

Decline in Your Parish? Complacency or Action?

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Many parishes – of all dioceses, jurisdictions and denominations are facing numerical declines. What can be done? For some it may be appropriate to continue what you have been doing. For most complacency and/or more of the same would not seem to be a good formula.

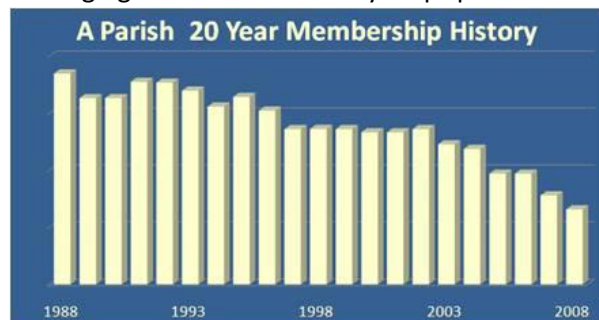
For those looking to explore new ideas here are some thoughts:

Gather Facts

Numbers tell a small part of the story of a parish. Handwringing over numbers rarely helps parishes to live a life in Christ. However, clearly taking stock of your parish's particular situation -- *including* numbers -- can be a first step toward change for the better. Try some of the following:

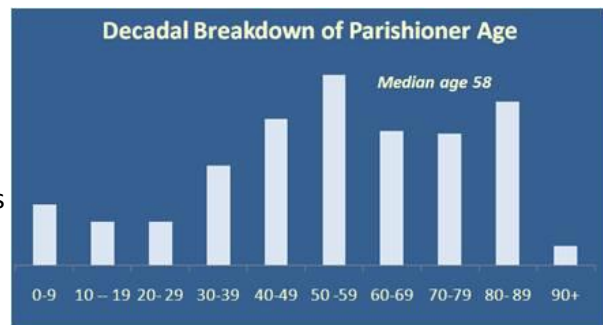
Membership/Attendance History

Summarize parish membership and, if possible, attendance history over the last five to ten years. If it looks like the parish in the chart at the right it would seem reasonable to say there is a problem -- or as we Americans like to call it - a "challenge". Even if these numbers are well known --write them down. Put them on paper. Make them real.



Age Profile

Build a (decadal) *profile of the current parish by age group*. What is the median age of parishioners? How many children are registered in church school today vs. in the past? Using simple common sense what does this information project about the parish in five and ten years?



Out the Back Door?

Create a list of *those who are no longer in the parish*. Some have died or moved away. Some have fallen away for other reasons. What does this list tell us about our parish, its people, our behaviors and practices? What were these people seeking that was not found in our parish?

Sources of New Parishioners

Identify how many *new people* have come to your parish in recent past years and where they came from? Some sources of new parishioners are beyond your control (job relocations). Others --attracting inquirers from which converts result and reaching dormant Orthodox are actionable activities.



Where have they gone? How many parish children of yesteryear are Orthodox today?

Where Are They Now?

If you get truly ambitious *explore high school graduates* from your parish in the last ten years. How many are Orthodox today? Has the experience of growing up in your parish helped to build a commitment Christ and His church -- or did they enjoy the parish youth group "fun" -- and never return to your parish or any parish? If they moved away did your parish export well formed Orthodox Christians?

Build a Sense of Urgency

Facing facts is hard -- particularly when facing a reality that contains unpleasant news. Avoid the tendency to suppress bad news -- if that is what you find. More importantly, though, avoid gloom and doom.

Share Data

Instead, *use* the information you've gathered to inform people and garner their active support and prayers. Our observation is that most people *assume* their parish will be just like it was five years ago -- ten years from now. That assumption is usually false. Help them understand the challenges we face together.

Also, avoid the tendency to assign blame. Instead under the guidance of the parish priest explore the facts, in conjunction with a review of the information in the box nearby: "*Attitudes that Help the Church Grow*". Which of these positive and

The following information first appeared in a 1986 publication of the Orthodox Church in America titled "Church Growth and Evangelization - the Basis and the Basics"

