



Parish Pulse

A Newsletter for Parish Leaders

Diocese of the Midwest,
Orthodox Church in America

March 2009; 2009 #2

Some Past Parish Health Ministry Articles

- [1. Parish Financial Audit Guidelines](#)
- [2. Best Practice Principles and Policies for Parish Financial Accountability](#)
- [3. Clergy Compensation Policy](#)
- [4. Workshops & retreats available through the Parish Health Ministry](#)
- [5. How Do Visitors Experience Your Parish -- Mystery Worshipers Provide Unvarnished Feedback](#)
- [6. Toward better Parish Websites](#)
- [7. Improving parish bulletin content](#)
- [9. Photographing Your parish Attitudes that Enable parishes to grow](#)
- [10. Growth and decline in our parish - taking action](#)
- [11. Reorganizing Parish ministries](#)
- [12. Areas of diversity among growing parishes](#)
- [13. Areas of commonality among growing parishes](#)

Videos & Powerpoint Presentations

- [1. Orthodox Evangelization Intro to Orthodoxy - A Three Part Inquirers Class \(Powerpoint\)](#)
- [2. The parish Video -Life and Vocation of an Orthodox Parish in America](#)
- [3. Father Arseny Society Video](#)
- [4. The Saturday Lunch Progra](#)

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory Forever!

Greetings,
Welcome to the March 2009 issue of Parish Pulse.

In this issue we cover:

- Upcoming Events
- Dayton Choir Workshop
- Summary of Jan 09 Diocesan Council, Bishop's Council and Mission Development Committee meetings
- Webinar series to begin
- Parish health grants to continue in '09
- Key points from of recent survey of Orthodox converts
- Lessons: Permission can be empowering
- Urban conference in planning stage
- Mission parish needs
- Diocesan representation at Sophia Institute conference

Please share this publication with your parishioners and encourage them to subscribe. Better yet send lists of names and e-addresses to us.

Since this is our first issue since Forgiveness Sunday we ask your forgiveness for any offenses we may have committed in the past year. We wish you a quiet and productive Great Fast.

Joseph Kormos
Parish Health Facilitator
Diocese of the Midwest

Upcoming Events

Kansas City and Chicago Deaneries Announces Schedule of Lenten Vespers

[Click here](#) for the schedule of Sunday night Pan Orthodox Lenten Vespers to be held among Orthodox parishes in Kansas City. Click [here](#) for the Chicago deanery schedule.

Ss Peter and Paul Church in Lorain OH to hold Lenten Retreat March 7

Fr Constantine Nasr, pastor of St Elijah Orthodox Church in Oklahoma City will lead a retreat entitled "Fighting the Good Fight" and "The Mission of Orthodoxy" at Ss Peter and Paul Orthodox Church in Lorain OH. [More info](#)

Archangel Michael Orthodox Church Broadview Hts OH -- Lenten Retreat

Fr Thomas Soroka, pastor of St Nicholas Orthodox Church McKees Rocks PA will lead a lenten retreat at Archangel Michael Orthodox Church. His topics are "Called to Be Servant Leaders" & "An Orthodox Perspective on Suffering". Click [here](#) for more info.

Parish Health Workshop -- St Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Basilica, Livonia MI, March 14

A parish health workshop, similar to one delivered in the Detroit area in October 08 will be held at [St. Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Basilica](#) on Saturday 14. The event is primarily focused as a training session for this church's parish council, however attendees from other Detroit area Orthodox communities are welcome. If you are interested contact [Joe Kormos](#).

Cleveland Deanery Youth Retreat 3/27-28/09

Lenten Retreat for Cleveland Deanery will be held on March 27-28 at Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Parma OH. Featured speakers will be Archbishop JOB and Fr. Deacon Joseph Matusiak. Info Ted Bellack 330-962-5001.

FOCA Arts Contest Deadline March 23 2009

The deadline for the FOCA 2009 Arts Contest is March 23. This year's theme is "Through Christ's Eyes" [More info](#).

Dayton Liturgical Music Workshop Draws Large Crowd

On Saturday February 21 choir directors and singers from parishes in the Columbus deanery gathered at St. Paul Church in Dayton OH to participate in a liturgical music workshop led by David Drillock retired professor from St. Vladimir's Seminary. In addition to learning new music, attendees left with an understanding of:

- The proper role of music in Orthodox liturgical worship
- The role of choirs, chanters, readers and congregational responses in Orthodox worship.

- How to enhance the meaning, understanding, flow and pulse of the liturgy while engaging the entire gathering in joyful worship.
- Technical and execution tips and practices for proper liturgical singing.



