

## **PILLAR FIVE**

### **Evangelizing North America**

*...all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their own homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

(Acts 2: 44-47)

#### ***Orthodox Church in America Mission Statement***

The mission of the Orthodox Church in America, the local autocephalous Orthodox Church, is to be faithful in fulfilling the commandment of Christ: "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that He has commanded" so that all people may be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth; to preach, in accordance with God's will, the fullness of the Gospel of the Kingdom to the peoples of North America and to invite them to become members of the Orthodox Church; to utilize for her mission the various languages of the peoples of this continent; to be the Body of Christ in North America and to be faithful to the Tradition of the Holy Orthodox Church: to witness to the Truth, and by God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to reveal Christ's way of sanctification and eternal salvation to all.

#### ***Introduction***

A church that is not missionary, that is simply closed in on itself, is not the Church. Few would disagree with this statement, and the Orthodox Church in America Mission Statement reflects this in no uncertain terms. In the pages that follow, we learn about the history of evangelization efforts on our continent. Turning to the present, we are informed about the religious profile in the United States and Canada, with the opportunities and challenges that this offers. We learn also about the demographic shape of the Orthodox Church in America. We then turn to strategies for planting new missions and for revitalizing existing parishes. In conclusion, we come to what is perhaps the

essential point, which is reflected in the citation from Acts above: God will lead people into the Church only when we ourselves live as Christians. It is when we, individually and corporately, visibly live out the truth of the Gospel that people will be drawn to join the Church. Converts will come when they see the presence of Christ in the community, when they see that community reaching out to one another and to the surrounding community, when they see unity in love rather than bickering and fighting, humility rather than triumphalism. As we consider our missionary outreach, we must be aware first of what it is that we are bringing people to, and it may be that we need first to repent of our own sins, our own betrayals of Christ and the Gospel. All our efforts and programs will not bear fruit unless we ourselves conform to Christ and to the Gospel.

Indeed, one could argue that the aim of each of the first four pillars is nothing other than preparation for fulfilling the fifth pillar, which is nothing less than carrying out our God-given task of evangelizing North America, where God has placed us.

### ***Past Efforts at Evangelization***

As the living continuity of "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3), Orthodoxy's history and missionary tradition are replete with examples, models and writings that commemorate and perpetuate the fervor, zeal and conviction of the apostolic era. They are indeed what continue to confirm the apostolic character of our Church expressed in the Creed. The Orthodox Church in America is itself a living testimony to Orthodoxy's history and missionary tradition. We would not now be laboring in this North American vineyard were it not for those who joyously and sacrificially fulfilled the Great Commission to "Go, make disciples, baptize, teach and preach the gospel." To venerate our beloved North American saints is to pay tribute to our missionary tradition. Their lives, labors and writings comprise a contemporary, North American sequel to the Acts of the Apostles worthy of ongoing study, reflection and response (see next section). This is the foundation given to us, upon which we HAVE built and must CONTINUE to build in determined effort: "which we have seen and heard" and must proclaim to all.

Virtually every All-American Council has, directly or indirectly, concerned itself with some aspect of evangelization. The first three All-American Councils sought to set the Orthodox Church in America "house" administratively in order; to build a foundation and framework for subsequent activity within our North American culture.

This was accomplished through painstaking conciliar work in coming to grips with the challenges inherent to autocephaly and developing governing documents. It was from within this now-defined administrative structure that the Fourth All-American Council (Cleveland, 1975) adopted the theme of "Mission," generating extensive study papers and offering plenary session discussions. The Church thus testified that it was ready to do what it had been "sent" by God to do!

Subsequent Councils continued to "flesh out" this work -- this "mission" -- in meaningful and practical ways; a process that continues. Through thematic pre-Council study papers and plenary session presentations, with later additions of exhibits, department hearings, workshops, forums and youth gatherings, numerous hierarchical and conciliar mandates and resolutions were zealously drafted, deliberated and adopted. Of special note are the Seventh (Philadelphia, 1983) and Eighth (Washington DC, 1986) All-American Councils that focused on the themes "Church Growth" and "Evangelization" respectively. Pre-Council study papers of these Councils, together with related presentations offered and resolutions adopted in plenary sessions, are well-worth revisiting within the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century America.

To lift and list all "evangelization-related" Council actions from official Council minutes would be to produce an impressive missionary textbook and "strategic plan" for evangelizing America!

### ***What We Have Accomplished***

The following summarizes some of our accomplishments in regards to evangelization, including not only the work of past All-American Councils, but also of various segments of our Church and even of individuals in response to those conciliar initiatives:

The Holy Synod published Guidelines for Missions, an encyclical on Preaching, The Rite for the Reception of Converts, and Moral Affirmations, and adopted the Church's Mission Statement (cited above).

Mission-related courses have been incorporated into seminary curricula.

The Department of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Ministries and the Department of Christian Education have developed lesson plans and study units.

The Orthodox Church in America's Department of Communication was mandated to give high priority to offering an immediate Orthodox response to contemporary issues.

The Orthodox Church in America's Department of Evangelization, with diocesan representatives, is in place.

Each February the Church has its annual Mission Appeal, with a national financial appeal and supporting materials for parish focus.

The Orthodox Church in America coordinates international missionary efforts with the SCOBA Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC).

Mission Planting Grants are offered to aid in the establishment and nurture of new communities. Funds for this come from the annual Mission Appeal.

Annual Mission Conferences are held: sponsored by the Orthodox Church in America and in cooperation with the Antiochian Archdiocese.

An Orthodox Church in America's Mission Planter's Resource Kit has been published.

Mission priests are assigned mentors for pastoral support.

Numerous seminars and workshops have been offered, including "Heating Up a Lukewarm Church," "Equipping the Saints," "Basic Orthodoxy" and "Turn-Around Ministry."

Church Growth "Boot Camps" have provided intensive study and training.

The internet puts relevant information literally at our fingertips through [www.oca.org](http://www.oca.org) and a plethora of related sites.

Several radio initiatives, including advertising campaigns as well as broadcast programming, have developed.

An audiotape ministry called "Everyday" has evolved.

The Department of Lay Ministries' *Resource Handbook* features regular packets of articles with numerous creative ideas and reports.

Together with *The Orthodox Church* newspaper, diocesan publications include resource materials and regional reports on mission efforts.

A Review Board was charged to respond to instances where public school textbooks fail accurately to cite Orthodoxy's role in history and culture.

Multimedia Council presentations and related video programs were prepared and remain viable resources.

The Orthodox Christian Publication Center (OCPC) stocks resource materials, including pamphlet tracks.

Seminary bookstores offer stock "book packages" for parish libraries.

And, lest we forget perhaps our greatest resource, we **pray** for catechumens!

All of these evangelization efforts flowed from the conciliar spirit and work of our Church. They are among the ways that we have, are, and must continue to fulfill the Great Commission to "Go, make disciples, baptize, teach and preach to all creation" within the context of contemporary America. Each of these initiatives essentially worked. Most continue to work.

Why is it, then, that, though armed with this seeming "evangelization arsenal," we appear to be making little more than a small dent in the religious landscape of North America? Why aren't all these many and varied tools sufficient for our collective task? What will be our "good defense before the dread judgment seat of Christ" for our apparent failure to evangelize America to date? These are the questions that demand the urgent attention of the upcoming and every subsequent Council, with the thoughtful involvement of all constituencies within our Holy Church, based upon prayerful consideration of our history, tradition and our current "realities."

### ***Obstacles***

Modern society presents formidable obstacles to evangelization. Escalating secularism affects every religious group. Growing consumerism suggests that all religious belief systems are essentially equal. And the increasing mobility of modern society, which stems largely from a search for economic opportunity, leads to the further degeneration of stable community and family life. As a result, a substantial portion of the population has become religiously passive, content to remain on the fringes of commitment. These are among the societal obstacles – the current realities – against which we must struggle.

But having stipulated these **external** obstacles, we must also focus our attention on addressing and overcoming the **internal** obstacles within our Church that in effect cripple our ability to evangelize effectively. Though past Councils have considered and adopted numerous, ambitious measures, we have still not succeeded in establishing evangelization as "an inner necessity" for the Church. We tend to

regard it as "just one of the things we do" rather than "our reason for being." We cannot assume that our parishes and people comprehend this when, practically and administratively, we don't reflect this. The Orthodox Church in America Mission Statement should be viewed as a standard by which every Church-wide initiative is tested.

When every constituency of the Church was asked to consider possible churchwide Initiatives for the 12th All-American Council (Pittsburgh, 1999), it was highly significant that the Council not only adopted the Seminarian Internship Program as its top priority but also generously responded in a financial "floor-drive" to fund it! There were at least two intriguing things about this. First, funds "miraculously" became available to support the program, dispelling the notion that our Church always suffers from a lack of resources. Second, the initiative related to Church Growth placed a distant third!

Finally, there is one central internal obstacle to effective evangelization, and it must be addressed by every segment of our Church until it is resolved: Orthodox DISunity. How much longer can we, as Orthodox Christians in America, afford to say "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," before we finally say with one united Orthodox voice to this land, "I belong to Christ" (1 Cor 1:12)? In spite of this current reality, the Orthodox Church in America must continue ambitiously to function as "the local autocephalous Orthodox Church." But evangelization COULD BE so much easier...

### ***The North American Saints*<sup>1</sup>**

For us to consider the future of the Church in North America we must certainly examine and learn from its past. The opportunities and challenges that present themselves today have their origins in the efforts – successes and disappointments – of our predecessors. Furthermore, patterns for evangelism and Church life have already been established in earlier struggles that can guide us in the years ahead, steering our communities toward advancement, preventing us from slipping into error or "reinventing the wheel." Particularly instructive are the examples of those glorified by the Orthodox Church

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<sup>1</sup> Portions this section contain quotations and paraphrases from *Portraits of American Saints*, compiled and edited by George A. Gray, and *Orthodox America 1794-1976*, published by The Orthodox Church in America, Department of History and Archives.

in America, our patron saints and fervent intercessors before the Lord. *“God is glorified in His saints.”* Through them His love for this continent and all people was shown, and models were given of the faith and charity necessary to transform the hearts of the American people.

