Building Vibrant Parishes

Session One

Decline & Renewal: Stories & Experiences

7/16/2013

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Thank You!

- Your time this evening
- Your past labors
- Your willingness to consider new approaches

Background

On This Series and This Evening's Session

Presenter

Joseph Kormos

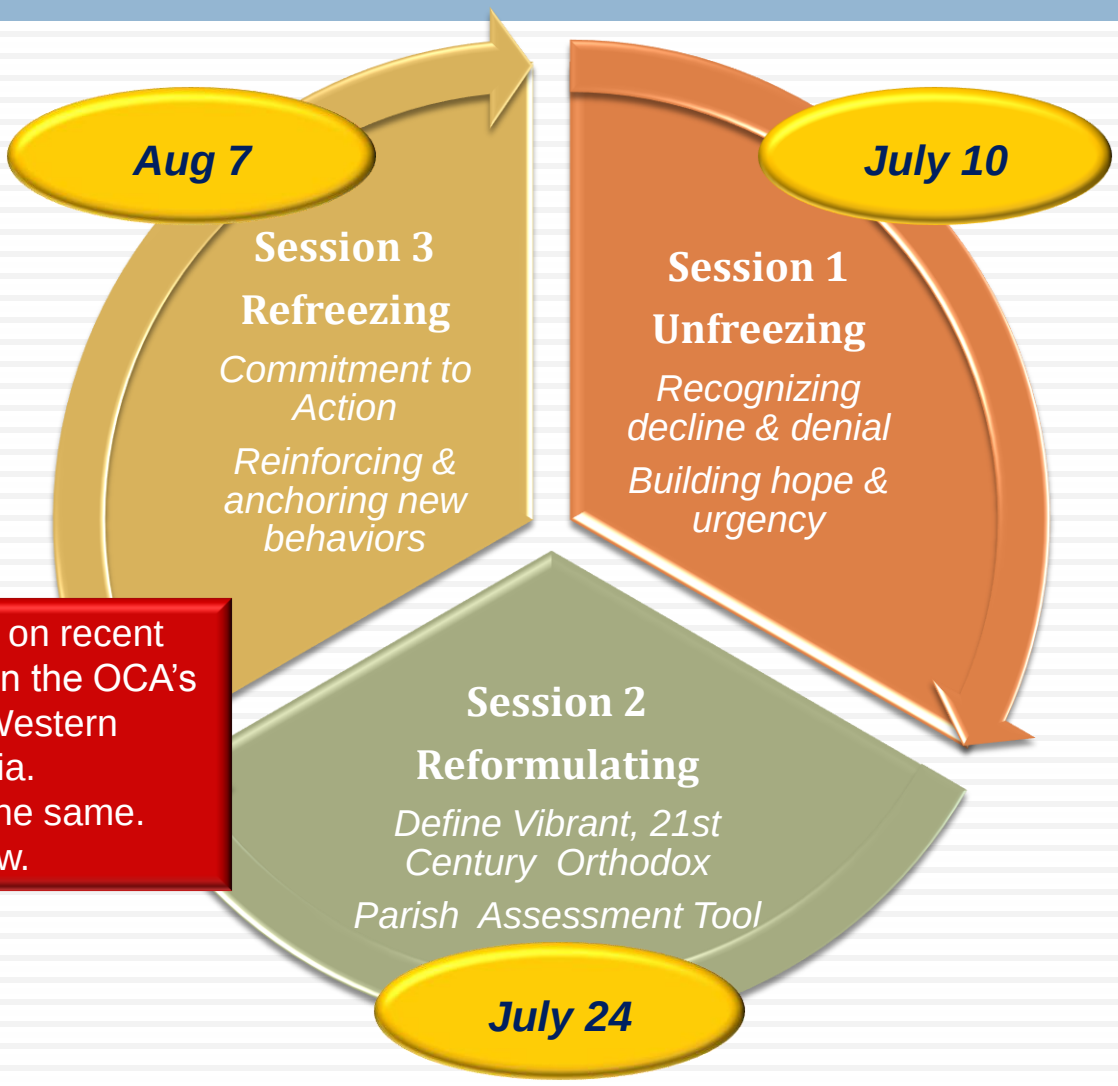
- Metropolia and OCA era parishes
  - A parish "founder"
- Consultant, Facilitator, Marketing
- 6 years Parish Development Ministry
  - Diocese of Midwest

Visited >65 Orthodox parishes in last six years

Participant Profile

- % OCA
  - Most OCA Dioceses incl. Alaska
  - Also Greek, Antiochian, Ukrainian, Coptic, other
- 75% laity/ 25% clergy
- Varying parish situations
  - Missions >> Hundred year old parishes
  - Pan Orthodox >> Ethnic
- Cradles and Converts
- Single parish experience >> Moved around

