Areas of Commonality: Growing Orthodox Parishes

While the growing parishes at a recent OCA Midwest Diocese Parish Health Summit were distinctive and different -- they also exhibited many areas of commonality as well. There was a universal feeling among all present that "our parish is far from a model parish." Warts and imperfections in parish life abounded. Yet, it was hard not to feel that, in an aggregate sense, the collective insight of those assembled could be used to describe a composite view of good Orthodox parish practices.

Ten Areas of Consistency

Here, in no particular order are ten noteworthy items of commonality.

1. **Diversity**

None of the parishes in attendance was dominated by a single (traditionally Orthodox) ethnic group. Baklava mixes well with pirogis. All parishes either never were ethnically consistent or had transitioned to becoming a pan-Orthodox parish or even convert centric parish. Many mentioned the importance of generational and economic diversity among their parishioners.

2. **Christians First**

One of the most frequently mentioned comments by attendees was the importance of helping parishioners to remember that too often we focus on the specifics of being Orthodox to the detriment of the basics of being Christians. Versions of "I remind my flock that to be Orthodox is to be a right believing Christian. We're Christian first -- by being Orthodox" and "We try to lay a strong foundation of the basics of the Gospel" were themes heard throughout the Summit.

3. **Focus on the neighborhood**

Numerous participants spoke of the importance of engaging with their local neighborhood. This manifested itself in many ways -- communication with local ministerial associations, chambers of commerce, "buying local", lines of communication with local newspapers as well as neighborhood centered charitable endeavors. One priest offered: "We work hard to avoid allowing our parish to turn inward on itself. If we do that we become our own ghetto."

4. **Find a Ministry**

While many present mentioned their efforts to be tolerant of various levels of engagement on the part of parishioners, we heard often about parish efforts to invite everyone to "find a ministry". Many parishes reported a broad set of ministry areas -- something for everyone. One reported thirty seven distinct ministry areas. There was much discussion about how to do a better job of identifying members’ gifts and talents, and channeling those gifts for proper use within the church.
5. **Say 'Thank You!' Often**

Perhaps the simplest yet most commonly expressed idea from these seasoned priests was the tremendous importance of clergy and lay leaders expressing collective, and individual thanks to parishioners for their good efforts. *"A measure of praise and appreciation goes a long way in building a hopeful community outlook."*

6. **"Yes More Than No"**

There was a palpable sense that the priests present felt that in order to help parishioners connect with the work of the parish *lay persons need to be trusted*. Efforts to delegate abounded. In these parishes fresh new ideas are more often met with "OK lets try that" than "Not in this parish". "We just implemented a new position of parish office secretary", said one priest, "I'm struck by the many new things we're trying that I would have never thought of."

7. **Websites**

There was almost universal agreement as to the importance of effective websites. Many priests mentioned that their website was by far their most important way that new people -- Orthodox and non-Orthodox -- find the parish. Email and blogs were also mentioned as an important tool in parish communication.

8. **Fund Raising is limited**

In most Summit attending parishes fund raising is limited. Often it is focused on fellowship and charitable causes. Few of these parishes spend a significant amount of effort on fund raising. Some have none.

9. **Parish Council**

There was important mention of the need for a give and take --synergy -- between the clergy and laity. There were numerous reports of important improvement in the focus of the parish council on "more than money and minutiae". Under the priest's guidance parish councils it seems are engaging with the questions of "What God is calling us to do?" and "Where do we want to head?" They are doing more than maintenance and are taking action to build the health and vibrancy of the parish.

10. **Broad Stewardship**

Probably the most consistent theme we heard can be put simply as a sense of broad stewardship of the parish. One sensed that in these reasonably healthy parishes members are more likely to see the parish not as "their own" -- but as belonging to Christ. Parishioners and leaders seem to see their roles as stewards -caretakers of something they have received from the Master.

"**We Take This Seriously**"

Shortly after the Summit we led a retreat for one of the invited parishes. After reviewing impressive progress on an array of ministries we congratulated them on a fine effort. Their response seemed to exemplify the attitude of many Summit attending parishes. "We take our church seriously," noted the head of the parish council.