

Fr. Jonathan Ivanoff has been working in the field of parish health, renewal and revitalization for the past fifteen years. During this time he has presented at, or coached/consulted with, over eighty parishes. For the past five years **Joseph Kormos** has been the Parish Facilitator for the Diocese of the Midwest's Parish Development Ministry. Fr. Jonathan and Joe presented a series of workshops at the 2011 All American Council focused on the theme of parish revitalization. Oca.org's editors asked them to reflect on what they'd learned about bringing life to parishes, both as they've listened to the stories of parishioners, and from their own study and experience.

Oca.org: What is parish development and why should the average layperson be interested?

Fr. Jonathan and Joe: "Parish Development" is a deliberate, concerted effort undertaken by the entire parish - but especially by the priest and lay leadership - to become healthier, more hopeful, more vibrant Orthodox communities that are embracing and living a Life in Christ: Christian communities that live in peace and love toward one another, share the Gospel with all in their own locale and are prepared to do the work of Christ in the world; parishes that are truly "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic" in every possible living expression of those meanings.

The term Parish Development shares many labels – "parish health", the "vibrant parish" and, for parishes on a plateau or in decline, we often apply the terms "parish revitalization" or "parish renewal." Labels are of course necessary for communication but whatever we choose to use we need to be careful not to ascribe specific programmatic attributes to the term. Programs do not grow the church! Because each parish is a unique and can't be reproduced, Parish Development will vary deeply with the needs and situation of the parish. It will, however, always have one element in common across all parishes: it will bear no fruit without prayerful serious collaborative effort between clergy and laity.

Laypeople vary considerably in the availability of their time, talent and treasure that they can give back to God through their parish. Except for, perhaps, the most peripheral, marginal parishioners who may not truly care deeply about their parish, the parish is, for most Orthodox Christians, the place where they encounter, even if infrequently, the Living God in the sacraments and worship. Often it is where they enjoy fellowship with others who in many instances are their best friends. Many see their parish as a foundation of their family life and often an important inheritance from ancestors. They really want their parish to flourish and to grow, but they may not have any idea of how to do this or where to start. Parish Development is simply a prayerful effort – not a program – to help their parish become, or

continue to be, a place where they and others can live out the Orthodox faith for many generations to come.

Oca.org: Between the two of you, you have either worked with or visited 125 parishes. With all that exposure, what have you learned about the state of Orthodox parish life in America today?

Fr. Jonathan and Joe: To be brutally honest, both of us find that too many parishes are withering: many others, while not in decline are on a plateau:

- Parishes that were 500 members in 1980 may now be 200 persons or smaller.
- Parishes with a church school of greater than 50 children - or even half that number - are no longer the rule.
- The average age of parishioners is getting older. A median parishioner age of 60 or even 70 years of age is not uncommon in entire deaneries. The upshot: Many parishes find that a disproportionate share of their income comes from senior members. When those members die the parish not only loses people but a significant portion of its funding base as well.
- Many newer parishes (those founded post 1970) are treading water in terms of size and vision.
- There is an astonishing lack of interest in youth work and the spiritual development of youth of any kind.
- Often starting new efforts associated with evangelistic or charitable outreach to the neighborhood can prove difficult to entrenched groups of parishioners who often have become fearful of their decline and of the changes to parish life that change itself - the fearful "unknown future" - will bring.

Certainly there are Orthodox parishes that are growing. Often, not always, the growing parishes are a special story – a uniquely gifted pastor, a flow of immigrants, a high growth suburban location or a large city with few Orthodox alternatives. The facts associated with parish decline have been readily apparent for many years. The quantitative and qualitative evidence of decline, staleness and tepidness in too many communities, certainly not all, are visible.

While the Church is not about numbers, a Church whose numbers continue to decline seriously will soon cease to exist. A Church with a clear inheritance of the apostolic deposit and ‘The faith that changed the world’ needs to seriously explore why many of its communities are in numerical, financial and no doubt, and most importantly, spiritual torpor.

Oca.org: Finish the sentence: "Parishes decline because..."

Joe: There can be many good ways to finish the sentence.
...because they forgot (or never really grasped) that their true purpose is to serve the Living God and to share their love of God with others. To “Proclaim Christ” without any regard to region of origin, class, or race.
... because they fail to make the transition from ethnic social club to being a Gospel-centered Christian community.
... because they failed to retain youth by helping them encounter the reality of the Risen Lord
...because they failed to attract new persons to become active parts of their community. And, when they do attract new persons they fail to move over to make room to serve the new and different needs of new and different people, instead hoping to mold those persons to be “just like us.”

However, there is a very simple and direct answer: Parishes decline because...people (laity and clergy) let them.”
There are “mechanisms” by which this takes place. They (clergy and laity), refuse to “face facts” and consider early warning signs of decline -- be they numerical or qualitative. When signs of a plateau in spiritual life or a decline in church school registration and attendance become too obvious to ignore parishioners quickly look for someone to blame – almost always focusing on the priest. Leadership structures - parish councils, for example - continue to focus solely on the material aspects of parish life – “bills, budgets and buildings” instead of seeing themselves as needing to put their shoulder to plow to be co-responsible, under the leadership of the priest, for the total mission of the parish (if the parish even sees itself as having a mission).
Once the parish clearly perceives a challenge (“opportunity”, “problem,” call it what you wish) most parishes ‘grab for answers’ based on the personal viewpoints of individuals instead of building consensus around one area of parish life (worship, leadership, external ministry, spreading the gospel) on which to focus. And it is never just “one thing”. The challenges facing the parish did not happen overnight, and will not and cannot be solved in weeks or months. Addressing the challenges will take time -- many years in most cases – and it will also take focus – since no parish has the energy to truly strengthen its life in many areas all at once.