Attitudes That Enable the Church to Grow	Attitudes that Don't
Church growth involves spiritual as well as numerical growth	God is not concerned with how many members the Church has. All He cares about is quality.
"Orthodox Christianity is the faith for all mankind."	"Orthodoxy is just for our people, not for everyone."
"As a steward I must wisely manage the gifts God has given me and use them for building up of the church."	"Stewardship is just another gimmick to get more money out of the parishioners."
"I am called to work with Christ in reaching others."	"God does not need me to make the Church grow."
"I want my parish to serve as the means by which others are brought to Christ and His Church."	"My parish exists to serve the needs of 'our people' and to preserve our heritage and culture."
"I must share God's love with others by sharing my faith with them."	"Religion is a private matter which I never discuss because I might offend someone else."
Evangelization is at the heart of the Church's life and experience.	Evangelization is a non-Orthodox concept
I am committed to Christ and His Church because I am convinced that he is truly the God and Savior of all.	"Sure I'm committed to the Church. After all I pay dues!"
"The church is an organism made up of those who base their lives on Christ."	"The Church is an organization made up of voting members"
I must help to make the Church more visible and invite others to services and activities.	"If outsiders are interested in the Orthodox Church they will take the initiative to find one.
Church growth begins with me	Church growth is not my concern

negative attitudes are present in our parish?

Identify Root Causes --Ask "Why?"

One proven technique for getting to the core issues behind challenges is to "ask why" multiple times -- as often as five times consecutively. Do this for each symptom you've surfaced. How often do you find that in the end the final answer is a version of: "We do not love God." "We do not love our neighbor"?

Are We Satisfied?

Ask: "Can we be satisfied with this? Have we put to use all the resources that God has given us to enable this parish to fulfill what God expects of us?"

Explore a Vision

We do not know or control the future -- but we can prepare for and use our gifts and resources to work with God to enable a better parish future. Have a series of conversations about what a hopeful future for your parish could look like.



What portion of parish council time is spent on ministry vision and building stewardship of your parish mission vs "bills, budgets & buildings".

Parish Council Meetings

Set aside a portion of parish council meetings to refocus from "today" (budgets and leaky roofs) to discussions on

"where we want this parish to head" and "what types of ministries, personal behaviors and commitments are needed to begin the journey?"

What Size?

One aspect (of many) in discussing what God desires for our parish in the future is parish numerical size. *"What size do we see for this parish in five and ten years? Do we want to grow? Why?"*

Many parishes that have had serious declines will likely never grow to their former size. They are finding that a smaller parish can offer a greater sense of community, improved commitment and opportunities for ministry. For those parishes the vision may be to remain the same size. Others may anticipate growth while others will prepare for a smaller future. Can you achieve a consensus about what you believe God wants for your parish?

Get to Work

Rebuilding and rekindling life in a parish is often more difficult than establishing it in the first place. Anticipating "heavy lifting" there can be a tendency for leaders to discuss and debate with little action to follow. Unfortunately most challenges do not melt away on their own.

The actions you take need to be derived from your particular situation. However having an idea ahead of time of potential actions (and their prerequisites) can be useful. Here are just a few of the actions that may be a part of the renewal effort for some parishes:

New Member Target

Making assumptions about attrition, job relocations etc. how many new persons/members do we need to add to our parish per year to remain the same size? To grow by 10%?

Track visitors and returns

Having defined the number of new persons required for our target size, another pragmatic action would be to begin tracking the number of visitors/new faces to our parish per month --and the number who return. Does this flow of new faces seem appropriate? If not ask:

- Why and what can be done?
- What do we do to attract inquirers? Do we find that visitors rarely give serious consideration to our parish as their spiritual home? Why not?
- If you were exploring Orthodoxy what would/would not be attractive about your parish?
- If you moved to your area how would you view your parish?

Our sense is that most parishes are interested in focusing on efforts to attract new people -- but few want to tackle the tougher longer term efforts renew the parish to become a place that "outsiders" will find attractive as a spiritual home.

Learn from Other Parishes

In many parishes the members and leaders have known only one parish all of their lives. They often think 'every parish is like ours'. They may lack a model of the practices, principles and behaviors of healthy and growing parishes. Consider having "learning parties" visit other Orthodox parishes --perhaps to observe and discuss with the priest and laity. Discover for yourselves how growing parishes may differ in ministry, worship and overall atmosphere from your parish.

Work on One Thing

If you believe action is warranted avoid trying to do much at once. Pick one or two items. Prove your ability to "say what you will do and do what you say."

Get Help

Stuck? Don't be too proud to ask for assistance or coaching. A fresh set of eyes can often be just naive enough to generate some fresh thinking about recurrent challenges.

Or, A Simple Formula

If all of the above seems just too complicated for you then just work through the following list. One at a time:

1. Come to church
2. Do something for others as a parish.
3. Make people aware of your parish.
4. Engage newcomers/visitors with care & warmth.
5. Give them a reason to return – expressed and experienced.



Now get to work. DO SOMETHING!