

A Collection of Practical Principles of Orthodox Evangelism

*Compiled by Joseph Kormos
Parish Development Ministry Leader,
Diocese of Midwest, Orthodox Church in America.*



We have occasionally been asked to provide insight about appropriate practices and methods of Evangelism from the perspective of the Orthodox Church. Is Evangelism Orthodox? When, how and why should we go about sharing the 'hope that is in us' with others? What should be our proper motivation in doing so? How should we view the mandate to "go forth" from a personal and parish wide perspective?

To attempt to at least explore these questions we turned to a variety of historical OCA documents – mostly those from "Pre-conciliar papers" for past All American Councils though some information comes from non -OCA Orthodox sources – and some even from other Christian traditions.

We have organized what we discovered into a set of "principles". Some are overarching guidelines. Others approach a set of practices. The content of this document has been reviewed at various times by a variety of OCA clergy associated with evangelization, growth and parish development –yet we claim no particular endorsement by others. Certainly no clear consensus has emerged. So we ask readers to consider this document not as a perfect or even complete list but, hopefully, a useful collection and a starting point for further discussion about practical approaches for bringing Orthodoxy to America.

[Joseph Kormos](#)
April 2012

Overall Principles

1. Evangelism is Orthodox

We who claim to hold the apostolic faith, we who are disciples of Sts. Cyril, Methodius, Herman and Innocent, cannot say that mission and evangelism are not Orthodox words. Evangelism – the spreading of the Gospel --is not a "Protestant" concept.

2. Evangelism is Everybody's Job

Far from being the exclusive ministry of the clergy, evangelization and church growth is the calling of every Orthodox Christian. Just as the Holy Spirit equipped the apostles to proclaim the risen Christ, the members of the Body of Christ –clergy and laity alike – also are equipped with gifts and functions by which the Gospel might be proclaimed.

The attitude that says “God does not need me to make the Church grow,” is wrong. We are all called to work with Christ to reach others. All those who hear the gospel are expected to proclaim it. Just as faith, hope and charity are virtues every Christian needs and strives for, so the responsibility for Church growth is that of every Orthodox Christian.

Growth and evangelism cannot be delegated to a clergy specialist like repairing the roof. Much of the day to day to work of evangelization can and should be done by the laity. Laity are more numerous than clergy. Laypersons usually have more contact with unchurched through jobs, schools and civic organizations than clergy.

3. Evangelism Is Not Optional

Christ’s death and resurrection were public events precisely because they were to become publically proclaimed. We cannot separate the personal Christ from His resurrection – and we cannot separate our faith in and experience of the risen Christ from our calling to proclaim His resurrection “to the end of the earth”. Faith in the risen Christ is reduced to an *intellectual exercise* if we fail to share it with those yet to discover and experience it. The Good News is not “our little secret.” If one actually has a personal experience of the beauty and goodness of God she will *want* to share it.

·THE SOWER OF GOOD SEEDS·



4. Proselytism is NOT Evangelism

EVANGELISM is the act of proclaiming the Gospel to those who have yet to hear it, either in full or even in part. PROSELYTIZING is the act of actively encouraging those of other faith traditions to reject their faith traditions, not out of a conviction that they hear the fullness of the Gospel, but for the sake of making a convert. With true evangelism there is a commitment to lead people to the truth. Encouraging people to leave another faith tradition and embrace Orthodoxy so that Orthodoxy will grow is not evangelism. This impulse conflicts with the "methods" of the apostles¹, who proclaimed the fullness of truth, but nowhere told Jews and pagans that they need to leave their traditions simply for the sake of making the early Church grow. Proselytism is wrong. It also wastes time.

¹ In his book *“Evangelism in the Early Church”*, author Michael Green summarizes the evangelistic motivations of the apostles as being: (1.) gratitude for the overwhelming experience of the love of God they had experienced through Jesus Christ; (2.) a sense of responsibility to share the message of God’s love and (3.) genuine concern for the well being of the unevangelized – a lively awareness of the peril of those without Christ.

5. Evangelization Requires Corporate (Parish) and Personal Effort

Orthodox Evangelism is not something that the parish does. Evangelism is most effective when each Christian has a part in responding to God's desire to bring all men and women to salvation. Likewise, without concerted effort by the *parish* the effectiveness of personal efforts will surely be diminished. It takes both dimensions to work in tandem for Orthodox evangelism to become effective.

Parish Efforts

6. Our Parish is Not a Closed Community

Each parish is a local Church of God. Too often we make it into a closed community that keeps to ourselves and does not actively seek or welcome new members. It is not for 'Our people' but rather for all mankind.



