

What Priests Want

Attributes of an Attractive Parish Environment – and Insights into Healthy Parishes

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We recently worked with a parish to help them develop some plans for the next 5-10 years. Since the rector of the parish will be retiring at some time during that period he asked that we include the topic of preparing for a clergy transition in the discussion agenda. To help the parish think not only about what they would like in a pastor, but also to think about what a future rector would be looking for from them, we asked the group to describe what parish qualities/characteristics an experienced Orthodox pastor would consider to be a good fit for his ministry.

Prior to the workshop we asked that same question of a few senior Orthodox (OCA) priests. Here are some answers we received from the priests. Predictably the workshop attendees' answers differed somewhat from the priest's answers. These insights may be particularly valuable to parishes that are or will be experiencing a clergy transition in the coming years.

To be sure that your community is attractive to a new priest nurture these qualities in your parish:

Priest 1 Response

"I'm looking for serious, honestly devout, faithful, God- & neighbor-loving, people who are:

- interested in cultivating further personal & parish spiritual growth;
- biblically literate (or willing to become so);
- have a true desire for personal and corporate (parish) charitable activities;
- inform the priest of important, and pastorally relevant, events in their lives and of their family;
- going to seek out and heed the priest's pastoral advice-- especially before a preventable crisis would develop;
- willing and able to respect his presbyteral responsibilities and limitations;
- not going to treat the priest as a general church secretary;
- able to respect the priest's personal abilities and inabilities;
- not assuming the priest's wife to fill a predetermined role, e.g. be the (only) prosphora baker or choir director."

Priest 2 Response

"I would look for a parish that is (or is interested in becoming) a set of people --

- who believe the Church matters in their life every day.
- who are willing to go to church and order their lives liturgically. For example, people who won't take cruises during Holy Week. People who know when the major feasts are celebrated -- and plan to celebrate them.
- who are comfortable speaking of their faith AT LEAST with each other. Who will have interpersonal relationships which include a level of spiritual depth. You can talk baseball with anyone. Christ should at least be recognized in our midst. They don't have to assault each other with their testimonies, but there should be a testimony."

Priest 3 Response

"I'd look for an indication of --

- *Open Communication.* If you don't like something, tell the priest. We're adults. We can handle it. If something doesn't make sense, ask the priest.
- *A sense of hierarchy* -- If someone complains about the color of the carpet, I would hope to hear from them that the issue is of less importance than their life of repentance and being part of the Eucharistic community.
- *A Eucharistic Community.* This means that --
 - people confess (not just during Lent), and that
 - EVERYTHING in the life of the parish is centered around the Eucharist.
 - Events in the parish are planned knowing that the community is preparing to receive the Eucharist on Sunday morning.
- Flowing from being a Eucharistic Community, I want a social community. Let's have fun together, but Feast when the Church says to Feast and Fast when the Church says to Fast. Let's go to a ball game and enjoy ourselves, but not during the Apostles Fast."

Priest 4 Response

"I'm looking for --

A community that is forward looking --

that see themselves as having a future ; something to offer in the future - and they are willing to work to get there.

I do *not* want to go to a parish that is most interested in its past - whether it be remembering the golden years, or trying to resolve age old conflict, or always trying to relive past successes (or failures), or just trying to maintain the status quo.

I'm attracted to a community that

has some goals and the hope of attaining the goals.

If I knew what "future" the parish envisions, I would ask them:

- What do you think it will take to get to that vision?
- What do you think are major things that will prevent you from reaching this vision?
- Are you prepared to deal with the problems it will cause to bring this about?
- Are you prepared for the costs involved?
- By problems and costs I would be thinking about what stumbling blocks do you imagine lie before you? How are you going to deal with them? What about those in the parish who are not interested in moving in that direction? Are you prepared to deal with the fact that some long time members may leave the parish as new members join and a new vision drives the parish?"