When we speak of evangelization there are two constants that render timeless the examples of our fathers in Christ: that God Himself is, *“the same, yesterday, today, and forever”* (Heb 13:8), desiring *“all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Tim 2:4); and that man is essentially the same in every generation, a creature fashioned in God’s image, called to repentance and to share a life of divine glory. These constants refer us to the inner dynamic of evangelization and conversion, of the human heart’s response to God’s activity in the world, that towards which missionary endeavors are ultimately directed. Here lies our most profound link with visionaries of the past. Their struggle is ours as well, upon the same soil which God sanctified through their witness. Times have indeed changed, but the need remains for each person in North America to hear the Gospel and apply its teachings and Spirit to his or her unique life circumstances.

The Gospel which we preach for the salvation of souls is enduring, always “relevant and contemporary” for the very same reasons; that is, the Gospel speaks to the human condition; to a fallen, fragmented world and broken lives; of the inner dynamic of man’s response to the love of God and His will for man. Its message does not change according to societal trends. The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ beckons all to a life of holiness and sacrifice for “the other,” in times of peace and war, affluence and poverty, health and sickness, cultural advancements and stagnation. *“Love one another as I have loved you.” “Be merciful as your Father in Heaven is merciful,” “Be holy for I am holy,” “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me.” “Lose your life for My sake and the Gospel’s.”* These commandments and the whole of Christ’s teaching were embodied in our North American Saints who gave up everything “to obtain the pearl of great price.” They must be the guiding force in our lives as well if the Orthodox Faith is to have a major impact on society. The authentic Gospel of Christ is so maximal in its expectations and demands that people must see lives transformed by its precepts in order to believe. With these thoughts in mind let us look at basic practices or principles of evangelization exhibited through the lives of the American saints.

## Repentance and Conversion

Reflecting upon the Church's start in America the late Fr. Alexander Schmemmann once wrote that,

...long before successive waves of immigration brought to these shores sons and daughters of virtually every Orthodox nation, the Orthodox faith was implanted here by the basic imperative implied in that faith itself: the desire to bring the Gospel to those who, not knowing Christ, "sat in darkness and the shadow of death."

*(Orthodox America: 1794-1976, p. 11)*

Orthodoxy came to this land because of the Russian Church's desire to serve and enlighten the Russian colonists dwelling in Alaska, as well as native Aleuts. In 1794, ten monks from the Valaam Monastery near St. Petersburg – examples and symbols of those who have died to this world – carried out the effort, initially. Among them were Father Herman of Alaska and the Holy Hieromartyr Juvenaly. They were motivated by faith, wishing to share that which they "*freely received,*" in accordance with our Lord's command: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things, that I have commanded you...*" (Mt 28:19-20). They were strengthened by the assurance that Christ would be with them, "*always, even to the end of the age*" (Mt 28:20). Here, the only intention was to serve and educate, with the hope that lives would be transformed; the only security and promises were Christ's abiding presence and heavenly rewards. These faithful disciples very quickly established a bilingual school (Russian and Aleut) for the natives, built a chapel as well as an orphanage. They also functioned as guardians, protecting native Americans as best they could, from harsh treatment at the hands of certain colonists, suffering persecution, slander and false arrest in the process. This selfless and tireless approach to the Gospel characterized the lives of the American Saints, laying the groundwork for future generations. It provides an important example for those called to follow in their footsteps, given the charge to pass on a vibrant Orthodox Christianity to others.

Mindful of that, as we consider the future of our dioceses and individual communities, we must resist temptations that come to members of a Church dwelling within an affluent society where success is measured largely by numbers and people thrive on competition. Without denying the benefits, positive signs and spiritual



dimension of the measurable elements of church life, it becomes far too easy to make these the sole criteria by which we gauge the Church's "success" in this country. The overriding questions guiding our efforts and evaluations should be, "Have lives been changed?" "As people come to Orthodoxy are there genuine conversions taking place?" "Are the bonds of faith and love which bind us together being strengthened within our communities?" These reflect a key principle of evangelization, addressing that inner dynamic referred to earlier. They were primary motivators for our spiritual forefathers, whose tangible accomplishments were indeed quite impressive. It is estimated that within two years, the efforts of this initial band of missionaries led to the conversion of more than 12,000 Alaskans.

### **Identification**

From what has been said, it is also apparent that in their work the first North American Saints readily identified with those whom they served, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (Jn 1:14). "*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin*" (Heb 4:15). Their preaching of the Gospel was experienced as coming "from within" the community, so to speak, rather than "from above or outside," in the sense that these relative strangers proved themselves ready to learn local customs and languages, live with and teach new skills to the native Alaskans, and to suffer and die with and for them if necessary.

Later missionaries displayed this same approach to evangelization. St. Innocent, for example (1797-1879), an extraordinary figure, became a true father in Christ to those entrusted to his care. He was strong physically and well-versed in many subjects and professions: theologian, pastor, carpenter, educator, clock maker, navigator, natural scientist and anthropologist. He used his natural abilities and learned talents in service to the Church and his fellow man. Some of his accomplishments: by the grace of God he organized a school for the natives and taught them carpentry skills, developed an alphabet for the Aleutian language based on the Cyrillic, translated services and the Gospel of St. Matthew, wrote a spiritual treatise in Aleut titled "*A Guide to the Way to the Heavenly Kingdom*," guided many Tlingit Indians through a smallpox epidemic and subsequently converted a number of them by his love and sacrifices, organized a seminary to train native priests, constructed the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael in the city of Sitka, and traveled extensively in harsh conditions, by foot and canoe, in order to preach the Gospel.

Other North American Saints displayed a similar love for and sense of identification with their flocks. St. Jacob Netsvetov's efforts (1802-1864) mirrored those of the first missionaries and St. Innocent. Born in Alaska to a Russian father and native American mother, he was married in 1826 and ordained to the priesthood in 1828. St. Jacob traveled extensively throughout the Aleutian Islands preaching the Gospel, provided the natives with medical supplies, defended the Aleuts against oppressive administrators of the Russian-American Company, established a school in order to teach the Russian and Unangan Aleut languages, and with the help of St. Innocent worked on devising a written form of this latter dialect. He also translated parts of the Scripture and other writings into the native tongue of local inhabitants. By the end of his 36-year missionary "career," Fr. Jacob had brought over 1,300 people to the Orthodox Christian Faith.

St. Raphael Hawaweeny (1860-1915), came to the United States as an archimandrite in November of 1895 to begin pastoral and missionary work in America with the Arab Orthodox community. Half a year after his arrival, he embarked on a five-month, 30-city visit to acquaint himself with Arabic-speaking American Christians. Within two years he had organized many parishes throughout the United States. During his travels he also provided sacraments to the faithful – marriage, baptism, confession and the Eucharist – often celebrating services in homes, in areas where no churches yet existed. In 1898, he produced an Arabic language service book called *The Book of True Consolation in the Divine Prayers*; the English version published by Archimandrite Seraphim Nassar is used by clergy and laymen to this day. On May 6, 1904, Bishop Raphael became the first hierarch to be consecrated on American soil. During his episcopal ministry, he continued missionary endeavors, publishing *The Word* magazine as a tool for instruction, and working with Isabel Hapgood to prepare *The Service Book of the Holy Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church*. Both of these are still in print and enjoyed by many American Orthodox Christians. St. Raphael was also engaged in ecumenical discussions: he was often invited to address local diocesan and national conventions of the Episcopal Church, which had been extremely helpful to and financially supportive of the immigrant Orthodox in America. At the time of St. Raphael's death, the Syro-Arab Mission in America had thirty parishes and approximately 25,000 faithful.

And then there is the example of Our Father among the Saints, Tikhon, Enlightener of North America, an image of unity and of what it means to identify with the faithful. Upon his arrival to this country in 1898,

he was the only Orthodox bishop on this continent. Immigration was reaching its peak; St. Tikhon's flock was made up of a growing number of diverse ethnic groups. Wishing to maintain unity among the brethren, he allowed for ethnic and cultural variations between parishes. The faithful worshipped in Slavonic, Arabic, Greek, English, and Alaskan native languages. St. Tikhon traveled throughout North America during his nine-year archpastorate here, opening many Churches and encouraging parishioners to think of themselves as one with other Orthodox Christians. Realizing that the American mission could not simply remain an extension of the Church in Russia, he devoted his efforts to directing the faithful in America to become a local, self-sustaining and autonomous Church. St. Tikhon opened the first American seminary in Minneapolis and established the first American monastery in South Canaan, Pa. It has been said that St. Tikhon's archpastorate would be characterized by his extraordinary vision of Orthodox mission in the New World.

Reading, then, about the lives of our forefathers in Christ, one can appreciate their acceptance of the call to lead others, but to do so "from within" the context of the Christian community. They identified with their flock, a principle of evangelism that is so necessary to stress in an impersonal society. In teaching the Gospel, Orthodox Christians can begin with those closest to them, family members and friends, with whom they already have common bonds. "*Let Thy light so shine before men...*;" all men, especially those whom we see everyday.

### **Heroic Sacrifice**

Finally, one can point to a third necessary, yet sometimes neglected, component of evangelism: sacrifice and hard work. As has been described above, it is evident that the saints of our land identified the preaching of the Gospel and the salvation of souls with painstaking labors, some more physical than others. While the past 100 years have seen remarkable changes in terms of the American Orthodox standard of living, there is still and always the need for Orthodox Christians to "do what it takes" in order to evangelize and minister to those around them. Heroes are needed – clergy and laity who approach the Gospel with a sense of urgency and priority, who are willing to make sacrifices in terms of stewardship to see that the Gospel is taught and put into practice, and that churches and other necessary ecclesiastical institutions are built. The following is a one-day account in the life of St. Jacob Netsvetov:

On the occasion of the Feast of St. Innocent of Irkutsk, I held the vigil. In the morning, prior to Liturgy, I baptized an infant born to a local Aleut a week ago. Then all the children, boys and girls, were gathered in the chapel and I spoke to them about God's love for people, especially children...Afterwards I celebrated the Divine Liturgy, at which 50 adults who had come to confession were joined to the Holy Mysteries. Later on I visited the cemetery and sang the requiem for all those who had died here since my last visit. The rest of my time was spent performing (eight) weddings...After the ceremonies, I instructed the newlyweds on the meaning of marriage and the duties of husband and wife, respectively. Thus, I concluded my activities there.