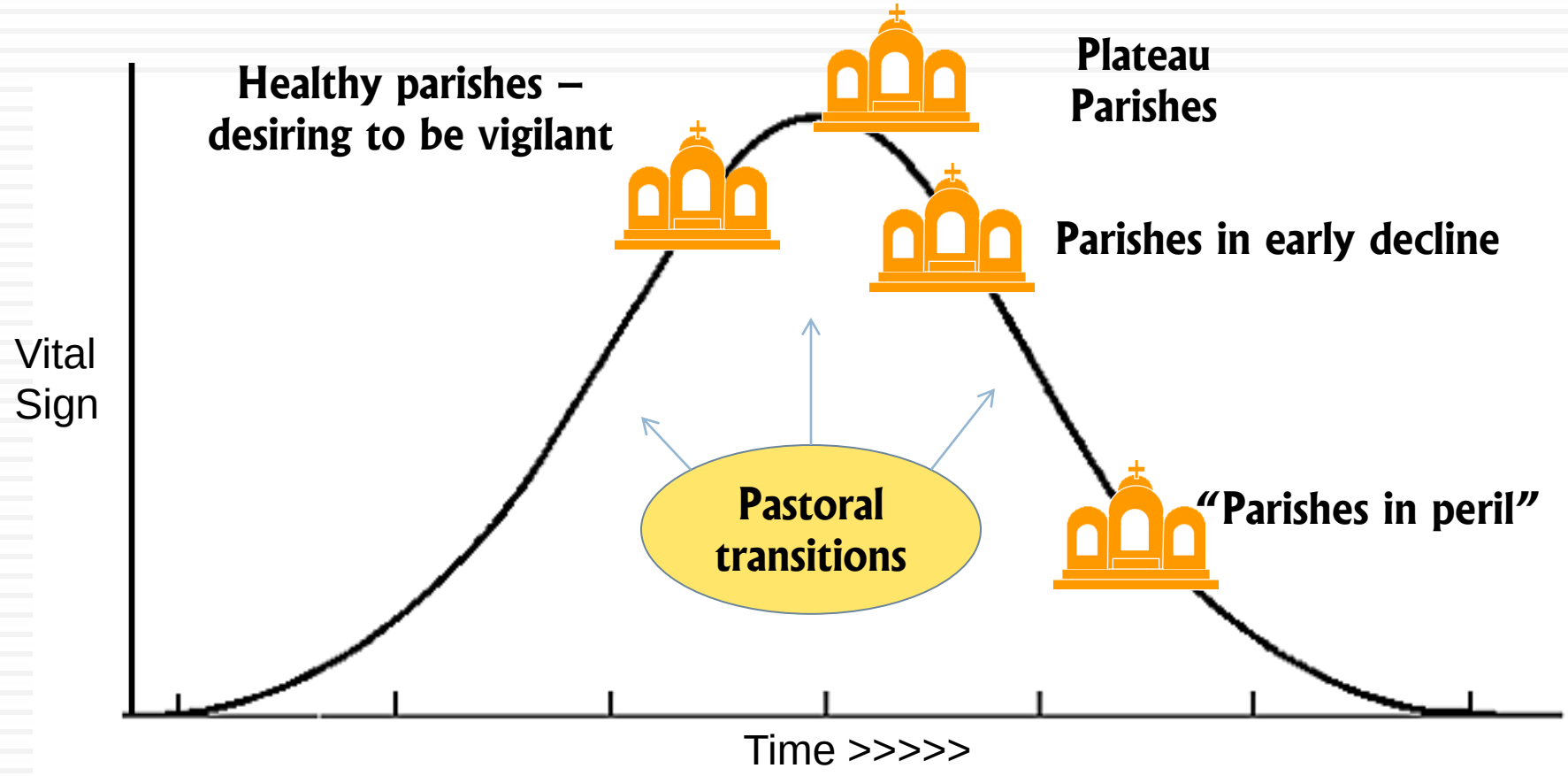
Series Outline



The series is based on recent workshops delivered in the OCA's Archdiocese of Western Pennsylvania.
Some material is the same.
Some is new.

Parish Applicability

Life Stage

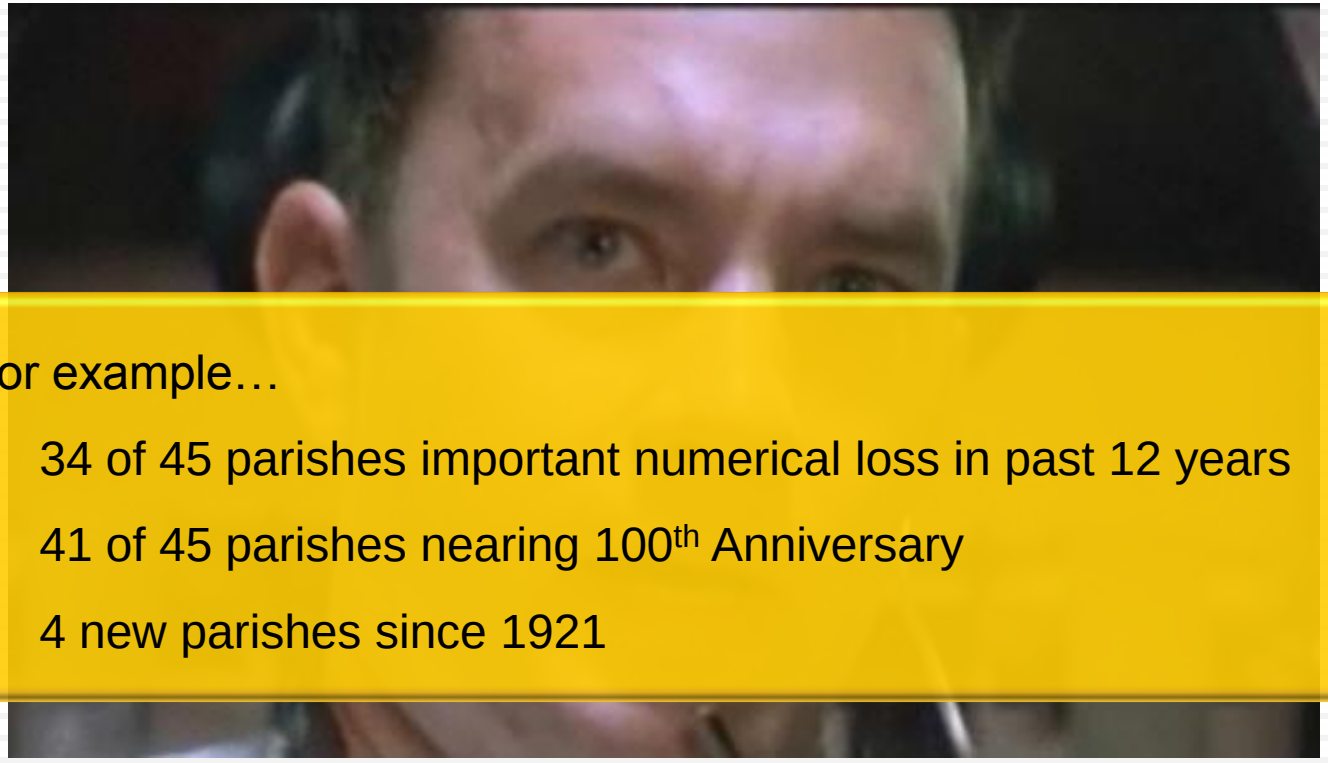


Parish Applicability

Key Challenges & Symptoms

- Declining worship attendance?
- An aging parish?
- Members in name only?
- Many "clubs" -- but few real Christian ministries?
- Fading fellowship
- Falling membership?
- Lost youth?
- Minimalism in stewardship & discipleship?
- New members rarely become active?
- Visitors come once - but do not return?

The Imperative



For example…

- 34 of 45 parishes important numerical loss in past 12 years
- 41 of 45 parishes nearing 100th Anniversary
- 4 new parishes since 1921

"Houston, we have a problem"

Is This All About Numbers?

No…but…numbers are NOT <u>Un</u>important

- Acts 2:47
  - "and the Lord added to their number daily"
- Early Church
  - Evangelistic numerical growth necessary
  - Lest Christianity be an insignificant historical footnote.
- Nothing buoys parish spirit more than growth.

Outline

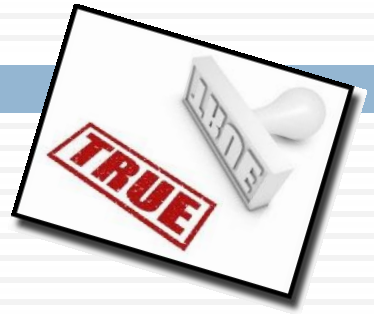
- Background
- Myths & Truths of Parish Renewal
- Exercise: Parish Impossible
- First step actions

Myths and Truths of Parish Renewal

Myths or Truths?