Oca.org: Briefly explain what a "rut cycle" is and why this is destructive.

Fr. Jonathan and Joe: People get in ruts –they get stuck-- all the time. The ruts may be spiritual, personal, dietary –whatever. So, too, with parishes. In a parish the ruts usually have something to do with being stuck either in the past –with an imagined version of parish life that either never was or does not fit the realities of 2011, on ourselves – with assumptions about who the parish serves and what will “work” and on low expectations – a conviction of

minimalism toward living out our faith, a paltry budget and an unspoken belief that we can't do that because "we've never done it that way."

These ruts, however they may manifest themselves, as an unwillingness to change or a preoccupation with the past, lead us to perpetuate many of the same parish attitudes and practices that have led the parish into decline. We continue to do the same the things while expecting different results as the saying goes. What seems to help is to truly understand what a vibrant 21st century American Orthodox parish looks and feels like, how it behaves—and then to find new values and its true mission. Much of the ongoing work in Orthodox Parish Development focuses on helping parishes to think about their life and practices in new Christ centered ways.

Oca.org: In your AAC presentation you asked, "How can we release the the potential that God has placed within every church?" So, how can we?

Fr. Jonathan and Joe: Parishes must begin with one fundamental understanding: It is God Who grows the church. While we might have roles to play (Paul planted, Apollos watered), it is ultimately God Who gives and manifests and blesses the growth. We must do our roles - God can certainly work through us - in order for God to do His, but we must remember that asking the question, "How do I grow my church?" is, in reality, asking the wrong question. We are not in control of the situation, God is, and since in Mark 4, Matthew 6, John 15 and elsewhere God makes it very clear that the Church - the Body of Christ - as an organic, living entity is meant to grow, then we must ask a different question: If the Church is meant to grow, and meant to grown naturally, what might we be doing that is preventing that God-given, God-ordained growth from naturally occurring?

Oca.org: If you had to boil parish renewal down to one key concept, what would it be?

Any parish can become a more vibrant healthy, hopeful American Orthodox Christian community – IF it truly desires to do so AND it can muster the focus and consistent long term effort to do so.

Oca.org: Do you provide resources to OCA parishes and clergy, to help people grow their parishes? Please share.

Fr. Jonathan and Joe: First of all, as we tried to make clear in the workshop we don't so much focus our efforts on helping parishes to "grow" as we do on helping parishes to identify how to do the Gospel-centered work that will enable it to grow-- for God to bless the parish with growth – to "provide the increase".

Additionally, we want parishes to consider us as resources to draw upon for work, help, resourcing, training, coaching and consulting. Our bios are as follows:

Joe Kormos is the Parish Facilitator for the Diocese of the Midwest's Parish Health Ministry, whose focus has been to stimulate parishes in the Diocese of the Midwest to engage in a new more vibrant life in Christ. To do this, Joe offers workshops, conferences, webinars, newsletters, web-based articles and assessment tools for parishes. These are all available for use by any OCA (or other jurisdiction) parish from the Midwest Diocese website at www.domoca.org/parishhealth.html. We also provide "in-parish" workshops and direct parish coaching. This is available to Midwest Diocese parishes at no charge. Bishop Matthias has blessed Mr. Kormos to assist parishes outside the Midwest Diocese who desire facilitation in exploring their response to a revitalization need. This assistance is available "as time is available" and with the parish bearing the costs for the assistance. Additionally the Midwest Diocese also provides cash grants to parishes for begin or expand worthy ministries. These grants of course are only available to Midwest Diocese parishes.

Fr. Jonathan Ivanoff has been working in the field of parish health, renewal and revitalization for the past fifteen years and during this time has presented at or coached/consulted with over eighty parishes. He was formerly a presenter at the OCA's Office of Church Growth and Evangelization's Church Growth Boot Camp, held between 1998 and 2002, at which over forty parishes and 150 people participated in a seminar/workshop format designed to teach and equip parish clergy and laypeople to construct and conduct a deliberate approach to parish renewal. He has been a member of the Department of Evangelism since 2002 and is also Director of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey's Commission on Mission and Evangelism, and has twice been featured on Ancient Faith Radio's The Illumined Heart. Fr. Jonathan is also director of Orthodox NCD America (<http://oncd.us>), a ministry devoted to the training and equipping of clergy and parishioners in an Orthodox approach to nurturing parish health and, by extension, parish growth using the Natural Church Development parish health model. Now used by or in use by over two dozen parishes in a nationwide pan-Orthodox cooperative effort, OCND uses webinars, training workshops, materials and tools, and seminars and personal coaching to prepare church health teams to begin the necessary effort to create, foster and promote a truly Christ-centered, healthy parish life. More information can be found on the aforementioned ONCD website.