The North American saints bear witness to God's presence in our midst. They demonstrate that He does provide the strength, courage and wisdom needed to present the Gospel in its fullness to the people of this country. The lives of the saints provide us with definite principles upon which we can base our own efforts to evangelize, notably: calling others to repentance and genuine conversion, identifying with those whom we serve, and making heroic sacrifices for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. God bestows on us, as well, the power to have our own lives transformed by His word, a feat that must first take place if the message of Orthodoxy is to have meaning for those hearing it.

## ***Profiles of Religion***

### **In the United States**

Trying to profile the state of religion in the United States these days is like trying to map an explosion. Bits and pieces of what was once solid and secure are flying around and the whole thing is expanding out in all directions. In such consternation it is easier to identify the forces for change than to predict the future result. Yet within the chaos are abundant possibilities for a vigorous and vitalizing Orthodox mission to bewildering and volatile religious situation North America.

In the midst of near spiritual chaos across the U.S. the most obvious impression is that of the escalating proliferation of religious groups. Although well over 1,500 identifiable Christian denominations in the United States can be documented, a better idea of the expansive

propagation of religion is geographer Wilbur Zelinsky's count of some 400,000 places of worship here.<sup>2</sup> Wherever one looks, signs of an ever-increasing religious diversity are popping up on the landscape. In Madison, Wisc. (population just over 200,000), for example, a website lists 19 Buddhist centers representing 12 different types of Buddhism alone.

For religions other than Christianity, much of this religious building boom is due to the latest wave of immigration. Since 1965, immigration at that rate of 1 million legal newcomers a year<sup>3</sup> has resulted in the sudden appearance of countless, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, and meditation halls across America including, for instance, a Shinto Shrine in Richmond Hills, Georgia; a Rastafarian Center in Rochester, N.Y.; and a Jain Temple in Buena Park, Calif.

Despite the attention given to non-Christian religions, polls show that the latest religious imports represent no more than 5% of the population<sup>4</sup> and perhaps less.<sup>5</sup> The most marked dissemination of religion appears within Christianity as great numbers have been swept up in evangelicalism, while many others have dropped out of mainline Protestantism. In this shift, Americans have broken loose from the established structures of American religion as they seek personal spiritual fulfillment over religious belonging.

It appears that the overwhelming majority of Americans still identify with Christianity, though the percentage is declining. According to the

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<sup>2</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky. "The Uniqueness of the American Religious Landscape." The Geographical Review 91 #3): 565-85 < <http://www.amergeog.org/gr/jul01/Zelinsky-1st.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> George J. Borjas. "Immigration." The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics. 2002 <<http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/Immigration.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Newport. "The Gallup Update: Americas and Religion." December 24, 2005. The Gallup Brain. The Gallup Organization. Rock Valley College Library, Rockford, IL.

<sup>5</sup> Barry A Kosmin and Egon Mayer. "Profile of the US Muslim Population." American Religious Identification Survey, Report No. 2, October 2001. The Graduate Center: City University of New York, 2001. <[http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris\\_part\\_two.htm](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_part_two.htm)>.

2004 Gallup polls,<sup>6</sup> one in two Americans consider themselves Protestant; one in four, Catholic; one in ten, “other Christian”; about one in ten consider themselves atheist or agnostic, and again, no more than 5% identify with a non-Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup> The Gallup “Index” that measures the nation’s “religiosity” has been “stable” since the turning point of 2001: about four in ten say that they attend church weekly, about two in three consider themselves members of churches, and about six in ten say that religion is “very important” to them.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the “stability” of the figures hides the fact that many Americans are no longer content to stay put in religious organizations. Pollster George Barna admits that though the total church belonging/attendance figures seem somewhat constant, a substantial amount of switching from church to church is going on.<sup>9</sup> The extent of the church hopping is reported by the Web magazine, “Faithworks”: one in seven adults changes churches every year and one in six attends several different churches on a kind of rotating basis.<sup>10</sup> Religious groups keep surfacing to take advantage of this growing religious mobility. For example, the much heralded “megachurches” purport to adapt Christianity to reach the “unchurched.” In fact, a Hartford Institute study found that the main draw of “megachurches” is from other denominations. Like their more staid competition, they also must battle the forces of attrition.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Lyon. “Religiosity Measure Shows Stalled Recovery.” . Jan. 11, 2005. [The Gallup Brain](#), The Gallup Organization. RVC Library.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Newport. “Update: Americans and Religion.” Dec. 23, 2004. [The Gallup Brain](#). The Gallup Organization. RVC Library.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Presser, “Estimating the Bias in Survey Reports of Religious Attendance” Proceedings of the Survey Research Methods Section, [American Statistical Association](#), 1996 < [www.amstat.org/sections/srms/Proceedings/papers/1996\\_162.pdf](http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/Proceedings/papers/1996_162.pdf)> confirms the suspicion of over reporting of worship attendance but also affirmed the demographic findings of the study.

<sup>9</sup> George Barna. “Is America’s Faith Really Shifting?” Feb 24, 2003. [The Barna Update](#). The Barna Group. < <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=133>>.

<sup>10</sup> Amanda Phifer. “Church Hopping.” [Faithworks](#). <[ggbts.edu/events/phifer02.html](http://ggbts.edu/events/phifer02.html)>.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Thumma. “Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context.” \_Hartford Institute for Religious Research. c. 1996

To explain why religious organizations have lost their grip on numbers of Americans, sociologist Wade Clark Roof studied the baby boomer generation (born from 1946 to 1964). In the turmoil of the anti-establishment 1960s, many of these disassociated themselves from their religious roots. According to Roof, a spiritual “quest culture” was born and several decades later three in four of this boomer generation are still on a “spiritual search.” Roof found that only about one in three of his subjects stuck with any religious organization. As they matured, one in four of those who left organized religion have gone back to church but not necessarily to the denomination they started with. Four in ten remain disconnected from any kind of religious organization.

The weakening of organizational ties has led to the recent but hazy distinction between “being religious” and “being spiritual.” Besides Roof, Robert C. Fuller has written about those who see life as a “spiritual journey” to some metaphysical truth,<sup>12</sup> a pilgrimage outside the organized church. Accepting this distinction, a January 2002 poll found that one in two Americans said they were “religious,” while another one in three said they are “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>13</sup> The number who so distance themselves from organized religion is ever increasing.

The result of the dynamics of disassociation is a noticeable decline in participation in institutional religion in the United States: George Barna reports that since 1991 the population has increased by 15%, while the number of adults who do not attend worship has almost doubled to some 75 million.<sup>14</sup> Some of those who have forsaken Christianity have discovered new religious movements such as the neo-pagan group “Wicca,” claiming to be the “fastest growing religion in America.”<sup>15</sup> Yet when the base starts at 8,000 members in 1991, growth to 131,000 in a decade can be touted as a 1,575% growth

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<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Fuller. Spiritual But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America. Oxford, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> George H. Gallup, Jr. “America’s Spiritual Search Turns Inward.” Feb. 11, 2003, The Gallup Brain. The Gallup Organization. RVC Library.

<sup>14</sup> George Barna. “Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled Since 1991.” May 4, 2004. The Barna Update. Barna Group.

<sup>15</sup> Kimberly Winston. “The Witch Next Door.” Earth-Based Religions. Beliefnet. <[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/155/story\\_15517\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/155/story_15517_1.html)>.

rate.<sup>16</sup> Most of the 75 million unchurched cannot be found in any identifiable groups, even in new religious movements.

A review of the trends thus suggests that the historically dominant Protestantism of the country is fragmenting. The established denominations are struggling to manage the conflict of extremely divergent views without breaking up. Meanwhile, new “non-denominational” groups, unencumbered by any history or institutional association, are springing up everywhere to grab everyone who is disaffected with a religious group.

As American Protestantism flies into pieces, the boundaries of what is considered to be acceptable belief and morality also continue to stretch. Almost unnoticed in the controversies over abortion and sexuality, many American Christians, even evangelicals, are accepting beliefs once out of bounds.<sup>17</sup> About one in four Americans say they believe in reincarnation,<sup>18</sup> and almost 44% believe that the Bible, the Qur’an (Koran of Islam), and the Book of Mormon (Latter-Day Saints) all are different expressions of the same spiritual truths.<sup>19</sup> Beliefs in ghosts and haunted houses, witches, clairvoyance, extraterrestrial beings, and spiritualism abound in America and are increasing.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the Church can find a plethora of opportunities for the intensification of mission to North America in the explosion described. Many Americans are neither set nor satisfied in their current denominations. Many are on a “spiritual quest” and are looking for alternatives to the false ideologies of the post-modern times, both religious and secular. Then too, an increasing number of unchurched are outside any religious circle. Some of these are established Americans, and others are immigrants from non-Western cultures. The

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<sup>16</sup> Winston.

<sup>17</sup> George Barna. “Americans Draw Beliefs From Diverse Points of View.” Oct. 8, 2002.. The Barna Update. The Barna Group.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Newport and Maura Strausberg. “Americans' Belief in Psychic and Paranormal Phenomena Is Up Over Last Decade.” June 8, 2001. The Gallup Brain. The Gallup Organization. RVC Library.

<sup>19</sup> Barna Update: “Americans Draw Beliefs...”

<sup>20</sup> Newport and Strausberg.



Church faces the challenge of putting the Gospel into the multiple “languages of the people” of these diverse groups who approach religion in varied ways.

However, the Orthodox Church in America will not really grasp the future prospects without an understanding of what is propelling the explosion. Wade Clark Roof sees this bewildering situation as a “kaleidoscope” and tries to make sense of it according to categories of the “new pluralism,” the “new organizational structures,” and the “new spirituality.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Roof comes closer to the impetus behind these when he speaks of the “new volunteerism,” referring to the free and subjective choice of the autonomous individual. It is the principle of freedom of religious choice that sets up an intensely competitive religious marketplace in which the individual religious consumer is offered an ever more dazzling assortment of spiritual wares and services.

Sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke have developed a widely accepted “rational choice” model to explain the dynamics of this marketplace idea. “Rational choice” presumes that the individual continually chooses religious affiliation on the basis of perceived benefits weighed against costs. Analysts such as Stark and Finke even speak of “religious capital” to refer to the religious knowledge, skills, and relationships” that individuals “use” to produce religious benefits.<sup>22</sup> Competitive advantage is gained by offering distinctive and compelling religious mastery and belonging (capital) that other groups cannot match.<sup>23</sup> Groups that have such advantage, whether it is in “core teaching,” worship style, or ethnicity, get and retain members. Thus, successful religious groups in the open market must offer a distinctiveness that its members see as useful for their religious benefit.

With this in mind, it is easy to see how the marketplace image fuels the explosion of religious beliefs, styles, and associations. Everyone

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<sup>21</sup> Wade Clark Roof. “Religious Kaleidoscope: American Religion in the 1990’s.” *Tremenos* 1996.

<http://www.abo.fi/comprel/temenos/temeno32/roof.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Finke. “Spiritual Capital: Definitions, Applications and New Frontiers.” *Spiritual Capital Planning Meeting: Penn State University*, 2003, 3.

[http://www.metanexus.net/spiritual\\_capital/pdf/finke.pdf](http://www.metanexus.net/spiritual_capital/pdf/finke.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Finke 5.

engaged in the religion market must develop a distinctive identity that will sell to the public or to target audiences. The result is an exponential growth of divergent forms of religion—an explosion of religion into bits and pieces.

If this analysis is correct then the hope of some futurists of a renewed emphasis on communal ties in religious organizations<sup>24</sup> is just wishful thinking. The drivers of the market are the demands of the consumers for whom “belonging” is just another commodity that can be offered by any religious group. In the religious marketplace, consumers buy “belonging” to a specific religious group as long as the group fulfills their needs. Likewise, religious groups invent ever newer and more exciting forms of “belonging” to attract new consumers. Thus, the divergent forces of the market prevail over the convergent need for community.

Of course, the Church must give a prophetic critique of such a humanistic view of religion and the spiritual life. It must challenge the rampant ideology of the sovereign individual and the presumptuous notion of “choice” among equally valid options that is embedded in it. The Church does not preach man’s gospel but the revelation of the Holy Trinity in Jesus Christ and so we pray, “Illumine our hearts, O Master... with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge.” Moreover each one of us is a living member of the Body of Christ, not a volunteer who chooses to belong as long as the perceived benefits outweigh the costs.

Yet the Church might also find in the fragmentation of religion in America a new opportunity to present the fullness of the one, catholic, and apostolic Church. Where others strive to set themselves apart by focusing on one or the other aspect of religion, the Church can represent the wholeness of salvation that puts together all the disparate fragments of religion within a shared life in Christ of transformation and final deification.

Insofar as the Orthodox Church in America exists within American society, we will have to live the sacramental life and carry out our call to mission within an ever expanding explosion of religious forms. We

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<sup>24</sup> Marcia Z. Nelson. “Religion Update: What the Future Holds.” Publishers Weekly (Vol. 246 #46) November 15, 1999, S1-S18 N 15.

must pray for wisdom, that we might respond with insight to this bewildering and volatile religious situation.

## **In Canada**

There is a sense, of course, in which people are people wherever one goes, and people (being made in the image of God) will often respond to the truth when it is proclaimed and embodied by a loving and enthusiastic community of Christians. This applies to the people of Canada, too: the churches that experience growth here are the ones in which the people have a demonstrable love for one another, where Jesus Christ is exalted as Lord and God and Savior, and where the Gospel of His transforming love is preached, in homily and liturgy, in a way that can be understood. Our own community, for example, has grown steadily since 1987, not because of any effective evangelism program, but simply because the word gets around that our church is a place of love, truth, and healing. It is the people of the parish who bring other people, and this is true of all growth in Orthodox Church in America parishes in Canada.

Having said this, Canada (aka “The Great White North”) is different from the USA. These differences are not confined to the more obvious ones. (That is, a Canadian is not simply, as one person said, an unarmed American with health care.) It is not just that we pray for Her Majesty the Queen in our litanies (not the President), and can spell “labour” properly (i.e., with a “u”). There are other differences as well, ones that make doing evangelism in Canada different from doing evangelism in the United States.

First of all, **everything takes longer here**. When I first returned to Canada after spending my time in seminary, I was told that I might have to work at a secular job for a couple of years until the new mission I was assigned to had grown enough to support me and my family. Two years—no problem. As it turned out, in only six years was I able to stop working at a secular job – and only because my father gave me money to help pay off the mortgage. Otherwise, I might still be working at a secular job.

Americans assume a church-going culture, which is a great help in growing new missions. “If you build it, they will come.” Not up here. Canada is secularized to a degree scarcely imaginable to most Americans. Also, there are significantly fewer people here, and when most of those don’t go to church, church growth is a much slower process.

It also makes the definitions and numbers assumed in some of our Church documents largely irrelevant to Canadians. For example, *Guidelines for Missions* (published 1989) speaks of mission stations, provisional missions, missions and parishes. A “provisional mission” is defined as consisting of “no less than 25 pledging individuals...provisional mission status is granted for a period of time not to exceed three years.” These figures and growth expectations presuppose the American experience. Growth will be much slower north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Second, **Canadian Orthodoxy is tribalized** to a much greater extent than in the USA. The American Melting Pot means that English language liturgies can be assumed in many jurisdictions, and that a Greek Orthodox could easily join an Orthodox Church in America parish. Canada, however, is the land of the Cultural Mosaic, and our government delights in a policy of “multiculturalism.” That means that every ethnic group is encouraged to keep its ethnic distinctives. Thus, in Canada, almost all Orthodox jurisdictions *define themselves in terms of their ethnic identity*, and the result is (to be blunt) that the Gospel is almost totally absorbed by and subordinated to the various ethnic identities. Orthodox churches in Canada are about being Ukrainian (or Greek, or Serb, or whatever). The Orthodox Church in America (where it does not itself fall into this trap by billing itself as Russian) is almost the only exception to this rule.

In practical terms, this means that when one opens up a new Orthodox Church in America mission, it is rare to the point of miraculous for ethnic Orthodox to come to support the new mission. The Greeks might come if it was Greek, or the Romanians if it was Romanian. But if the liturgy is entirely (or largely) in English, forget it. Our own parish, for this very reason, is made up almost entirely of new converts. Mission work mostly means making new converts (sowing the good seed into our stony Canadian soil), not gathering the Orthodox already there. I tell new mission priests to be prepared to bleed for every convert.

Third, (and following from this) **Canadian Orthodoxy is ghettoized** far more than in the United States. The first result of defining Orthodoxy in terms of national identity is the sacrifice of the Gospel, and the effective end of any outreach to those not of that identity. The next result here is that all the jurisdictions live in hermetically sealed isolation. There are happy exceptions to this, but in general, inter-

Orthodox unity and cooperation are miles (make that kilometers) behind our neighbors to the south.

Fourth, **Canada is big**. It is geographically the largest diocese in the world. (Our bishop has his hands full trying to visit all his far-flung flock.) It is therefore time-consuming and costly to do many things together as an entire archdiocese. So, when the Archdiocesan Council gathers twice a year, its members have to travel vast distances, and at great expense. We are divided into deaneries, but each of these also takes in great areas. The Deanery of British Columbia, for example, is stretched from west to east, across Washington state, past Idaho, and goes all the way north to the Yukon, next door to Alaska. In this deanery, there are four parishes in the Vancouver area, two on Vancouver Island, and two monasteries. That's it. We are few and far between. Isolation from our brother diocesan priests is a fact of church life.

Fifth, (because of Canada's vastness), there are **regionalisms** to consider. British Columbia is very different from Alberta, which is very different from Ontario, which is very, very different from Quebec. One size does not fit all. The different mind-sets and attitudes of the local scene must be taken into account. To be sure, the American-style of evangelism strikes almost all Canadians as too aggressive, too much razzmatazz, and may even be counterproductive. But that is not to say that all Canadians are alike. A clerical ponytail or cassock (worn as an evangelistic tool at the mall) that works well in Vancouver may be less effective in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Sixth, **there is no money**. Opening up a new mission means, in almost all cases, that the priest (coming out of seminary with a sizable debt load), must work at a secular job for years as he tries to grow the new mission from the ground up. Occasionally some of my Protestant friends ask, "Can't you just ask the church head office for money?" We just laugh (in both official languages).

All of this, however negative it sounds in a report, makes Canada the greatest place on earth to do mission work. Because of the challenges, the priests all have a sense of shared adventure, as well as a closeness and camaraderie found in few other places. We all know the truth of the saying, "I've been doing so much, with so little, for so long, I am now qualified to do anything with nothing!"

The Bruce Springsteen song, "No Surrender," has a line about "soldiers in a winter's night, with a vow to defend—No Retreat, No

Surrender.” That’s us. It has been a privilege beyond telling to serve in the long Canadian winter night with those other soldiers—the best I’ve ever seen. For all of us up here, there will be no retreat, no surrender.

### ***Past Growth and Decline – A Statistical Overview***

When analyzing the Orthodox Church in America’s past statistics and patterns of church growth and decline, it is necessary to first keep in mind that the history of the Church is a history of three different kinds of church growth: biological, transfer, and conversion. With the exception of Alaska, which has a rich history of conversion growth, the history of North American Orthodox Christianity is mostly a history of, first, transfer growth (primarily from the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires) during the early waves of immigration that started in the 1880s, and then, from the turn of the twentieth century through the middle decades of the last century, biological growth (i.e., the births of the second and third generations of Orthodox Christians who were the children and grandchildren of those early immigrants, or who themselves were born here to those who came later). Only in approximately the last three decades have we seen any form of conversion growth that can be said to be affecting our church in any substantial way.

The recognition of these three forms of growth is important in analyzing the impact each has had on the growth of the Church in North America. Biological growth can only result in church growth when the number of births within a parish community exceeds the number of deaths. Given the general aging of the American population and the falling birth rates among Americans in general, it is not surprising to find many Orthodox Church in America parishes with a preponderance of older members.