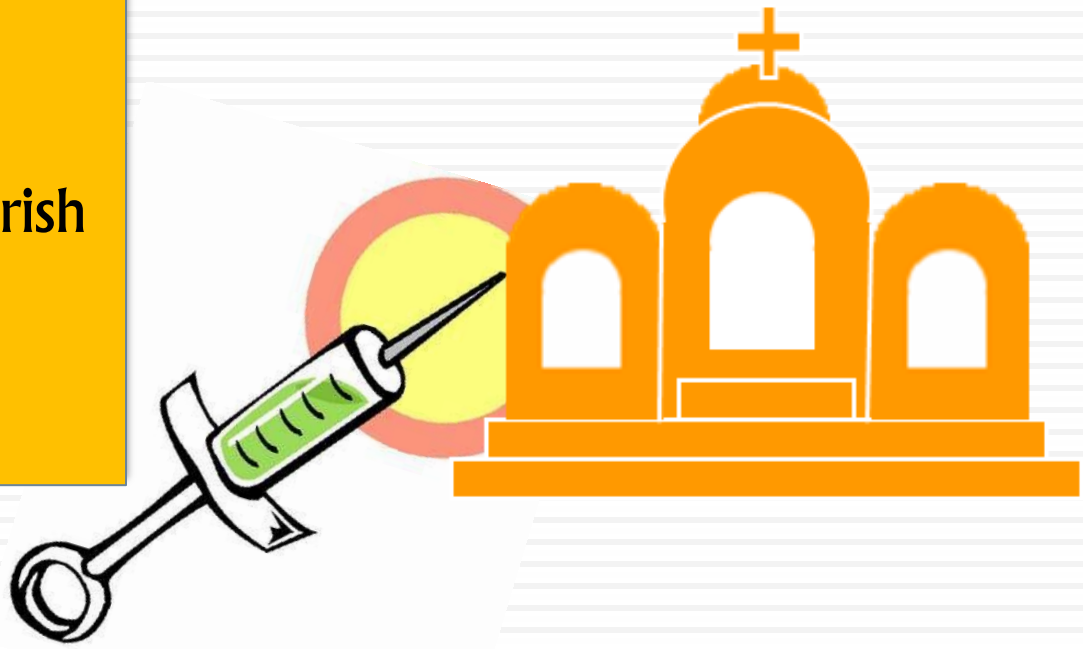
- Only “new” parishes can be vibrant.
- Only parishes in the suburbs can be vibrant.
- A *new priest* is required for renewal.
- Need a new beautiful building.
- The silver bullet is _____.

1. No Known "Parish Vibrancy" Vaccine

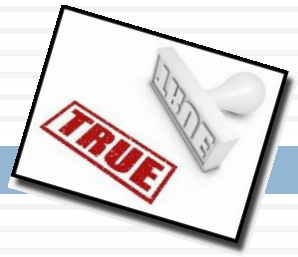


You'll need to:

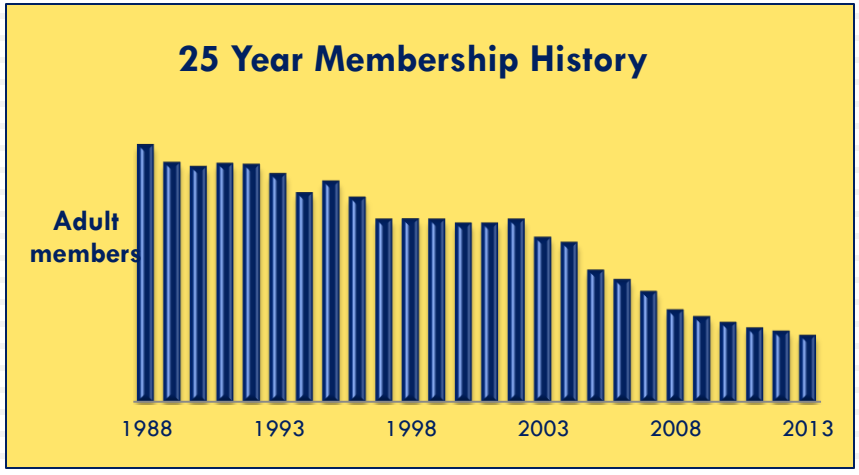
- Learn new skills
- Do additional work
- Give additional $ to parish
- Think differently
- Give up sacred cows



2. It Will Be a Long Term Effort



- You didn't get in this position in 3 years
- Probably 5 + years before noticeable progress

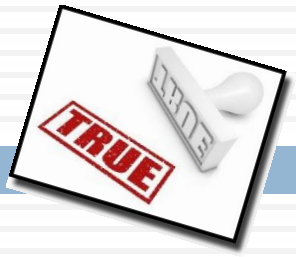


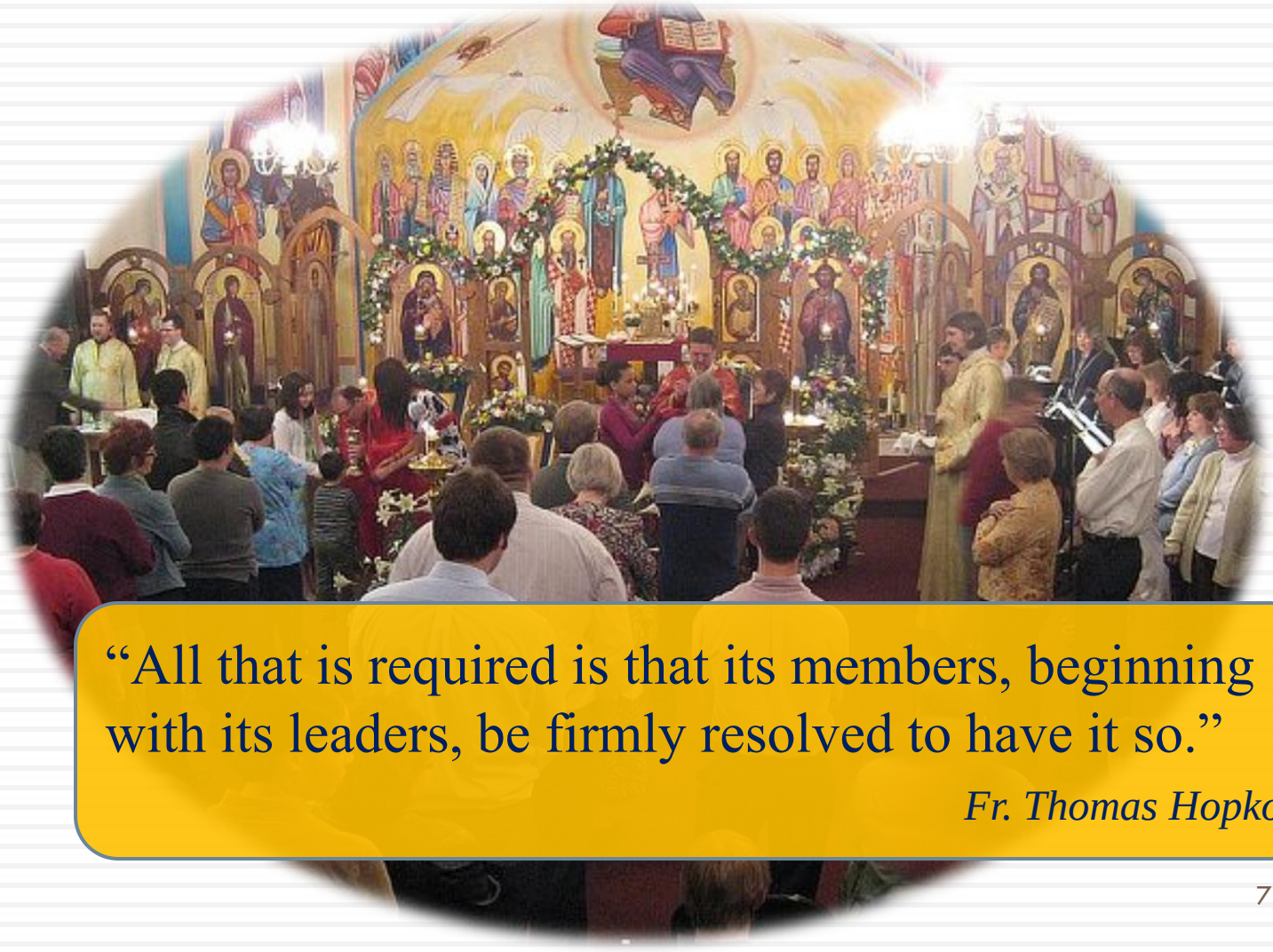
- Old habits die slowly
- Not just one thing
- The limitations/ challenges not independent
  - Mutually reinforcing.

