

What Makes a Solid Parish Youth Effort?

Lessons Learned from Diocesan Parishes

Joseph Kormos, Parish Development Ministry,

One of the valuable conversations at the 2008 Midwest Diocese *Parish Health Summit* dealt with the importance of parish practices for helping parish youth to become lifelong Orthodox Christians. A few parishes in attendance mentioned that over the past ten years, virtually every young person (90+%) growing up in their parish continues to be a practicing Orthodox Christian.



We decided to explore more deeply the principles and practices behind the youth efforts at these and a few other parishes to see what might be learned that can be shared usefully with other parishes. We communicated with priests and youth leaders from parishes with active, and reasonably effective youth related efforts.

The following are a few key principles that seem to be in operation at the parishes we interviewed.

Establish the Correct Goal

“We believe that ministry to Youth, Young Adults and OCF College students is the key to retaining our Youth. But its purpose is not merely *retention* but building active committed Christians. There is no purpose in youth activities if they do not truly bring our young people into a vital relationship with Christ and the Church,” said one priest.

“No one is going to help them grow in faith and virtue if we don't,” added another youth leader. “Fellowship is important but it can't be the only thing. We try to challenge youth to grow in ways they are reluctant to grow.”

Build a System

One common theme seemed to be the importance of building what might be called an organic youth “system”.

Most of the parishes interviewed try to offer a multi-dimensional “suite” of youth related efforts that may include liturgy participation, informal discussions with the priest and youth leaders, fellowship efforts, service projects, summer camp, summer bible study, and retreats. All these activities are designed to teach through action and example and to systematically develop relationships among parish youth and a relationship of those youth to the parish and the broader Church.

“We try to work it so that our Youth Groups *evolve* to Teen Groups, then young Adult Groups where the kids become buddies, sometimes very close friends, summarized one priest.”

Link to Liturgy

“The liturgy is where youth really learn the faith by congregational participation along with their parents and the others. Make sure that every sermon is understandable to youth as much as possible,” said one priest. “Find as many ways to incorporate your parish youth into liturgy. We’ve found that parish adults – parents and others - respond well to this. It gives them a clear feeling that they are building the church every week, one child at a time,”

In addition to encouraging children to become readers, chanters and singers and for boys to serve in the altar as soon as practical, other ideas are:

- Family sponsors for feast days
- Church school class sponsors for feast days
- Youth group sponsors for feast days
- Have girls serve as “[Handmaidens](#)” -- cutting up and serving the bread and wine.
- Candle ‘blower outers’,
- Participation in the Paschal procession
- Palm Sunday Procession (they line the aisle with raised palms as the priest makes the procession to the little entrance)
- taking the collection,

“Every Sunday is youth Sunday at our parish since kids are greeters along with their parents, take the collection, and take attendance,” said one priest.

Link Youth Efforts and Church school

“We spend many years in our Sunday school curriculum teaching about Orthodox Christian beliefs and behaviors, Bible stories, the history of the church, the feasts, the Liturgy,” notes one parish leader, “*but there comes a time when we must teach our children to apply this framework to living their lives.*”

Consider these ideas:

- “Use the weekly Sunday school class to examine, discuss, role-play, problem-solve teen challenges. This can help them make decisions and choices based



“Sister Magdalen writes in her book, **Children in the Church Today**, about teenage years: ‘...they are struggling to sort out a set of values for themselves: gradually the faith they have received must become their own conviction, and this process does not always take place smoothly.’ Her chapter on *Christian Life in the Teenage Years* provides practical guidance for Orthodox clergy, teachers and parents. She cautions against a rigid attitude and suggests that ‘teenagers need real dialogue with their parents.’ I would add that teenagers need real dialogue with other Orthodox Christians, clergy and teachers,” noted one parish leader.

on Orthodox values and teachings. Discussion has a way of helping teens see the truth, when it is guided by a competent teacher.

- “Build a short summary of the class in a fun e-mail as follow-up during the week to remind the students of issues discussed (also an easy way to keep up the interest of those that are not in attendance).
- “Use Talk sheets by David Lynn, published by Zondervan Publishing. They are terrific and provide a clever framework for thinking about the issues young people want to talk about.
- “Use Teen Choices, from Chariot Victor Publishing as a game which provides hundreds of scenarios that require decisions.
- “Use Steven Covey’s book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens, and discussed it chapter by chapter in church school -- applying an Orthodox perspective to the habits described in the book.”¹
- Make them do some work - don't prepare and hand all the lessons to them - challenge them to prepare some lessons.
- Have an oratorical contest. Let each one research a question, problem or issue and report to the class about what they found out.