Transfer growth is another important means of church growth. Given the extensive mobility of the North American populace in general, and the specific and noticeable movement of people from the eastern states and provinces to western and southern ones, it is vitally important that the Church not lose sight of these people and risk their falling away from negligence or disinterest. The general growth of parishes in the OCA in western Canada and in the Dioceses of the West and South mirrors the current migration of people into these parts of the North American continent. However, transfer growth can alone never grow the church, as it is only the redistribution of existing parishioners from

**Propose a self-examination instrument for the parish that chooses to evaluate where it is and where it wants to go.**

one parish to another. Much of the Church's growth since autocephaly has been of this kind.

Conversion is the third and most important kind of church growth, and is the kind that is mandated by our Lord in Matthew 28:14ff, and the kind that we find practiced in the Acts of the Apostles. While the history of the Church in Alaska is a history primarily of conversion, that is not necessarily the case elsewhere on this continent. America has mostly been, for the last 100 years or more, primarily an immigrant church that has catered to her own, even to point of excluding the proclamation of the Gospel to those who were not of that immigrant tradition. Presently, approximately 177 parishes in the Church are in decline, with 134 of those showing double-digit declines. The reported census figure of roughly 25,000 for the eight territorial dioceses of the "Lower 48" shows an average parish size of about 70, well under the national average of 100 for Protestant and Evangelical congregations, and well under those of the Roman Catholic Church. This is one effect of transfer growth: the Orthodox Church in America has more than 200 new parishes and missions since autocephaly, but the decrease in reported membership among the eight territorial dioceses produces a much lower parish average than would have been evident 35 years ago.

However, signs that this is changing are becoming evident throughout the Church. Whole communities have come into the Orthodox Church in America from non-Orthodox origins, and many parishes are reporting an increasing number of inquirers and catechumens eager to learn about and enter the Orthodox Faith. Unfortunately, many dioceses do not keep diocesan records of births, baptisms, chrismations, and receptions (of adult converts) that can be reported and analyzed on a national level. The lack of this information severely hampers any serious church-wide effort to examine and analyze the effect of the evangelization efforts of our local, diocesan, and national outreach work to bring converts into the Orthodox Faith.

The following table presents our Church census data as submitted by parishes within the Orthodox Church in America and reported each year to the Chancery in Syosset, NY. Comparisons with past years are highlighted, particularly with the last All-American Council, three years ago, with the decade starts of 2000 and 1990. Net changes in census reporting from the previous year are noted. The term "decadal" refers to the previous ten-year period, from 1996 to 2005, and statistics here are presented in both numeric and percentile form.

Diocese	1990	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<b>Eastern PA</b>	5,590	<b>4,342</b>	4,278	<b>4,078</b>	3,899	3,824	<b>3,770</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	-15	-169	-64	-200	-179	-75	-54
Decadal # Growth/Decline		-1,248	-1,156	-1,213	-1,222	-1,239	-1,199
Decadal % Growth/Decline		-22%	-21%	-23%	-24%	-24%	-24%
<b>Midwest</b>	7,385	<b>6,629</b>	6,608	<b>6,808</b>	6,535	6,356	<b>6,219</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	-72	6	-21	200	-273	-179	-137
Decadal # Growth/Decline		-756	-755	-397	-513	-507	-578
Decadal % Growth/Decline		-10%	-10%	-6%	-7%	-7%	-9%
<b>New England</b>	3,367	<b>2,654</b>	2,617	<b>2,576</b>	2,514	2,445	<b>2,371</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	-125	-23	-37	-41	-62	-69	-74
Decadal # Growth/Decline		-713	-541	-522	-469	-463	-453
Decadal % Growth/Decline		-21%	-17%	-17%	-16%	-16%	-16%
<b>New York &amp; New Jersey</b>	6,312	<b>5,300</b>	5,176	<b>5,236</b>	5,169	4,781	<b>4,630</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	-131	-57	-124	60	-67	-388	-151
Decadal # Growth/Decline		-1,012	-1,031	-901	-761	-1,014	-989
Decadal % Growth/Decline		-16%	-17%	-15%	-13%	-17%	-18%
<b>South</b>	1,272	<b>1,635</b>	1,857	<b>1,955</b>	2,063	2,074	<b>2,105</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	0	126	222	98	108	11	31
Decadal # Growth/Decline		363	567	661	913	923	833
Decadal % Growth/Decline		29%	44%	51%	79%	80%	65%
<b>Washington</b>	838	<b>934</b>	958	<b>990</b>	990	1,015	<b>1,020</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	2	54	24	32	0	25	5
Decadal # Growth/Decline		96	141	120	101	150	143
Decadal % Growth/Decline		11%	17%	14%	11%	17%	16%
<b>West</b>	1,876	<b>2,296</b>	2,326	<b>2,412</b>	2,450	2,450	<b>2,608</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	119	156	30	86	38	0	158
Decadal # Growth/Decline		420	431	630	676	655	721
Decadal % Growth/Decline		22%	23%	35%	38%	36%	38%
<b>Western PA</b>	4,028	<b>3,200</b>	3,154	<b>3,121</b>	2,938	2,838	<b>2,788</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	17	-17	-46	-33	-183	-100	-50
Decadal # Growth/Decline		-828	-786	-623	-696	-682	-687
Decadal % Growth/Decline		-21%	-20%	-17%	-19%	-19%	-20%
<b>Territorial Subtotals:</b>	<b>30,668</b>	<b>26,990</b>	<b>26,974</b>	<b>27,176</b>	<b>26,558</b>	<b>25,783</b>	<b>25,511</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	-205	76	-16	202	-618	-775	-272
Decadal # Growth/Decline	-6,732	-3,678	-3,130	-2,245	-1,971	-2,177	-2,209
Decadal % Growth/Decline	-18%	-12%	-10%	-8%	-7%	-8%	-8%
<b>Alaska</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	<b>8,331</b>	8,331	8,331	<b>8,331</b>
<b>Albanian</b>		<b>1,502</b>	1,502	<b>1,502</b>	3,200	3,200	<b>3,200</b>
<b>Bulgarian</b>		<b>1,500</b>	1,500	<b>1,500</b>	1,500	1,500	<b>1,500</b>
<b>Canada</b>	700	<b>1,300</b>	1,300	<b>1,309</b>	1,309	1,309	<b>1,600</b>
<b>Romanian</b>		<b>6,311</b>	7,838	<b>7,838</b>	7,181	7,181	<b>7,295</b>
<b>OCA GRANDTOTAL:</b>	<b>31,368</b>	<b>37,603</b>	<b>39,114</b>	<b>47,656</b>	<b>48,079</b>	<b>47,304</b>	<b>47,437</b>
Net Change from Prev. Year	N/A	76	1,511	N/A	423	-775	133
5 Year Losses:		1981-1985: -1,800	1986-1990: -4,727	1991-1995: -2,836	1996-2000: -502		2001-2005: 1,292

## Planting New Parishes – A Historical Overview

In 1 Cor 3:6, the Apostle Paul speaks words of encouragement to a fledgling community: “*I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gives the increase.*” These words ring true today for the future of evangelization in North America. First, God gives the increase, and the Church must rely on His mercy and love for this vine that He planted with His right hand. But there is more to it. As the Apostle Paul stated, it requires individuals to plant and water the vine. These individuals are all of the members of the Church and they are all charged with planting and watering the vine. While it may be important for the purpose of this paper to present a long-range centralized strategy, ultimately it comes down to individuals on a local level reaching out to others. Evangelism is ultimately a one-on-one process and the entire membership of the Church must be on fire for the Faith to actualize this.



The charge of 100 missions in ten years is certainly an ambitious one and the Church has seen this realized at certain periods in her recent history. But this may very well be due to the circumstances surrounding the establishment of missions rather than a coordinated strategy. The growth of the Church in America can roughly be divided into four periods which is well worth examining.

**The Arrival of Missionaries.** This is roughly characterized by the arrival of the first group of missionaries from Russia to Alaska and then on to America. These foreign missionaries established missions wherever they traveled or settled. They took care of the ethnic Orthodox they encountered and also converted many native people to the Faith.

**Ethnic Migrations.** This is distinguished by the arrival of ethnic Orthodoxy from Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and Middle East. As they settled throughout the country, they established parishes and communities. While evangelism was not a priority, they did ensure the survival of the faith in a foreign land largely through the intermingling of language and culture.

**The Flight to the Suburbs.** This is the more recent situation in the church. As the Orthodox began to move from the ethnic communities and integrate into a larger society, they also established parishes wherever there was a gathering of Orthodox. This brought the American society into contact with the faith, and the shift from ethnocentricity allowed for greater evangelization.

**The New Situation.** However, the Church is now in the midst of a new stage. The flight to the suburbs has largely ended, and many areas already have an Orthodox presence of one kind or another, though there continues a filling in of the gaps where the reach of the Church continues to spread (in geographic terms). There is also a new evangelism, with a widespread acceptance of converts and convert parishes. In fact, a large percentage of clergy are now converts. But there is something else happening as well: a new wave of immigration has occurred since the fall of Communism, and this leads to a unique situation that requires great sensitivity.

These factors will affect the future of evangelism in the next ten years and will require the attention of the Church and clergy. It is possible to plant 100 new missions, but the means for doing this will be different from the past.

### **Establishing New Missions**

The first factor that needs to be considered is the geographic gaps. While these are not as wide as previously, there are still major regions and population centers that have no strong Orthodox Church in America presence. While other jurisdictions may have parishes in these areas, these may not adequately meet the needs of a diverse population (particularly in being primarily English-speaking). A recent survey of the top 500 population centers in the United States showed that at least 100 of them have little or no Orthodox presence. These are primarily in the South, parts of the Midwest and the West. A comprehensive program in each diocese listing these places should be initiated, together with a methodical approach to planting missions. It would be helpful for each diocese to have a mission coordinator. Care should be taken to maintain contact with other Orthodox in the region, so that our efforts are not construed as “sheep stealing.”