Example stewardship –teaching new ideas, financial practice, ministry

- You can't work on everything
  - Eventually need to address many things.
- Not a one person show

3. Any Parish Can Become Healthy





"All that is required is that its members, beginning with its leaders, be firmly resolved to have it so."

Fr. Thomas Hopko

Do You Want to Be Made Well?

Paralytic at pool of Bethesda (John 5:5-7)

"Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there, and already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, **'Do you want to be made well?'"**

The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me."

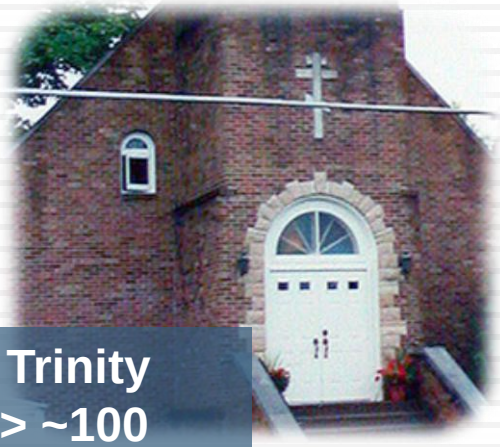
Key Points

- The man kept faith in a situation that was seemingly hopeless.
- **Not everyone who is ill actually desires healing.**
- **Some prefer to remain infirm in order to have license to complain, avoid responsibility and receive pity of others.**

Orthodox Study Bible

Parishes Can Become More Healthy

A Few Examples…



Holy Trinity
12 >> ~100

Sts Cyril & Methodius
45 >> 77

Holy Assumption
46>> 85

Holy Trinity
85>> 162

Holy Trinity Church

St Paul MN

12 >> 100

- No assigned priest 4yrs
- Assets
  - 12 people – various Slavs
  - Existing bldg
  - One pious exemplar –antidote to bookishness
  - "Before we die…"
- Worship changes
  - English --became a uniqueness
  - Modest increase in services
  - Vesperal/Baptismal Liturgy
- Committed to long haul
  - No '15 yr plan'– but a basic vision
  - Multiplication
- Blending – ethnics & converts
- "Discerning & encouraging gifts"

Holy Trinity Church

St Paul MN

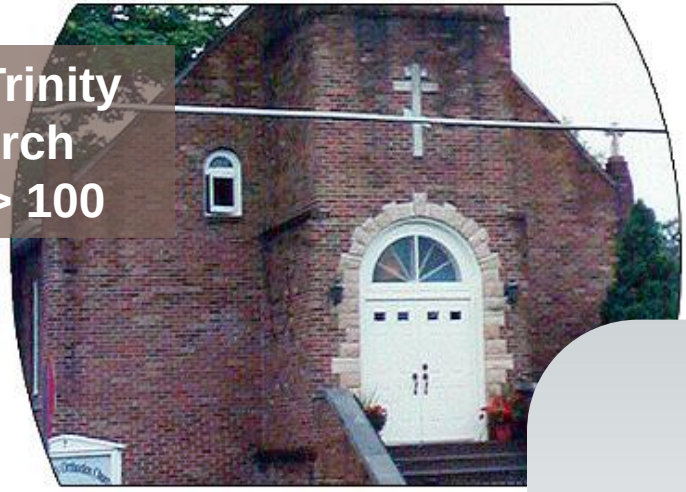
New iconography…

…slowly
…incrementally

Holy Trinity Church

St Paul MN

Holy Trinity Church
12 >> 100



Parishes *Can* Become More Vibrant

*"… we have a **new-born ministry to the depressed neighborhood around our church**, that is just taking its first steps. …the **confidence** to embark on that whole vision has its **roots directly in the recent urban parish conference**. …a difference was made, in very concrete terms, to the day-to-day life of our own local church, in ways small and very large."*

Parishes Can Become More Vibrant

A Different Example: Suburban Plateau Parish

An excerpt from a Parish Warden's report …

"As I gathered my thoughts on the status of our parish, I discovered that I was unable to express my thoughts in terms of donation levels and financial status. This was not because we were unsuccessful in these areas, quite the contrary, but rather I felt there was something far more significant that should be brought to light. That "something" is how we think and act as a parish community.

No longer are we focusing on our existence as a parish, but instead on what kind of a parish we should be.

In a recent discussion I had with Father ____ regarding this change, he made the observation that we **no longer spend a day selling cookies to help our finances** but now **spend two days to provide a weeks worth of groceries and gifts to over 200 families.**

We as a parish community are thinking less in terms of what we have accomplished but instead are thinking of how much more we can do. Can we support (local project) efforts for 300 families, 400 families or more?"

The parish has grown by 22 persons since 2007.