Prof David Drillock

Deanery Parishes Multiplying

The workshop was important for its content. But observers also noted that 30 years ago this region's OCA presence consisted of one tiny mission and one heritage parish whose entire membership likely numbered fewer than 25 persons. Now this deanery includes eight parishes and two missions and the Deanery choir workshop attracted over sixty joyous attendees on a snowy day in February. Slow growth to be sure but growth --good growth -- nonetheless.



First choir to watch director!

But Can They Sing?

[Click here](#) for a video of the group's rendition of Rachmaninov's Rejoice O Virgin Theotokos. Not perfect. Also not bad for only about 25 minutes of learning/rehearsal. And another strange thing -- these singers (see photo above) appear to be actually watching the Director! (*Is that proper? Why were we not informed?*)

If improving liturgical music and worship is a priority of your parish or deanery [contact the Parish Health Ministry](#) to explore bringing a similar workshop to your area.

Diocesan Meetings Yield Important Decisions

Strategic Plan; Encourage Parish Health Inventory, Merge Mission & Parish Ministries

During the period from Monday January 26 and Wednesday January 28 important meetings of

the Diocesan Council, Bishop's Council and Mission Development Committee were held.

Diocesan Council Initiates Strategic Planning Effort

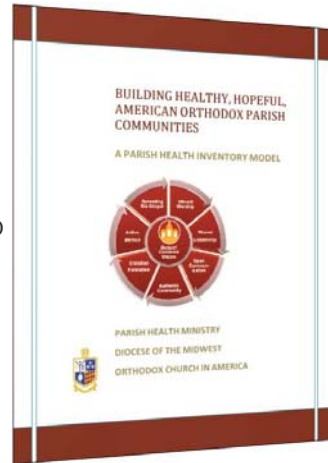
In response to discussions held at the 2008 Diocesan Assembly, the Diocesan Council, meeting on January 28, developed plans for crafting a strategic plan for the Diocese. This plan will hopefully dovetail with the OCA's Strategic Planning effort and will hopefully enable the Diocese to productively *contribute* to the OCA planning effort and to *align* the Diocese' vision with the emerging OCA plan. Such a plan will also provide a foundation which can help to prepare for an effective and smooth transition to a new Diocesan Hierarchy after the announced retirement of Archbishop JOB on or about 2011.

Input will be collected from Diocesan and Bishop's Council members prior to their meetings in May 09. Substantial portions of the May meeting for these bodies will be dedicated to the vision and planning topic. Based on the results of these discussions, subgroups may be commissioned to explore key issues and efforts will be undertaken to engage deaneries as well.

The rough target is to be able to present "important progress" on this effort at the October 2009 Diocesan Assembly.

Endorsement of Parish Health Inventory

The Bishop's Council, an advisory group to the Archbishop, made up of the six District Deans, considered, among other matters, the recently completed [Parish Health Inventory Model](#) which was a product of last summer's [Parish Health Summit](#) held in Wheaton IL. The Council enthusiastically recommended the model's use by parishes throughout the Diocese.



In concurrence with these discussions Archbishop JOB strongly encourages each parish to review its life in the context of the eight focus areas presented in the model and to use the model to identify one or two key priorities and action areas as the focus for renewal efforts for 2009 and beyond. The inventory document is [available online](#). Hard copies are being mailed to each parish.

Merge Parish and Mission Development Efforts

The Diocesan Council endorsed a recommendation from the Diocese' Mission Development committee to merge the Mission and Parish Development/Health efforts of the Diocese into one cohesive unit. Fr. Thomas Mueller, dean of Chicago Deanery, will become the coordinator for all diocesan mission activity and will chair a reconstituted Parish AND Mission Development Committee which will provide advisory assistance to the Parish Health Ministry.

This decision provides the budget to enable the Diocese to continue to fund important projects and efforts that benefit a broad cross section of the Diocese' missions AND parishes.

Some key efforts that are now in various stages of planning are:

Mission Parish Needs

Semiannual progress reports submitted by Diocesan Mission communities provided an updated view of various needs of mission communities for liturgical items.

- Stephen's Mission, Lima OH needs blue, green priests vestments
- All Saints Mission, Delaware County OH needs Altar boy robes and priest's vestments
- St. Raphael of Brooklyn Quincy IL needs a set of candlesticks for altar servers, baptismal font, artophorion, and a litiya set

Can your parish help out? You contact these missions from [this page](#) or contact [Fr. Thomas Mueller](#), Director of Missions.