From the book: Seven Habits for Highly Effective Teens, by Steven Covey

- **Be Proactive** -- Take responsibility with your life.
- **Begin with the End in Mind** -- Define your mission and goals in life.
- **Put First things First** - Prioritize and do the most important things first.
- **Seek First to Understand, Then Be Understood** - Listen to people sincerely.
- **Think Win-Win** - Have an everyone-can-win attitude.
- **Synergize** - Work together to achieve more.
- **Sharpen the Saw** - Renew yourself regularly.

Linking Youth to the Parish

Another area of consistency and commonality we heard was the importance of family oriented activities and linking the youth to the fabric of the parish. In achieving these goals two barriers seems to arise. First, parishes and parishioners tend to compartmentalize the youth group as *somebody else’s responsibility*. The thought that it’s not my problem because my kids are gone or ‘I don’t have kids can be a big factor in limiting effectively knitting youth to the parish. “Retaining our youth is the responsibility of the entire parish community. We need to know each other in order to love each other,” notes a youth leader.

Secondly, for many, seniors with little contact with young people, teens, can look like a scary bunch -- haircuts, tattoos and piercings, backward baseball caps, baggy jeans, etc. Some parishes are working hard to help parishioners realize that often underneath these teen “costumes” there are accomplished musicians, a ballet dancer, debaters, quarterbacks, science scholars, aspiring writers, community volunteers and school leaders.

Potential areas of effort:

- Work to recognize teens -- announce their accomplishments at end of liturgy²

¹ “Yes, there is a secular vernacular to the list of habits but the Orthodox Church provides us with many ‘healthy behaviors’ that we were able to incorporate into our discussion of each of the “habits” in the book,” noted one youth leader.

² E.g. ‘Jason’s swing choir won a blue ribbon at state, Kevin made the first squad summer league baseball team, Allison is studying economics in Madrid for the next six months’.

- Recognize college students home on breaks
- Invite past altar boys to serve on Christmas³
- Organize a skit/fashion show in which students wear school letter jackets, a favorite sports jersey, favorite hip outfit or even a prom dress and each student, with the help of the leader, writes a description of themselves, including hobbies, school activities or something distinctive and special about themselves. (e.g. Where they go to school, how big the school is and what grade they are in.)⁴
- "Cookies & Coffee" -- parish kids spend time asking questions and dialoguing with senior members.
- Organize "intergenerational" field trips: the zoo, a museum, a day in the city, a trip to a nearby monastery, and more...that included seniors, young moms with kids who needed a break and tweens and teens.
- Build a set of heritage stories spotlighting the parish's seniors with parish youth playing a key role in interviewing and structuring the result, producing a video.
- "Pizza, Pop & Talk" group time with priest – no parents
- Have youth help with coffee hour or host a coffee hour breakfast,
- Encourage families, or youth cohorts to participate in spring cleaning for Pascha.

Build Fellowship and Friendship

Many parishes can point to groups of parishioners who, having developed friendships while growing up in a parish, are now the adult core of the parish.

"One of the main goals of the youth effort in our parish has been to create fellowship among the members so that they can find a common place to bond and become friends. This enables other more serious activities that lead to the commitment to the Orthodox Church and to each other," said one priest.

Of course no exact formula can be recommended that works everywhere. Various ideas cited include:

- Encourage kids to hang out together at the Coffee Hour. As they get older they meet outside of church events socially and keep in touch when at college, etc.
- Hold "Faith & Family Night" by attending a game for a local sports team (or type of activity.)
- Movie night
- Establish a FOCA Youth Chapter. Encourage teens to participate in FOCA Camps, Sports tournaments and conventions. There they come in contact with other Orthodox kids and often



³ This past Christmas the altar servers included a law student, an investment banker, a paramedic, a college baseball player, a naval officer, and an economics student home from London, etc.

⁴ "Not only did the students have a fabulous time developing their profile, the parish loved the "show," explained a youth leader. "Nobody knew that Josh was being recruited by Notre Dame, Maxine danced the lead in the Nutcracker, Kyra was a cheerleader, that Peter was on the debate team, that Natalie spoke French. That Andrew had a colony of bees was the biggest hit. We're considering doing this on annual basis," she added.

develop lasting friendships that bud into leadership roles in the parish, Diocese and on a national or international level.

- Take trips – Obviously these can include a winter sports weekend, an overnight retreat at a park, attending summer camp as a group participating in a seminary program or visiting a monastery.
- Conduct a youth to participate in Project Mexico or other international mission/charitable projects
- Encourage college students to join the OCF at their local campus. Have your parish sponsor an OCF chapter at a nearby college.
- Summer camp,
- Summer bible study,
- Retreats.
- Facebook

Service

In the opinion of each of the parish leaders we interviewed service is an important component of their youth effort. “Challenge them to grow in ways they are reluctant to grow,” said one. A speaker at the recent Evangelism conference at Antiochian Village encouraged youth leaders to stretch parish youth beyond their comfort zone – to do things in the Youth Group that help them grow in virtue and love. “Have them do projects -- charity or work around the church -- not for any reward but because *that is what a Christian does,*” said one youth leader.