### **Evangelizing America**

The second factor is the growing conversion of people to Orthodoxy. Not only individuals, but a growing number of entire parishes, coming from non-canonical groups or other Orthodox jurisdictions, are joining the Orthodox Church in America, as well as non-Orthodox groups. The Church must continue to seek out these groups and to welcome them (after extensive investigation to avoid scandal or controversy). In addition, all parishes and missions must open their doors to individual seekers and welcome them into their parishes. While this may not plant new missions, it will allow existing parishes to grow, particularly in areas where the ethnic population has dwindled. Seeker and catechumen programs must be established in every parish and mission!

### **The New Wave**

The recent wave of immigrants, particularly from Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia and Eastern Europe, has presented some unique challenges to the Orthodox Church in America – how does one care for these Orthodox while not sliding into ethnic jingoism. They must be cared for and they must be integrated into the wider church. In some cases, this may require establishing missions that use the immigrants’ native languages. Even when these new immigrants settle

in larger population centers that already have an Orthodox presence, it may be appropriate to establish a mission dedicated to them. Issues such as language, calendar, and cultural identity should be respected, and clergy who speak the native language are a great asset. But these immigrant communities must not be seen as separate from the rest of the Church, but be integrated into the Church as a whole. The Church needs to seek and encourage such missions, or at the least ensure they find a home in an established local parish.

Our task, however, is not only to evangelize persons coming from traditionally Orthodox cultures, but others as well. The greatest population growth in America is expected to be among Hispanic, Asian and African-American communities. In the next 50 years, they are expected to become the majority population. A serious examination into evangelizing these cultures should be considered. Clergy who can work in this area will need to be recruited and trained. The Church should now begin the planning process for this and identify areas where, for example, a Spanish mission might be appropriate with material needs prepared to assist in this process.

### **The Declining Regions**

Not to be underestimated is the situation in declining regions and inner-city parishes. The flight from the cities and other regions has caused a serious decline in parish membership. Often, however, these parishes are perfectly situated to welcome new members from an under-evangelized population in their neighborhood. At least 50 Orthodox Church in America parishes have experienced double digit declines over the past ten years. A turnaround ministry in these parishes can achieve the same results as planting new missions. A concerted effort to identify and assist these declining parishes is needed, so that they can return to health. In some cases, declining parishes may need to be closed. In other cases where parishes exist in close proximity to each other, consolidation may be necessary. While this may cause some difficulties in the short term, it may allow for healthy parishes to exist and thrive, while using Church resources for a more effective purpose.

Parishes that can be rescued need to be assisted and put on a healthy growth pattern. In some cases, declining parishes exist in growing regions, and this poses other, more difficult questions on evangelization within the parish. In other cases, inner cities are undergoing a revival that offers the parish new opportunities. The Church's goals include not only healthy mission growth, but healthy

parish growth as well. Parishes need to be revitalized so they can play a vital part in the growth of the Church. A diocesan revitalization coordinator (similar to a mission coordinator) should be appointed and trained to intervene in declining parishes. And our dioceses need to address the problem of declining parishes, rescue those that can be rescued, and close those that cannot. We have in our Church the expertise to deal with this.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of 100 missions in ten years is daunting. It needs to be seen as part of an overall growth strategy for the entire Church. Healthy and growing parishes will more than make up for the loss in membership. In addition, a long-term strategy of evangelization will ensure that the vision of the Orthodox Church in America will continue to be proclaimed throughout North America. The goals and methodology are the same – preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the end, it still comes down to individuals planting and watering the vine. God will ensure the growth.

## ***Revitalizing Existing Parishes***

*The Law has no power over you, O my soul. You have made the Gospel fruitless, scorned the Scriptures, and reaped yourself no value from the Prophets or the writings of the just. Your wounds have increased and you have no physician to heal you.*

(Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete, Monday Evening)

For years we have considered and debated and enacted plans and programs. We have brainstormed, shared and ruminated on ideas. Too often we have thrown our hands up in frustration and hopelessness. We devoted an All-American Council to evangelism. Over many years we have struggled to find the formula, just the right program, to identify the exact place we need to put our energy and resources in order to grow the Church in North America, to reach the public with the faith that established the universe. Yet nowhere do we find the particular *way* that produces results. We see a multitude of approaches and no spectacular results, and sometimes little or no result at all. Some parishes pursue programs – through study, public relations, advertising, visitor’s services and open houses, bring-a-friend days, community outreach, enquirer’s classes, campus ministries, and more. Other parish communities just unlock their doors for services and have similar rates of growth or decline. We see no appreciable difference, no dazzling outcomes, and often

diminishing numbers. Truth be told, there are no new programs – just the gospel charge to preach, teach and baptize.

To begin with we must recognize that evangelism is and must be long-term and ongoing. If we imagine there to be some quick fix or some elusive but sure-fire formula (that we have just not yet discovered), either for a long-established parish or a new mission, we are sorely deluded. In modern Western society, popular ideas come and go quickly, passing like fly-by-night take-out food establishments. The bad news about the Good News is that most people, and sometimes parishes, are busy with other things. The theology of likes, pleasures, power, convenience, sexual prowess, portfolios and bottom lines – all loosely garbed in a notion of secular niceness, holds sway over the public discourse. If Oprah, or Jerry Springer, or Larry King, or Katie Couric and Matt Lauer say it, it must be so. Where can I get the best return for the least effort, and will it make me feel good? And can I get it after Viagra and before Botox? And if God isn't going to give me what I want anyway, why bother? All the while a few seekers, either those who have an "upper story" (*a la* A. Solzhenitsyn) or those who like things exotic – the smells and the bells – search out and find the Church in spite of ourselves. Mainstream America knows little or nothing of Orthodoxy, and the little that it knows is either erroneous or hyphenated (i.e., Russian-Orthodoxy, or Greek-Orthodoxy or Romanian-Orthodoxy or Albanian-Orthodoxy). In many cases, even if we are successful at getting a visitor in the door, even if the sign outside and liturgical language may be English, even exclusively in English, yet the life of the community is either exclusionary or secular/social. In other communities, the pride of the Pharisee is overflowing, but the Pharisee's good works are nowhere to be seen.

Evangelism must be a two-pronged effort. We cannot wait to get everything right on the inside before reaching out, but we must work to make things right on the inside while we reach out. From within, the work of evangelization must be carried out on every level of church life, and needs to begin with the basics – with the *Good News*. Evangelism is not a "growth program." Evangelism is not about membership numbers, it is about the Gospel, it is about Christ – about Christ in us, Christ in his holy ones. And most of what needs to be done requires commitment and considerable effort, sweat-equity, but little or no financial expenditure (although if we take the Gospel seriously, our giving will also increase).

On the diocesan level, hierarchs need to work with their clergy at deanery meetings and personally. Scriptural or patristic study can and should be an integral part of the “business” of regular meetings. Diocesan assemblies, which involve the lay and clergy faithful together, need to make time for more than just financial statements and receiving of reports. And token scriptural and/or patristic study and consideration is inadequate. A serious commitment must be made and the understanding communicated that ‘this (the Word) is what we are about,’ and it is our business and highest priority.

For the clergy, every effort must be made to upgrade preaching. Bishops or deans need to organize training sessions or refresher courses. And the bishops must make it clear even to reluctant or unwilling clergy that active participation is a must. Skilled and gifted preachers need to work with their weaker brothers so that all might be raised up. The words of the services and the words of the preacher must present and reflect the one true Word with clarity and timeliness. Choirs, readers and preachers must be prepared. An off-the-cuff sermon may be fine during an impromptu discussion at coffee hour or a home visit, but winging it through the sermon at the Sunday liturgy can never be normative or acceptable.

The work of evangelization needs to be ongoing within each parish community, with the Holy Scripture being studied and preached as if it were a vital word for the whole Church and for each of the faithful. Divine services must be done decently and well, so that the worship is offered and the word received. Parish councils need to study and receive “the word.” Prayer must be more than the formal opening and closing few seconds of parish events and parish council meetings. When parishes are locked in life-and-death power struggles, turf wars, and petty squabbles, internecine warfare dragged into the parish forum, clericalism or anticlericalism, when parishes understand Saint Paul’s instruction to Timothy to “guard the deposit” to refer to parish investment returns, why would anyone ‘hungering and thirsting for righteousness’ jump into the fray?

Those in leadership positions – hierarchs, administrators, parish clergy – all need to put their lives in good order. They must be an example to the faithful. They must not function in the Church as if it were their playground, someplace to foster their private pursuits and personal interests. They must not be picking and choosing their favorite period and shaping that portion of the Church given into their care as the forum for the exposition of their preferences. It must not be their power trip. Nineteenth century antiquarians and sixteenth century grammarians are as

out of place and out of step with the Gospel as those who feel called to translate the Gospel into Klingon. The Church is not a game or a playing field. The Church is about the beauty of truth. Brocade has its place, but the Church must not be reduced to a stage for those who love to prance about in brocade parades.

Growth in the Church will come from God but not without our diligent labors. And those labors are not meetings, programs, projects and events, not campaigns, media blitzes and PR outreach. If we are not consciously and deliberately laboring and living for Christ and his Gospel, if parishioners and parishes are not taking Orthodoxy seriously, and making it a way of life, why would God send anyone? Why would God give any growth except, perhaps, as a judgment against us?

Every parish must be challenged to become a welcoming and caring community, to say hello to the visitor, the stranger and the seeker so that no one who comes to the door of the church is made to feel out-of-place or unwelcome. This costs nothing tangible. Certainly each person, each potential convert, must come to believe and embrace the fullness of the Orthodox Faith for himself, yet when visitors and guests witness only nit-picking and bickering, and when they feel only cold indifference or lukewarm enthusiasm, we are our own worst enemies and, in fact, enemies of the Gospel.

Finally, all the faithful can be called and encouraged to pray daily, that our parishes, our dioceses and the entire Church may grow “in faith, in love and in spiritual understanding,” and that God may give increase for the building up of his Holy Church and witness to his name, as is good for the salvation of all.