7. Evangelism is More Than Planning

The Church is not a business. Therefore evangelism within the church is not simply about having the right strategy or a good plan. Unless all involved are committed to personal growth in Christ, there is no chance that we will succeed in helping a parish to grow.

8. It's Not About the Roof

If the primary motivation of the evangelism effort is rooted in finding more people to help pay for the new roof – or other looming expenses – it is wrong spirited and surely will not succeed.

9. Finding Those Who've Moved to the Suburbs is NOT Evangelization

Often mission parishes are formed without real missions. They simply look to serve current Orthodox Christians who have moved to another area. Many parishes claim to grow when they actually are only receiving transfers from other Orthodox parishes - a zero sum game for the Church. Increased convenience and shorter drive times are fine but true evangelism is about reaching the unchurched and those who have fallen away.

10. Prerequisites

Before undertaking a parish evangelization effort there are clear pre-requisites.

- **Know God** –Our first task in helping the Church grow is to enter into and be in the reality of God – to be in personal communion with Him. The goal of evangelism is “growth in life and faith and spiritual understanding”. That growth finds its beginning in our knowledge of God and our conviction that Jesus Christ is the very center of our lives.

“Let your life testify to the presence of God within you.” *St Gregory of Nyssa*. The best evangelization approach is living an Orthodox life.

- **Community of Love** – Our second priority is to manifest a spiritual quality of life throughout the whole community. Where there is hatred, bitterness, resentment and hostility, the community of love is destroyed; and without love the spiritual character of the Church is destroyed. Evangelization efforts will be useless without a receptive and caring parish.
- **Proclaim and Serve** – A third prerequisite is to go out into the world proclaiming the message of God by serving human beings in distress and providing for their essential needs in this world. The light of God must be allowed to illumine *through us* and God’s goodness must be made to season our life *by our activity*. We proclaim faith through actions that shine in the surrounding world.



11. Don’t Wait for Perfection

Just as most laypersons and some clergy are unsure of their preparedness for personal evangelism many parishes will seem (and all are) imperfectly ready for evangelism. It is possible that *your* parish is not ready for an intentional evangelization effort.

As with persons however, *waiting until we’re ready* almost always assures us of never being ready. Every parish is called upon to exercise in its special way every one of the ministries of the body of Christ. (1 COR 12). The parish’s work for the spiritual growth of its own members is inseparable from its mission to bring all people to the knowledge of the Truth. Neither is ever completed. You can’t wait until your parish is perfect.

12. Evangelism will change your parish

It is unchristian for a parish to seek new members unless it willing to accept them fully into the community. The fruit of your parish’s evangelism efforts will be new Christians that are, in all probability, going to be different in many ways than your current parishioners. You cannot restrict your efforts to seeking “replacements” that are “just like us.”



13. Good Evangelism Needs Intentional, Structured Effort

When a parish is not growing it is declining. However we can't simply *want* to grow. The will to grow and a parish climate that attracts and assimilates new members are necessary first conditions - but there must be something more. Effective evangelization is not accidental or unconscious. It is intentional. The parish must find ways to translate the Christian evangelistic impulse into a specific and effective, intentional program of action --a plan. As a first step each parish should evaluate its performance in evangelism and growth. Ask:



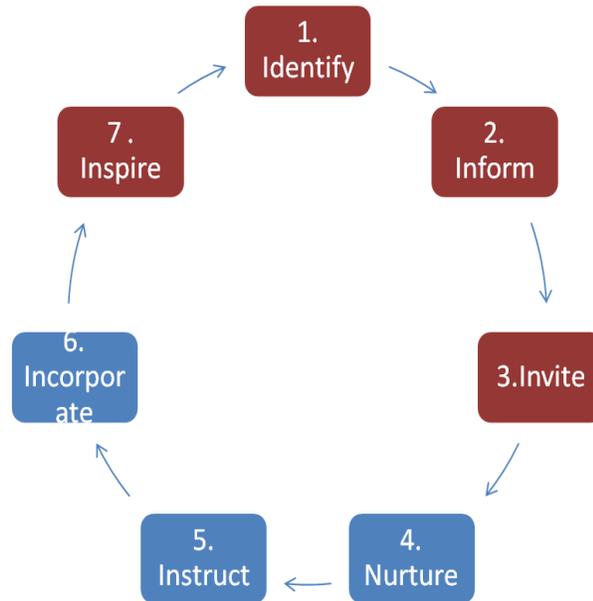
- who is responsible,
- what are our current procedures and
- how well are we succeeding at various aspects of the evangelistic cycle.

Survey the gifts, talents and skills of all parish members to understand available resources. Set goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bounded.

14. Define a Parish Evangelism Cycle

To follow through on your evangelization effort a systematic approach can be helpful. One such approach, shown below, follows the life cycle of a new member in coming to the parish.