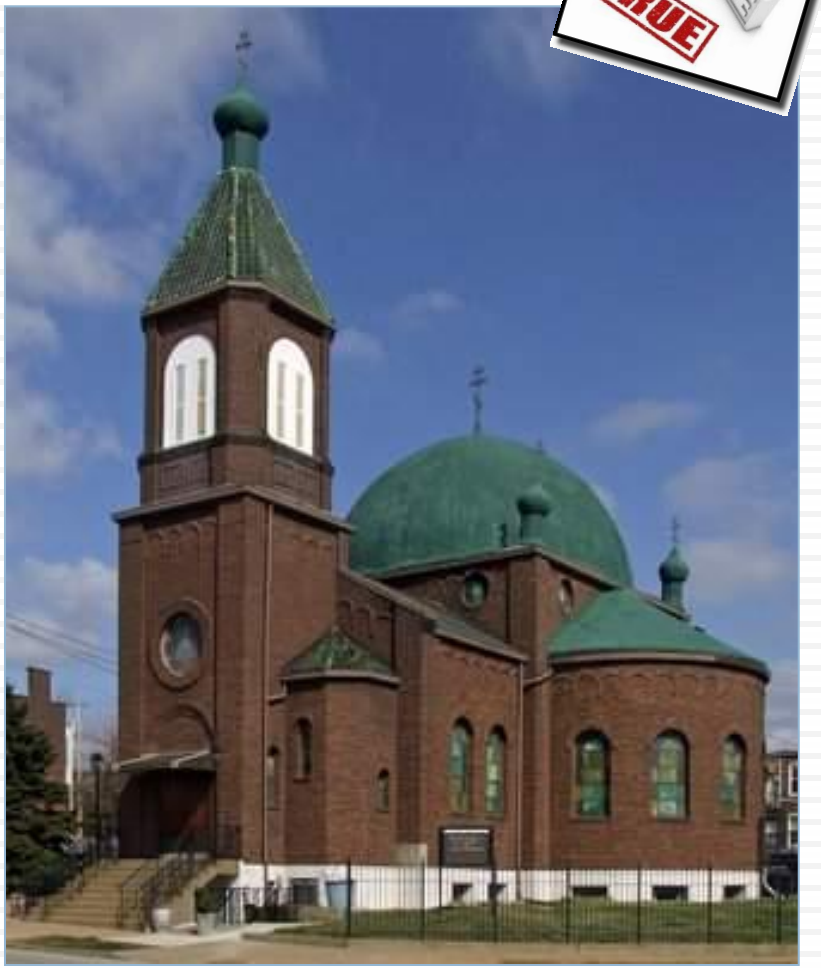
Parishes Can Become More Vibrant

Another Urban Parish

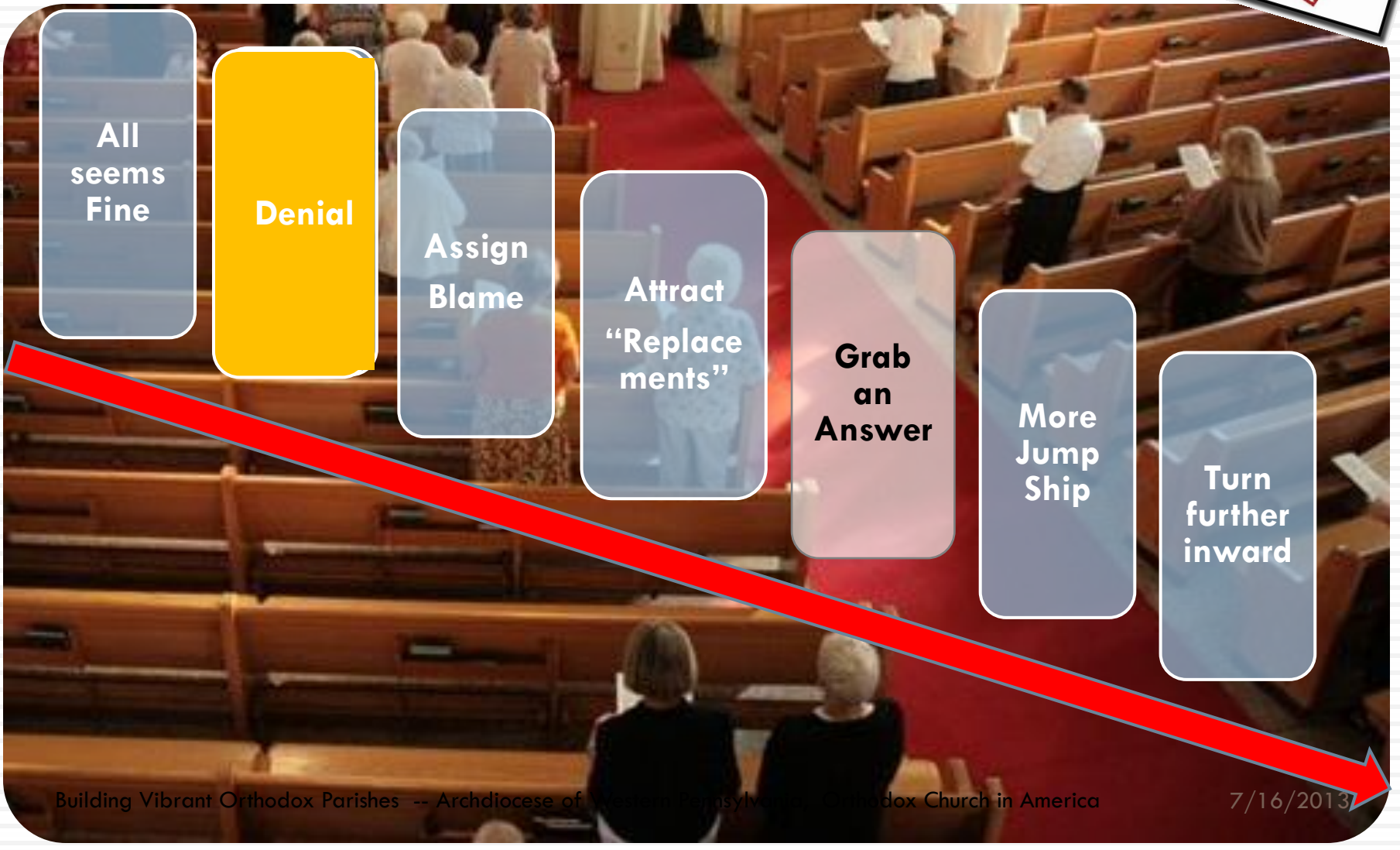
*"…a parish **climate survey** helped us pinpoint avenues of growth and development for our parish and her ministries. This in turn led us to create and adopt a mission/**vision statement**, and more importantly, **to act** upon important outreach opportunities and to build a plan for the future growth of our parish.*
*We are currently blessed with **eight catechumens**.*
*Our Sunday **attendance has increased** steadily from 56 per Sunday to 85 per Sunday [one year later].*
*Also encouraging was the **change in our financial situation**."*