Among projects cited by those interviewed were:

- Deliver food and gifts to needy families at Christmas
- Raise money for pancreatic cancer research
- "Cans for Cookies" (collected canned food for local food drive)
- Harvest for Hunger
- Project Mexico and other

Post High School Years

Twenty Something Dormancy

The idea that young people fall away from the church in college and early post college years –only to (perhaps) return as they settle down to a more stable period of their life is a staple of most adults’ views of college years. Yet, this view was challenged by a recent college graduate with whom we spoke. “I think too many parents, parishioners and pastors tend to give college kids sort of a free pass during the early years when they are away from parents. I know in my case my priest did not accept the idea that I or other young people from our parish should get lazy with respect to church attendance or church life while at college. Speaking from the point of view of someone who has recently been though this I recommend that parishes find ways to continue to *push* their Orthodox college students to find ways to express and live their Orthodox faith while in college” he said.

Preparing for College – Sharing Your Faith

In addition to actively keeping tabs during college, parish youth efforts have a critical role to play in preparing youth for college years. “Once they go to college and are totally influenced by friends and

profs, they will be challenged in their faith and their morality”, said one pastor. The youth group, then, should be a time for them to not only practice their faith –through virtue and charity -- but to also practice *sharing their faith* and *talking about faith*. Youth need to ask and be asked difficult questions about what it means to believe or not believe in God. Many leaders indicated that a good youth effort challenges youth’s faith and beliefs in order to prepare them for the world.

A speaker at the recent Evangelism conference pointed out the importance of challenging youth to grow and to not to be afraid of difficult questions -- nor of periods of uncertainty in their faith.

One recommendation: prepare kids to go on the offense about their faith instead of always being on the defense. This means instead of kids going off to college and having to defend their faith, prepare them to share their faith.

Some specifics:

- Let them point out ideas and scriptures passages that are important to their own spiritual life and maturation.
- Have youth call the priest and talk about a project/question/research. Let them have a real adult conversation with the priest about an important spiritual or ethical issue or question.
- Ask youth to deliver their findings as a report or sermon to the parish on the Sundays of Great Lent.
- Perhaps, after appropriate mentoring by the priest, ask youth to share/explain/defend their faith to the parish.

Keeping in Touch

One parish, after interviewing several college students and young adults, found that the spontaneous and informative e-mails that are sent out by the priest asking for prayers or announcing a baptism or death or asking assistance for someone experiencing a job loss, have a huge impact on a sense of belonging for college students.

These types of communications play a valuable role in knitting college students to the community. One student said that receiving an occasional little ‘mini-sermon from Father’ was a help. “I love that...to have a short note in the middle of my busy week that reminds me why we are celebrating a specific feast. I probably wouldn’t have thought about it otherwise.” To know that a young couple needs a home for their dog because they are having a baby was a specific message that another student remembered that, although he was studying abroad, made him feel connected to his parish. A widow was surprised to receive sympathy cards and notes from several college students because of an e-mail announcing the unexpected death of her husband.

Structured Youth Effort

Opinion varied on the importance of a formal structured youth group. “I’m not sure I see a ‘youth group’ per se as the most important answer here –at least for our parish,” said one lay leader. “We see our youth activities as being an organic part of the parish without necessarily having a formal youth group.”

Those parishes with a formal youth group or program had a number of tips for making and keeping the group effective.

- Mission statement - Create a mission statement to express a vision of the youth group's purpose and how it fits into the life of the parish.
- Ministry areas -- Establish a set of specific ministry areas under which each youth activity falls. One parish organized it as *outreach ministry, communication ministry and fellowship ministry*. Support this structure by having parent volunteers oversee each ministry. Likewise assign children to at least one ministry and then have each ministry group plan activities associated with their ministry.
- Staff -Consider a paid youth director to develop consistency, standardize efforts and follow appropriate safety guidelines.

Example Youth Group Mission Statement

- To foster the ongoing *spiritual growth* of youth and young adults, and work toward their continual integration into the life and ministry of the Orthodox Christian Church in North America.
- To encourage (*parish name*) youths and young adults to *show compassion and love* through outreach activities to members of the *community*.
- To help (*parish name*) youths to grow and mature in God's love through *community with each other*.

In Conclusion

There is, of course, no single formula for helping parish youth efforts to effectively grow good Orthodox Christians. Hopefully some of the practices, ideas and principles in this article can be helpful. If you are looking to establish or revamp a parish youth effort as you explore some of these ideas, we suggest that also consider first hand discussions –conference calls, “benchmarking visits”, or emails exchanges with the youth leaders and pastors consulted in developing this article.

Perhaps we will explore this topic – the “vibrant parish youth effort” as a theme for an upcoming Diocesan Parish Development Summit.