1. *Identify* – Locate individual receptive persons and pockets of persons who represent areas of greatest potency for our parish's evangelization initiative.
2. *Inform* – Build awareness, trust, curiosity and openness.
3. *Invite* – Invite those with curiosity and receptivity to come and see. Welcome and receive them with warmth.



4. *Nurture* – Follow up carefully and honestly to grow interest in and excitement for the faith. Help those with interest to explore what the Church offers and to identify if they truly seek it. Encourage participation as appropriate in services and events.
5. *Instruct* – Guide potential new members to catechetical programs, scripture studies or other paths of entry through parish groups.
6. *Incorporate* – Involve or include new arrivals in a role, task or group after uniting them with the church.
7. *Inspire* – Encourage them to begin the cycle anew by evangelizing the active – *to renew their commitment to Christ*; the inactive – *to heat up those only minimally involved*; and the unchurched – *to share the light of Christ with all*.

15. Catechesis is Linked with Evangelism

Evangelization efforts are often considered successful if it culminates in a cultic rite not a lifelong commitment. We must take responsibility for those to whom we have preached. Jesus told his apostles to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... teaching them...” (Mt 28:16ff). After Pentecost the disciples “were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” (Acts 4:2). No one can teach about the Kingdom of God without evangelizing and no one can properly evangelize without teaching. As receptive persons begin to truly seek Christ the teaching role of the parish becomes more important.

16. Beauty: Our Secret Weapon

Many Orthodox know the story of Prince Vladimir sending envoys to observe worship firsthand in other lands. After visiting the Great Church at Hagia Sophia they returned to say: “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. and we cannot forget that beauty.”

Orthodox worship is a sensory experience strong on beauty. Icons fill the walls -- illuminated by candles and framed with chanting and incense. Beauty is not enough all by itself but an atmosphere of beauty teaches wordlessly about the nature of God. It teaches that He is not a concept to be endlessly discussed; that at some point our capacity to grasp Him intellectually fails and we fall before Him in worship. Beauty opens our heart and stirs us to a hunger for God.



Personal Efforts

17. You Are Sharing Good, Important News

At a certain point if we would call ourselves Christians, we have to decide whether alienation from God, the teaching of His Kingdom, the resurrection of His Son really make a difference. We must believe we are delivering Good News that is important to anyone with whom we come into evangelical contact. The reason to do this is that people need it. Know that you are doing Christ's work. You are sharing good, exciting news and you are potentially making a difference in their lives. The Apostle Paul said to Timothy: "What you have received, give as a gift".



18. You Do *Not* Have to Be an Expert

You *do* need to be credible, likable, humble and yet confident. You need to listen, smile and be patient. And, you need to be capable of articulating the basics of the gospel in a way that invites further inquiry. Yes, you need to know your faith – and you can probably never know too much – but you will, conversely, never be perfectly ready. If you wait until you know enough you will never get started. In almost all endeavors we learn best by trying and teaching. Get started.

19. Not Everybody Can Do This Well - Most Everybody Can Do This Better

Conventional wisdom among evangelization experts is that only a small percentage of Christians have the gift of evangelizing. To be sure we all have different gifts and talents that will best fit various roles in a parish's evangelization activities.

We all need to know ourselves and understand how God has worked in our life. And, we all can learn to have the courage and conviction to confidently express that hope to others.

20. Beware of the Spiral of Silence

In our current society we don't ask where someone is in their lived relationship with God because that would be considered intrusive and judgmental. We don't proclaim Christ because that is imposing one's faith on another and implies a possible judgment on their spiritual condition. We are conditioned to believe that people deserve to be left alone so we don't share our faith or ask about their needs. Yet that same person may be someone facing extraordinarily trying situations requiring God's help the most. Your concern can be important to them. Your invitation can assist them in coping with their circumstances through the grace of God and the fellowship of the Church.

21. You Almost Always *Need* to Use Words

"Preach the gospel and, when necessary, use words", is a quote familiar to many. It is attributed, perhaps inaccurately, to St Francis of Assisi.

The most effective evangelism approach is a life that shines with the light of Christ. Practically speaking however when bringing others to the Church you need to use words at some point. Words help to indicate that you care. Words help to convey an understanding of the other person's needs. Words help to express the hope that is in you -- what you believe and why you believe it.

According to Michael Green, author of "Evangelization in the Early Church" the evangelization methods and approaches used by the apostles always included a combination of both "life and lip" -- behavior and belief.

22. Network of Communication

The single most comprehensive contemporary lesson in how to evangelize effectively in your parish comes from the Gospel reading of the first Sunday of Great Lent. (John 1:35ff) A bare bones paraphrase of the events in the passage is as follows:

- Jesus told Andrew and another man "Come and See" and they did. Because it was important Andrew went and found his brother Simon Peter and brought him to Jesus.
- Jesus told Philip, "Follow me," and he did. Because it was important, Philip went and found his friend Nathanael and told him, and Nathanael came to Jesus.