4. Parishes Die

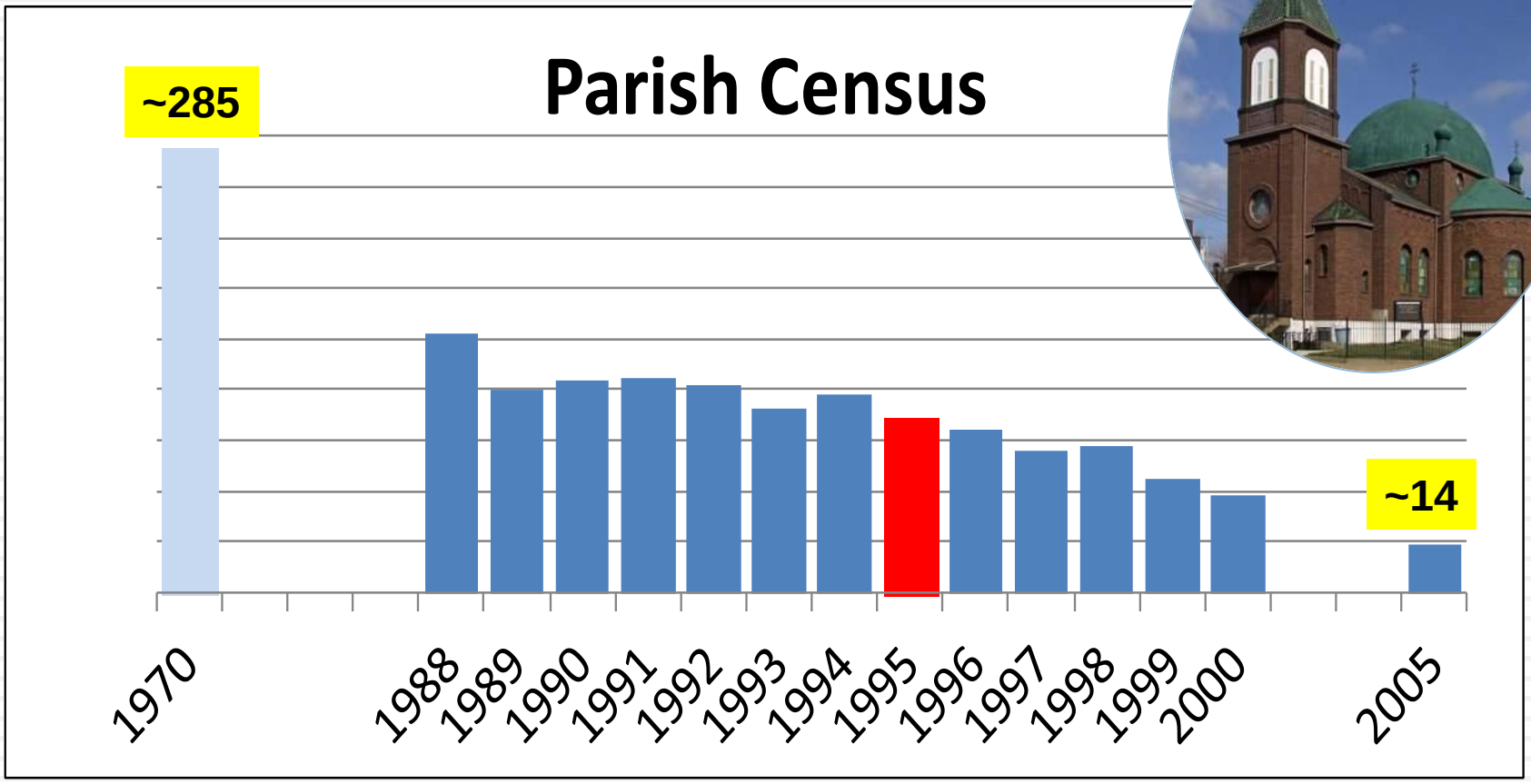
~285 >> 15



5. Typical Decline Pattern



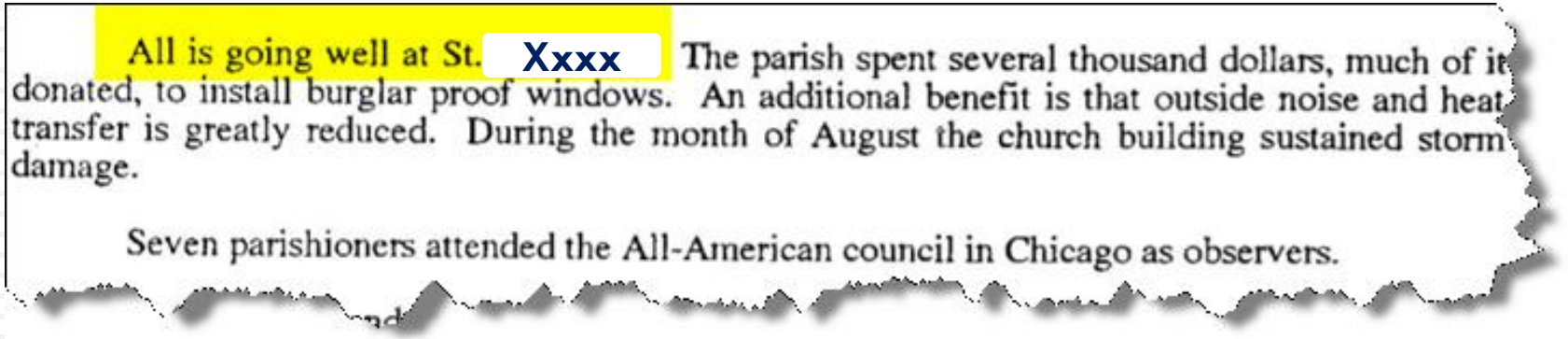
6. Denial: A Major Factor



"All is Well" – *Huh!!*

Denial

Excerpt from 1995 Report



All is going well at St. Xxxx The parish spent several thousand dollars, much of it donated, to install burglar proof windows. An additional benefit is that outside noise and heat transfer is greatly reduced. During the month of August the church building sustained storm damage.

Seven parishioners attended the All-American council in Chicago as observers.

The greatest danger is the illusion that all is well.

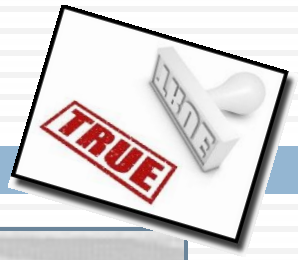
C.S. Lewis

Write this down!

Recent Hope

- Urban Garden Welcomes Neighbors
- Regional Headquarters FOCUS

7. Parishes are in Ruts



Our Assumptions About Parish Life

- Sunday Liturgy
- Clubs
- Youth camps
- Bake sales & fund raising.
- Banquets & anniversaries
- Insular
- Ministry? --unknown
- Parish Vision? – forgotten/ never known
- The fallacy that 'all is well'

We're stuck:
… in the past … on ourselves… low expectations

8. Seek New "Paradigm"

- Not:
  - "the way it was…"
  - "the good old days…"
- Instead:
  - a different *model* of Orthodox parish
  - Holiness …Sacraments… Service…Apostolic zeal

> 22 put away your former way of life….
> 24 …clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
>
> *Ephesians 4:22,24*

9. Discover Unfreezing Mechanisms

Forces for Remaining *Frozen*

- Naturally tend toward equilibrium
- Fear uncertainty/ timidity
- Orthodoxy: ~~new ideas~~
- Intentionality not our strength
- Insularity
- Aging parish/ Stuck in past/ Nostalgia
- 'Hang on 'til I die'
- Occupied elsewhere
- Gatekeepers; power; control
- Sympathy – prefer 'struggling parish'
- Compelling need unclear
- DKWYDK: lack "models"

Thawing Mechanisms

- Smell coffee – 'view of gallows'
- "Not gonna take it"
- Love of Christ – sense of mission
- Love of parish/inheritance
- Realize past is gone
- Glimpse of something better
- Language of excellence
- New arrivals/ new ideas
- An external change
- Catastrophe
- New Questions/conversation *"Why…?"*

Let's Play...

Parish Impossible

Fix This Parish…

- A series of polls

How long does this parish have to live?

Who is responsible for this state of affairs?

What actions would you recommend?

What wildcard asset would you choose?

1. Good choir
2. Additional $100K
3. 3-4 young families with children
4. Highly attractive building/temple
5. Four good leaders

Case Details

Founded 1915

Locale

- 10 miles from center of major rust belt city
- 20+ Orthodox Churches ~ 35 miles from city.

Membership

- Today: Actual 55; Reported 45
- 25-30 years ago membership was 250+
- 70 % of people are older than 70.

Church Bldg

- Reasonable church bldg in a middle class neighborhood.
- Church needs some important maintenance ~$ 75K. Limited parking.

Parish Life/Practices

- Sunday Liturgy; limited vespers & feast day services. Choir is *weak.*
- Pirogi and baked goods sales
- Board of trustees
- Adult ed. etc.-- tried but poor attendance.
- Eight children; minimal church school
- No web site; newspaper ad cancelled
- No charitable effort.

