discussions.

Consider:

- *What is important and unimportant to us as a parish? What do we value?*
- *Do our behaviors exhibit/reflect these values or do we just think we value these things?*
- *Is giving our best important to us? Or are we satisfied with 'good enough'?*
- Sometimes in this context the best question is a negative. *"What are we against? What practices and behaviors will we not stand for in this parish?"*

[For more info click here.](#)

## Idea Wall

Ask parishioners to consider *"What do we want this parish to look and be like in ten years?"* Gather opinions in various ways --perhaps including an *idea wall* where people can gather for coffee hour conversation to add 'post-it notes' describing their dreams about various aspects of parish life. The wall can grow over a period of weeks.



Unlike meetings "idea walls" capture inputs from many people --over a period of weeks.

## Future Centric Newspaper Article

Summarize the best vision contributions into a mythical 2018 or 2023 newspaper article (or whatever replaces newspapers!) written about your parish. What would you want it to say? *How do you want people in your neighborhood/town/city to see your parish?*

## Dedicate a Service Project

Most parishes need to break out of a life style hallmarked by insularity. Find a local service project -- dedicate your parish effort to celebrating your milestone. Accept publicity --don't seek it.

---

It has been said that *"Death comes when memories of the past exceed the vision for the future."* With the right blend of activities your parish anniversary can help everyone to feel like parish founders -- building a community for a second hundred years.