## ***Revitalizing the Mature Parish***

### **Vision**

Before any attempt at revitalization of the parish that has a long history and unwritten traditions, it is ultimately necessary to formulate a vision of what the parish should or may become over the course of years. In fact, this can be very difficult and even impossible to predict, but a well-formulated plan can estimate what the parish could realistically become. Being eternal optimists, we are always planning for growth. And in some cases it may be true that the parish actually can grow. Usually, this is the case for parishes located in areas with a large influx of new immigrants, or when the church is joined by a considerable number of experienced and missionary-minded converts

**Should parishes develop a vision statement for their community? If so, what would it contain?**

from Protestantism. In all cases, the parish must take a serious look at itself, at its resources and abilities. It should focus on laying the ground for future survival and stability, or perhaps even for a new beginning. Without a new and pragmatic approach, the very existence of the parish may be threatened. A realistic understanding of the current situation, along with readiness for drastic and necessary changes, is ultimately needed to find the proper direction for the parish. And this new vision must be accompanied by action.

## **Outreach**

The vitality of any parish depends on its outreach to the world. It is rather apparent that without “new blood,” any attempt at revitalization of existing communities is impossible.

### **New “old” blood**

Before going in search for strangers, parishes should launch a program directed to the children and grandchildren of the parishioners who may still live in the area. This is a serious outreach because, although baptized and supposedly related to the parish, this younger generation has lost (either partially or completely) its touch with the parish and is effectively unchurched. This group of people will also be more cheerfully accepted by the older generation. Such an outreach should be initiated and conducted if by the younger, more active members of the parish, because the older generation has failed or was not able for whatever reasons to keep their offspring in church.

### **Friends and strangers**

The saddest part about the mature parish is that although people are genuinely warmhearted and friendly, they have no sense of being missionaries and are not good witnesses to strangers or friends. Most parishioners know very little about their faith. The majority are seriously devout, but rarely do parishioners know about the particulars of the Faith or its uniqueness. This inability to witness about the Faith to their families and friends, much less to strangers, leads to the desire to maintain the status quo. Realistically, older parishioners should be asked to be more welcoming to strangers. They can be asked to invite their friends and family to worship with them. At the same time, a committee of more educated, knowledgeable and active parishioners should be formed in order to help inquirers, guests, and potential converts to feel welcome and to answer questions. The growth of the Church through history was often due to the efforts of new converts, and not only the missionary activity of the clergy. In fact, parishes that grew more than 5% to 10% over the course of the past years, did so



because of the active involvement of parishioners in support of the work of their parish priest. Our people often assume that it is exclusively the duty and responsibility of the clergy to attract new people. But communal life is impossible without the active involvement of all the members.

### **New immigrants**

Parishioners' attitudes toward new immigrants vary from joyous fascination to absolute neglect and rejection. On one hand, there are clergy and faithful who readily embrace everything that represents the old country, especially including the recent immigrants. On the other, others totally neglect and reject the new immigrant crowd. Both approaches are quite evident. The first comes from the fascination with the much older and larger Orthodox Churches. This approach is graphically demonstrated in relation to newcomers from the former USSR, who represent the largest Orthodox Church in the world. Rejection of the newcomers stems from the fact that very few of them become regular parishioners and contributors right away. An additional fear is that the abundant presence of the new immigrants will somehow detract from the parish's being authentically and distinctively American, the goal that earlier generation of immigrants sought to achieve over the course of many decades. The situation is complicated. Newcomers are for the most part not churched. But if they do manage to find their way to church, that means that they are genuinely searching. Unlike most Westerners, they have had little if any exposure to any religion, but their natural predisposition to Orthodoxy creates a window of opportunity. Most recent émigrés, unlike their predecessors, are highly educated people and/or professionals. They do not demand services in their native tongue and do not expect that the parish will cater to their needs. However, extra care and patience are needed. An explanation of basics of the Church, an attempt to make an extra gesture of good will, and the organization of some social or ethnic project at the parish, may serve the larger goal of converting them in true fashion to the true faith. Very often, it is a married couple or several new immigrants grounded in the church and the local parish who are actively involved in spreading the news about the church through their former compatriots, and often even among their American colleagues and co-workers. Our church still has a fear of the dominance of any ethnic tradition, but the modern reality is different, and these new immigrants may over time present the real bulk of the body of the revitalized parishes (and in certain cases this is already so).

**Immediate neighbors.**

Another group that ought to be targeted by parishes are ethnic minorities. As has already been stated, many of our mature parishes are in inner cities. With rare exception, however, these parishes bring little or no witness to their immediate neighbors, the majority them racial minorities. It is probable that this category can be expected to respond the least to our attempt of outreach, but our location is predisposed to that type of mission not to any less extent than to any other category from those mentioned above. We have to attempt to witness to all, but often we see fear and prejudice of those from our immediate surroundings. If we duly hope to be the all-American church, we have to target people that represent all categories and races.

**“Usual” outreach.**

It must be admitted that mature parishes, although generally involved in general social projects or various collections initiated by the National Church or the local Council of Churches, still lack personalized outreach to the needy. We rarely have soup kitchens, organize nursing home visitation groups, or initiate other charitable projects. However, experience shows that people respond much more readily to the witness of a community that follows the word of Christ not only in silent acknowledgment, but also in true action. Such projects often demand little if any money, but only a true desire and some volunteers to help. Supplies for various “meals on wheels” projects are readily available through county or state sources, and visitation or caroling at the nursing or assisted living centers requires few material resources. By reaching out to persons in need, parishes attract volunteers from outside the parish, people who have little connection to any church, but who respond willingly to help those in need. The immediate goal is not necessarily to convert, but to plant the seed, and to make the existence of the parish known to the surrounding community.

**The Parish Priest – A Healthy Leadership**

Clergy play a very important role in the formation and well-being of the community. In many mature parishes, however, the attitude toward the priest remains what it was 50 to 70 years ago, where he is seen as an employee of the parish, a chaplain of the club, and where he has little power or authority. This is beginning to change, but only very slowly. While revitalizing the parish is a very communal process, it must be acknowledged that without strong leadership and spiritual guidance, no change is possible.

**Noting the five groups that the writer says mature parishes should reach out to, how would you rate your parish's efforts in reaching these groups? Which are being effectively addressed, and which might need more attention?**

An ongoing issue regards the priest's compensation. Communities want to have a full time priest, but the issue of appropriate salary is always a painful issue. But even in cases when the priest's salary is adequate, another issue arises. Clergy compensation takes up a huge portion of the parish budget. Between his compensation and building upkeep, there is little left for mission and outreach, which at the very basic level contradicts the very understanding of the Church. A possible solution that could relieve this tension is to allow the priest to work during regular weekday hours to provide for his family and not to depend on the community for his welfare. This, along with some compensation from the parish, would provide for a decent living for the priest and will enable the parish to invest more into its revitalization. This suggestion may seem drastic and unacceptable. However, the evidence from Western Europe, where the majority of clergy work at secular jobs for a living, indicates that community life is not abandoned and is, to the contrary, vibrant and full. Such a radical solution does place additional stress on the priest, but is the current situation of poorly compensated and stressed-out clergy any better?

Finally, there is also the question of priests' sabbaticals and free time. Service in the church may not be a "job" *per se*. It is service, the sacrifice of the very life of the priest. To be an inspiration to others, however, clergy must be given a chance for continuous education, time for quiet reflection, solitude, prayer, and pilgrimage. This all relates to parish revitalization. Such opportunities are rare at present, but they are essential if we are to have healthy leadership. Without healthy leadership, healthy changes are impossible.

### ***Strategies for the Future***

While it may seem strange, when one begins to ponder the task of how to develop a cohesive approach to growing the Church in North America, it begins with a simple question: Do we *want* to grow the Orthodox Church in America?

While the mission imperative given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ would seem to be quite clear and simple, "Go forth and baptize all nations," it is not clear at all that the rank and file of the Church in our land feel a need to respond to that imperative. One of the true impediments to a sense of urgency in growing the Church is the religious relativism that abounds in our parishes. Everything — even Christ, His teachings and His Church — is relative. We accept what we "like," reject what we "don't like," and "respect" the beliefs of

others to the point that it does not matter to us where, or even if, our children or we ourselves build a life of faith in the Church.

If our faithful are not tempted away from the Church and Christ by the affluence and selfishness of our society — building careers, big homes and 401(k) accounts at the expense of family and faith — they are tempted by a generic belief that all faiths are basically the “same” and therefore have no need to grow the Church, and certainly have no need to sacrifice to accomplish that goal. There are many places where people just want to make sure there is a place from which they can be buried. This is *not* mission.

So first we must answer: Do we *want* to grow the Church?

***What will it take to grow by 10% in the next ten years?***

**Inspiration.** The talented preachers and teachers of our Church must be utilized to inspire the faithful to mission. A “publicity campaign” must be launched that helps people understand what Christ taught about the Church. Inspired by their parents, pastors and parishioners, children must grow in the faith and remain in the faith. The content of Truth must be articulated and imparted to generations to combat rampant relativism.

**Education.** There must be an integrated approach to teaching mission. The basic scriptural commandment to spread the Word and baptize all nations must be a part of the church school curriculum, Bible studies, publications (articles and books), and sermons.

**Outreach.** The faithful cannot be expected to be inspired to stay in, support, and grow a community that remains self-enclosed. Not only does Christ command us to care for the “least of these my brethren,” but we live in a world today that is shrinking by the moment. Instantaneous news, the world at our fingertips on the Internet, and easy travel make us aware of those who are suffering or who are in poverty. Outreach to those in need makes us less selfish and makes the community of the Church worth staying in. People (indeed, generations) cannot be expected to show loyalty to an organization that is self-enclosed or exists only to ensure its own perpetuation.

**Planning.** An unbiased assessment of current parishes and demographics may be necessary to ensure that our limited resources are being used most effectively. Small parishes located in close proximity may need to be consolidated. Dying

**In Strategies for the Future the writer describes why we may not care about dedicating ourselves to growing. (We accept what we "like", reject what we "don't like", and "respect" the beliefs of others to the point that it does not matter to us where, or even if, our children or we ourselves build a life of faith in the Church.) Does this same statement explain why we have the struggles that are described in these pillar papers?**

parishes in dying areas may even need to be closed. Individual parishes need to discuss and plan for church growth. Resources need to be directed to growing areas — clergy, money and effort.