Potential members of the Body of Christ are likely to come from the network of those who you already know since you are more likely to have an open and trusting relationship with them.

23. Not Manipulative or Hard Sell

Orthodox Evangelization is not about using the all too familiar tactics of modern evangelization. We're NOT talking about going door to door or putting leaflets on car windows or driving buses through the neighborhood or giving free car washes. These tactics have been shown to be ineffective. Do not employ manipulative routines based on emotional appeals, carefully prepared questions or high pressure tactics.

24. Evangelization is Not an Interrogation, an Argument, a Conquest

St Isaac the Syrian warns us to be wary of zealotry. Some Christians speak of "winning" a convert. Evangelism is not a game or a conquest. In our evangelism activities we need to always see a human person not an object to be conquered.

25. Not a Justification of Our Choice

An evangelization approach, no matter how well intentioned, that has as its kernel idea "'I'm Orthodox and you're wrong" is likely to be ineffective. Likewise evangelization activities should not be undertaken as an effort to subliminally justify your personal faith choices by obtaining endorsements from others.

26. Not a Monologue

We are not delivering a monologue designed to transmit certain religious facts, ideas or information. A correct understanding of facts does not necessarily bring about a positive response or commitment on the part of the hearer. Accepting God requires more than receiving information about Him. Orthodox Christianity is a total lifestyle not simply a set of doctrinal definitions. For the Orthodox, spiritual *experience* takes precedence over spiritual *understanding*.

27. Evangelization is an Authentic Dialogue Tuned to the Needs of the Other Person

People come from different backgrounds and have various needs, doubts and aspirations. Just as an inspiring speech or presentation starts with an understanding of the audience, effective Orthodox evangelization begins with connecting with the person with whom you are having a conversation. It is an honest two way process based on an honest concern for others. Orthodox evangelization demands that we listen *as well as* proclaim.

“It is our responsibility to articulate what we believe God to us about himself and his world and to do so as clearly and honestly as possible while being respectful of the persons who hold alternate views. We are looking for humble certitude –and that’s not an oxymoron.”

Peter Bouteneff

“Sweeter than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth”

We enhance the other person’s receptivity to the message of salvation by engaging them at pace that is appropriate to gaining their trust and engendering a spirit of openness. If we try to advance the conversation to quickly a barrier occurs when the other person feels you are operating on them with an objective of taking them from where they are to somewhere they don’t want to go.

28. Job 1: Develop Curiosity

We needn’t feel we must be equipped to guide a person completely through the process of embracing the faith. We can’t all be capable of answering every question. For most of us our necessary competency level is to be able to engage honestly with others, to sense a need, and engender curiosity by explaining the hope that is in us. Often that comes down to explaining why we are Christians and specifically why we are Orthodox Christians.

29. Accentuate the Positives

Contrasts to other faiths are inevitable and often helpful in sharing the faith with others. Focus on the positive qualities of Orthodox Christianity not the negatives of another religion.

30. We Are Not “Peddlers of God’s Word”

We must never reduce God’s salvation and truth to a packaged commodity that can be commercialized, advertised and sold in the marketplace as any product. People should not be fooled for Jesus. They should be told what it is really all about. Orthodox Christianity is not an easy road. If the real message is rejected then the mission is ended.

Summary: Principles of Orthodox Evangelization	
1. Evangelism is Orthodox	
2. Evangelism is everybody's Job	
3. Evangelism is Not Optional	
4. Proselytizing is Not Evangelism	
5. Evangelism requires corporate (parish) and personal effort	
Parish Related principles	Personal Principles
6. Parish is not a closed community	17. You are sharing good important news
7. Evangelism is more than planning	18. You do not have to be an expert
8. Not about the roof	19. Everyone can do this better
9. Finding those moved to the suburbs is not Evangelization	20. Beware the spiral of silence
10. Prerequisites: Know God, Loving community, proclaim and serve	21. You almost always need words
11. Don't wait for the parish to be perfect	22. Network of communication
12. Evangelism will change the Parish	23. Not manipulative or hard sell
13. Evangelization requires intentional structured effort	24. Not an interrogation, argument or conquest
14. Define a clear process – an Evangelization cycle	25. Not a justification of our choice
15. Catechesis is Linked with Evangelization	26. Not a Monologue
16. Beauty is Our secret Weapon	27. An authentic dialogue tuned to needs of other person
	28. Job 1 develop curiosity
	29. Accentuate the Positive
	30. Not peddlers of God's word