Priest – part time – "acting rector"

- Only person receiving remuneration from parish.
- Total comp $15K. Priest has secular employment to make a living.

Financial/Admin

- 30% of parish budget derived from sales/fund raising.
- Losing $10-15 k/yr
- Average donation from 35 families (including dues) is ~ $500/yr. Two additional donations are ~ $4K/yr.
- $130K in bank accounts.

The people

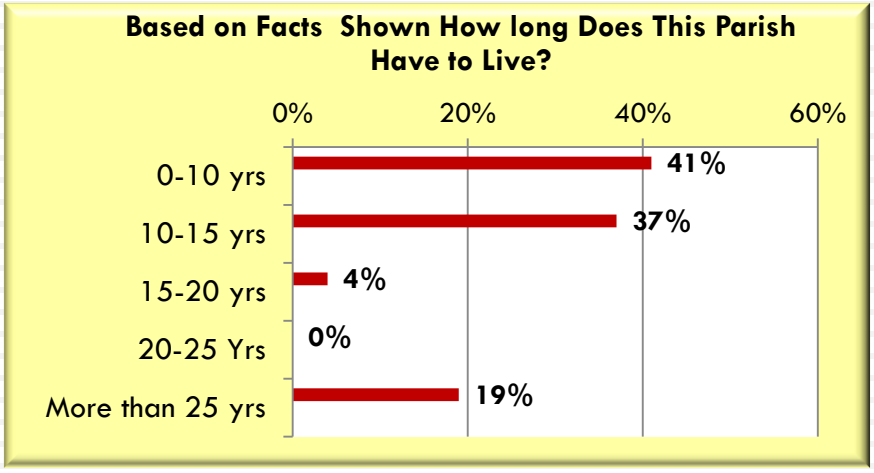
- Few parishioners live nearby. Most pass other Orthodox churches to drive here (20+ min) - " family ties"
- Ethnically 'consistent' (at least one person in 95% of families is Slavic)
- Most are cradles. Converts arrived via spouse.
- Most own/mortgage their own home, multiple TVs, cell phones etc. Nobody on welfare.
- Those families who are *not* retired all work and enjoy a median household income of $70K yr. or more. (30% higher than the general population.) 50% have a college degree. Those who are retired, while on fixed incomes, have reasonable assets. (Land, financial etc.)

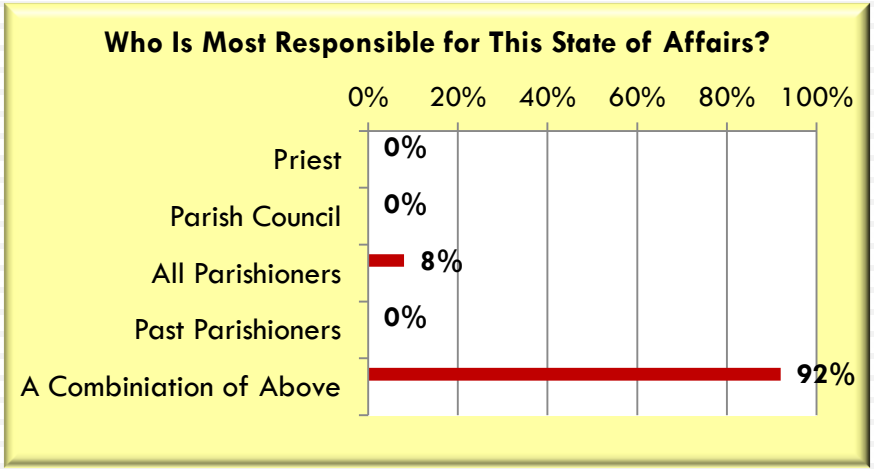
Questions….

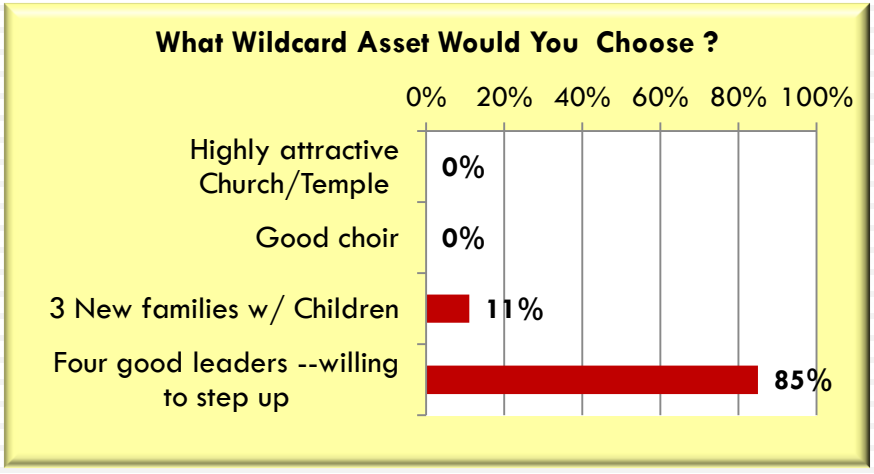
You are on the parish council at this parish…

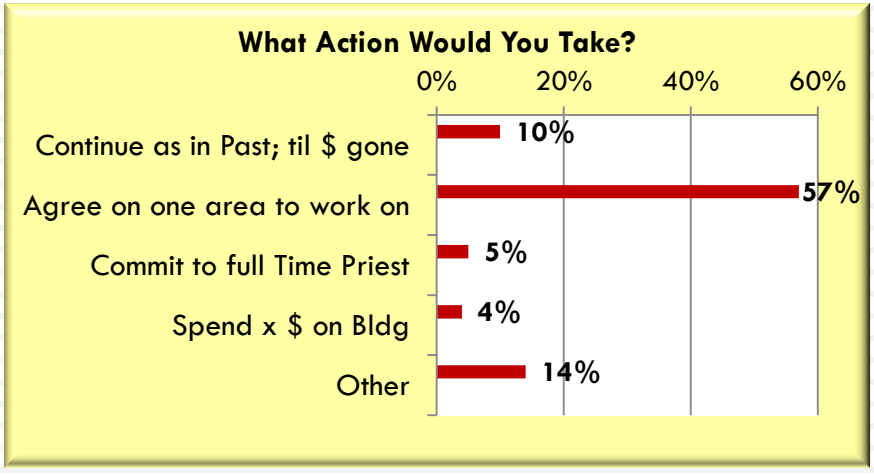
1. How long does this parish have to live?
2. Who is responsible for this state of affairs?
3. What wildcard asset would you choose?
   - Good choir
   - Additional $100K
   - 3-4 young families with children
   - Highly attractive building/temple
   - Four good leaders
4. What actions would you recommend?
   - Continue as in past until $ gone.
   - Agree on 1 area of parish life to work on together. Commit as a community & individually – & get started.
   - Commit to full time priest.
   - Stewardship effort
   - Spend $ X on Bldg now. Then take this step ___
   - Other? Combo??