**Dedication.** Existing communities, families, and individuals must be rededicated to the principles of the Faith and of church growth. Parishes must be vibrant examples of community life with full worship cycles, lay ministries, and outreach. Families must rediscover the time and effort it takes to raise children in the Faith in a world that tries to seduce those same children away from the Church. Individuals must live prayerful, churchly lives dedicated to Christ. St. Seraphim of Sarov said, “Acquire the Holy Spirit, and thousands around you will be saved.”

*What will it take to plant 100 new parishes in ten years?*

**Planning.** One of the imperatives for growing the Church by 100 parishes is a logical, systematic approach to mission by the Department of Missions and Evangelism. This would include a full-time Director of Evangelism, trained in missiology, with full-time responsibilities in overseeing a mission-growing plan. Part of the plan would be to train missions to “leap frog” — planning a new parish with the goal of that mission spinning off another mission at a targeted time.

**Demographics.** A vital aspect of the planning to grow the Church would be effective targeting of areas that might be ripe for mission planting. For example, a growing town in the “sun belt” with no Orthodox parish within 100 miles may be a better mission target than a city in the “rust belt” that has ten other parishes in a 50-mile radius.

**Money.** Funding will be necessary for church planting grants. It might be necessary to develop a way to pay for clergy to serve in small missions without secular employment to allow for maximum effort at growth. A centralized “clearing house” to provide vestments and liturgical appointments would be an incentive to small, new parishes.

**Clergy.** We must discover a way to attract candidates to seminary studies with the goal of becoming missionaries. Education costs and salary supplements would be provided with a service commitment of a determined length expected in return. An innovative approach to attracting older men to the

priesthood (perhaps “young retirees” who can have another vocation later in life) should be considered.

**Innovation.** Growth needs innovative programs such as “sister parishes,” with established parishes “adopting” missions to help provide for their growth. A program for young mission clergy, being mentored by older, experienced, maybe even “ex-mission,” clergy would also be effective. Missionary deaneries (already existing in some places) within geographical dioceses, but crossing geographic deaneries, allow mission parishes to gather and discuss common goals and challenges.

## Having the Right Vision

*“And they continued steadfastly in the Apostle’s teaching . . .”*

People are looking for answers. The Orthodox Church has the answers to the most important questions people are asking in this hemisphere in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We do not have these answers because we are so intelligent, well educated, or gifted. We have answers because the Holy Spirit has entrusted us with the teaching of the Holy Apostles, as taught to them by our Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, unworthy though we be. As recipients of this written and oral Apostolic teaching, we have the opportunity to be witnesses of the power and love of God in ways beyond compare. Ours is an awesome responsibility. To whom much is given, much will be required.

Therefore, every priest is a “missionary,” and every local parish is a “mission outpost.” Everything we do in the parish must reflect this missionary mandate entrusted to us. A church that is not missionary, i.e., not actively continuing in the Apostles’ teaching and sharing the good news with others, is choosing to die. It might be a slow death, but death is inevitable as soon as the choice is made. Better to control the damage and close a parish that will not repent before people curse God because of the way we live; a little leaven spreads to the whole. Churches that claim to be Orthodox while disregarding apostolic teaching in this way inflict great harm on those walking through the doors.

The first casualties, however, are not our guests or visitors, but our own children. We are perpetually one generation away from either syncretism or irrelevance in each local parish. There really is no such thing as a “cradle” Orthodox Christian. Every genuine Christian is a “convert;” after all, we are all in the process of being “converted.” But what does this look like?

***“And they continued steadfastly in the Apostle’s teaching and fellowship...”***

People look for answers through relationships—but relationships are constantly manifesting the wounds of sin, death, and the devil. Relationships are broken. The word from the scripture verse above is perhaps better translated as *communion* rather than fellowship. We were created for intimate communion with God but this communion has been broken. Because it is broken, every relationship we could possibly experience and enjoy with other persons and even with all creation is broken. Anthropologically speaking, this brokenness is a “cultural universal,” observable in every group of people around the world.

The local parish is commissioned to be a place where these relationships are being healed. This is what “repentance” looks like. That is what we do. This is the fruit of the apostle’s teaching. This is the missionary task. This is the good news of the Gospel (Mt 3.2). Anything that is not related to this mandate will hinder the growth of a parish. But how do we become a place where this happens?

***“And they continued steadfastly in the Apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...”***

The Holy Mysteries reveal what is eternally Real and True. They are given to us so that we might participate in them and enter more fully into the Reality they manifest. The gathering (*synaxis*) of people who are being healed through true communication with God and each other (*the prayers*), and the climax of communion restored (*the breaking of the bread* – i.e., the eucharist) are the means and the manifestation of the healing of broken fellowship.

The love of God is what makes these events possible—the eucharist is the greatest act of love imaginable. Only as we are transfigured by receiving and abiding in His love are we able to genuinely love others. Then we are creatively empowered to discern what God’s love looks like to the people God has called us to serve. According to our Lord’s parable, we need look no further than our neighbor. For the parish, that begins with the local neighborhood. If that neighborhood has changed over the years, then the acts of love must change. This is the model and power of the Incarnation, as revealed to us by the Father, through the life of His Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Love is always about the other. What does love look like to the households surrounding our temple? What does love require of us on behalf of our town, or of this part of our city? What does love look like in our

narthex, nave, parish hall, and parish council meetings? What does this love look like in our seminaries for the students and families God has called us to serve? It is not possible to overestimate the influence and power of a group of Orthodox Christians who are genuinely learning to love God, each other, and their neighbors. What must happen in the life of the average North American Orthodox believer to make such a “transfiguration” possible?

***“And fear came upon every soul; and many signs and wonders were done through the Apostles.”***

From the beginning of a person’s spiritual formation in the Church, he or she is described as “one who is learning to listen and to hear” (the literal meaning of the word *catechumen*). The willingness to listen and hear indicates one’s willingness to change. If one is willing to change, the possibilities are endless. This is what was transpiring in the Book of Acts within the context of the scripture above. People were willing to change, and they were being changed in dramatic ways, so dramatic that the changes were described as “signs and wonders.” “It is time for the Lord to act,” the deacon says before each Liturgy. What do we expect Him to do?

When the Gospel is communicated effectively, it will be good news for each generation and every culture. For example, catechism (along with all forms of Christian education) was never meant to be a classroom where students merely change outward behaviors or beliefs. Catechism is a place where a person’s worldview is transformed. Worldview is at the heart of how a person perceives everyone and everything. Worldview is the lens through which one perceives reality, determining the answer to the question, “What is real?” A person’s worldview goes on to shape values and beliefs and answers the question, “Based on what is real, what is true?” Finally, values and beliefs dictate behaviors, i.e., “Based on what is real and what is true, what should I do?”

While formal catechism eventually comes to an end, fostering the attitude of a catechumen should last a lifetime, for on this side of eternity everyone is a catechumen. We are all learning to listen and to hear. Our desire to change, to repent, to be healed can grow over time, and even through generations. This has long been a hallmark of Orthodox families who give to their children a deep and abiding love for God, and not merely an addiction to religion.



Catechism is only one example. Every activity in the church can contribute to a gradual transfiguration of one's worldview. Every function is a revelation either of the Kingdom of God which has come, or the kingdom of this world. So, how do we change worldview?

***“And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.”***

It is possible to force a person to change behavior without changing underlying beliefs, values, and worldview. History is filled with coerced conversions in the name of politics and religion. However, it is not possible to change someone's worldview without eventually affecting his or her values, beliefs and behavior. A genuine encounter with the living God will change one's worldview, and such a genuine encounter happens most often through relationships with other people who have themselves had such an encounter. “Ye shall be my witnesses.” This is what was being manifested in Acts. Worldviews were changing, and values, beliefs and behaviors were radically changed as well. The greatest “miracle” is the transfiguration of a person's perception of Reality (worldview) and the impact this has upon every part of his or her life. “See how they love one another!”

***“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.”***

This is what love looked like in the life of the early Church. The fellowship of the Apostles and early Christians was the catalyst for the growth of the Church. Relationships that were in various stages of healing were a powerful testimony of the power and love of God. If we accept the worldview of our creed and attempt to live it, communion (fellowship) will be manifested, and though it is manifested in “vessels of clay,” we will effectively communicate the Gospel as the greatest news ever heard in our respective countries.

***“And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”***

This is what happens when we answer the questions people are asking. In a general way of speaking, this is what love looks like, and the world will take notice of the Orthodox Church as we abide in the love of God and love each other. Every parish can provide opportunities for continuing Orthodox Christian education, for everyone from

grandparents to toddlers, from guests and seekers to the most mature of the faithful. These opportunities (e.g., church/Sunday school, Bible study, fellowship/discussion groups, seekers seminars, catechism) are all “ports of entry” into life in the Body of Christ through the local parish, if they provide answers to the most important questions people are asking in the twenty-first century, such questions as: What is real? What is true? Who am I? Who is God? Can broken relationships be healed? Such small group meetings become opportunities for spiritual formation, where lives are transfigured by the good news of who God is and who they were created to be.

Many people in America are not rejecting God. They are rejecting a false view of God and of His creation. We stand at the threshold of one of those wonderful moments in the flow of history, when we have answers to questions people are asking. But we must have eyes to see and ears to hear. We ourselves must be willing to change.

In the first days of the birth of our parish as a mission of the Orthodox Church in America, a wise mentoring priest told us, “You must always remember, everyone who walks through the door of your church is a gift to you for your salvation.” Those few words, repeated time and time again, have had a great impact on our local parish. As local parishes become places where relationships are healed and fellowship restored, the problem will no longer be developing the best resuscitation methods to use on a dying parish but dealing with the challenges arising from rapid growth.

While each example of a local parish endeavoring to express love in ways that make sense will inspire and influence other parishes, the methods and means each church employs will be as unique and unrepeatable as the unique and unrepeatable persons involved. The living tradition of the Church provides many examples, canons, purposes and goals, but each local parish will demonstrate what love looks like in its particular context. Case studies will be endless. **O Lord of the Harvest, send forth laborers, for the fields are white unto harvest**

**Having read the section on Evangelizing North America, what do you think is the major priority for the Orthodox Church in America in the next 10 years in this area?**