Poll Results









Comments from Past Groups

- They have 10 years to live – maybe 15-20 since they seem to have $ available
- What are they doing to reach out and invite people into their parish?
- They should find out what is needed in their local community then get to work to provide it.
- They should work on stewardship
- Sounds like they are stuck in the 1950's
- They need a budget item for evangelization
- Need an emphasis on parish education --all ages.
- How does the parish council operate? Are they taking ownership? Do they acknowledge the priest as the head? What is structure? Do they need some new blood?
- Where are the (lay) leaders in this parish> Somebody needs to step up and inspire a sense of urgency.
- Do the people of the parish know the degree of their numerical decline? Tell them. Make sure parish accepts responsibility --not blame game.

First Steps

Ask Good Questions

Face Facts

Questions

- How long do you want your parish to live?
- What is the purpose of this parish?
- Do you want your parish to grow? Really? Why?
- Who "owns" this parish? Its Stakeholders?
- What do we value in this parish?
- What are our best assets and gifts.
- Are you satisfied?

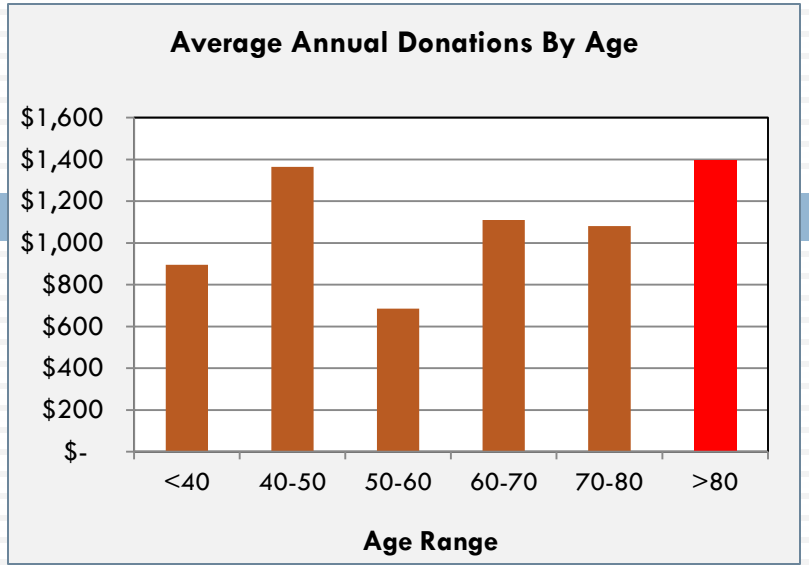
Questions

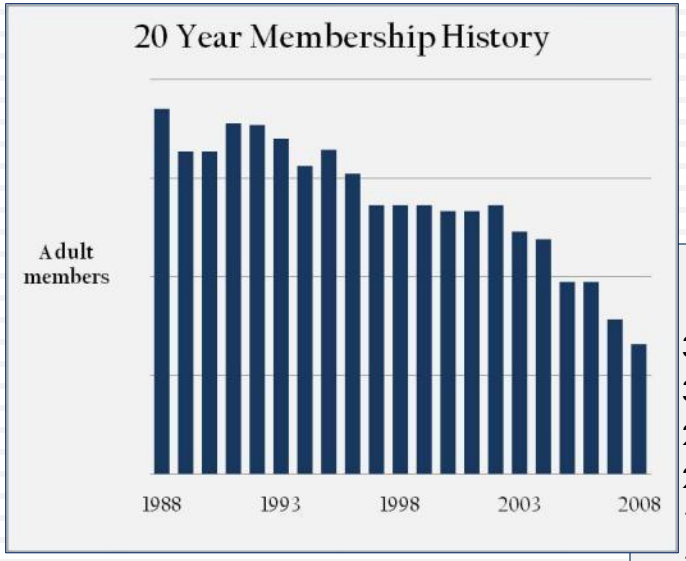
- What strengths do you think a parish 10 years from now is going to have to rely on to fulfill the ministry of the Church?
- What does Orthodox ***in North America*** mean? What competencies are required?
- What aspects of North American society and culture need to be considered as we bring Orthodoxy to America?
- What do you think are the characteristics needed by the parish lay leadership and the priest to meet the above?
- Is Orthodoxy/our parish today future, or at least present, oriented - or do we glorify our past?
- In what ways do we need to change?

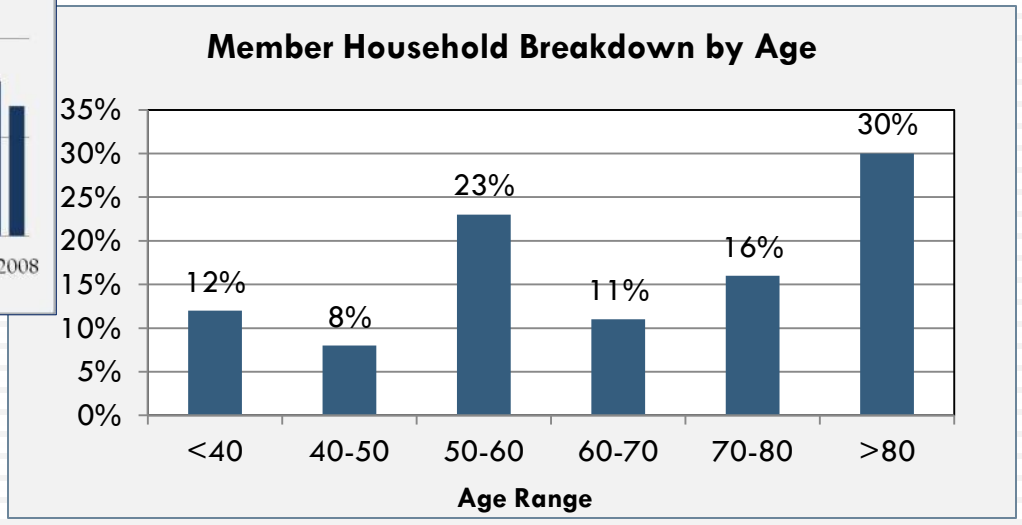
Tactics to Help with Change

- Get specific – what changes?
- Clarify alternative -downside of not changing.
- Focus on benefits
- Inspire allies – guiding coalition
- Tough skin. (Occasionally)… Revitalization is not for sissies
- Breakdown barriers; age, social, ethnic
- Direct personal visits -- 1:1
- Small steps >> focus
- Communicate; communicate; communicate some more
- Grants

Face Facts







"Get the facts first. You can change them later."
Mark Twain.

Some Points I Hope I Covered…

- Parish is a living organism -- Can grow AND also can die
- You are responsible for your parish's health
- Laity have a responsibility to know and live their faith
- Leaders lead.
- We CAN learn from other parishes
- Don't accept mediocrity
- Priest can't & shouldn't do everything
- The Church is for everyone; not just "ours"
- Parish conversation – What do we want to be like?
- Work on one thing at a time.
- We're not "diaspora". We're here to stay. "So, *what do we intend to accomplish here?*"

QUESTIONS?

Next session will be at 8PM EDT on Wednesday July 24.

Click this link to register for the next session.

https://www1.gotomeeting.com/register/471825561

THANK YOU

Slides and Recording Will Be Available Tomorrow!