- Continuation of parish health grants (see next article)
- A series of webinars focused on training and skill development for parish leaders (see related article)
- A Parish Life Conference, whose theme would focus on the unique issues and challenges facing Orthodox Urban parishes, is in early planning stages for the second week of July 2009 in Cleveland OH. The conference may also offer a set of topical/subject matter seminars in the areas of liturgical music, Deaconal training, church school teacher development and/or laity giftedness evaluation. (more below)

A bit more info can be found [here](#).

Webinar Series To Begin

Fr. Gregory Jensen to Kick Off Pilot Project

Combining the Diocese' mission and parish development efforts frees up budget to allow us to try out a tool called "webinars" as a way to deliver serious training and lecture style content to parishes leaders.

In the coming months we will pilot this internet based tool by offering at least three webinars. These sessions will be free of charge and last approximately 60 minutes.

Here is our opening lineup:

Webinar 1 Tuesday March 17 at 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM CST Fr Gregory Jensen

The Psychology of Leadership I: Looking at the Research

Fr. Gregory Jensen will deliver the first of two webinars dealing with the Psychology of leadership. Participants will be introduced to the current social psychological research on leadership and followership. Leadership traits necessary in modern Orthodox parishes will be explored.

Two dysfunctional approaches to leadership -- *collusion* and *competition* will be explored.

The learning objectives for these sessions are as follows:

1. Participants will have a better understanding of the different facets of lay and clerical parish leadership.
2. Participants will come to understand why effective leadership within the parish must take into account the role of the parish in the deanery, the diocese and the national Church.
3. While not directly concerned with outreach and evangelism, religious education, the philanthropic ministry of the parish, or stewardship, this webinar offers the parish a more effective, empirically based, foundation for the planning and implementation of these and other critical parish ministries and programs.

For more information [click here](#). To register [click here](#)



Fr. Gregory Jensen

Webinar 2 Tuesday March 31 2:00 -3:00 PM CST* Fr Gregory Jensen
The Psychology of Leadership II: Applying the Research to the Parish.

Fr Jensen will return to "webinarland" to look at how we can foster styles of leadership that are strength based. He will explore an approach to parish leadership that values collaboration/cooperation between clergy and the laity.

More info [click here](#). To register [click here](#).

Webinar 3 Tuesday April 28 2:00 -3:00 PM CST* Fr Basil Aden
Recent Changes in the American Religious Landscape

Fr. Basil Aden, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Illinois' Rock Valley College, will explore the implications of the recent PEW Study of religion as well as a companion study from Baylor University to offer insights.

More info will be available soon.

Key Info On "Webinars" -- Available Live or Recorded

Webinars can be accessed live. Visual aids are "pushed" directly to the attendee's computer screen and audio available over the internet or via telephone. (For phone access, long distance charges will be the responsibility of the attendee)When tuning in to live broadcasts attendees can ask questions via instant messages and can participate in instant polls and surveys.

Webinars will also be recorded and posted on the web so that attendees can go back to review content or persons unavailable at the time of the live event can listen to the presentation and the questions.

* Starting times for these webinars are tentative. We will experiment as to what times are best for various audiences.

Parish Health Grants to Continue in 2009

Application Deadline July 15 2009

Does your parish have a good idea for a new ministry effort you would like to try -- but just cant' scrape together the funds to do so? Do you have an important project that can help strengthen your parish --while providing insight and tools to others parishes?

Merging the Diocese' Parish and Mission development efforts enables the Diocese to continue to offer the highly popular Parish Health Grants in 2009. These grants could make your project a reality.

The [Parish Health Grant activity](#) was begun on a pilot basis in 2008 using funds solicited from private donors and two diocesan parishes. Six grants were awarded for worthy projects undertaken in parishes in Kenosha WI, Chisago Lakes MN, Quincy IL, Albion MI, Milwaukee WI and Rochester MI. [Click here](#) for info



**Parish Health
Grant
Application**



on 2008 Parish Health Grant Projects.

Inspired by the mission grants provided annually to support the *day to day operation of missions* in early stages of existence, Parish Health Grants are:

- Smaller \$ amounts - under \$3000
- Available to missions or parishes
- Designed to provide stimulus to *begin* specific new ministries or *further strengthen* existing parish ministries.
- Involve specific effort -- by the parish and its members- tied to the grant proposal. These are not handouts. PH Grants involve work.

To receive an award parishes need to submit an application, which can found [here](#) prior to July 15, 2009. The decision on which communities will be awarded grants will be made by a committee appointed by Archbishop JOB.

It is anticipated that approximately five grants will be awarded to parishes who submit worthy applications. Judging criteria include probable impact of the grant on the parish, breadth of Involvement, probability of effective execution, parish need and the ability to transfer results and insights to other parishes.

Additional background can be obtained from [this document](#).

If you have further questions or need suggestions on potential grants topics [contact Joe Kormos](#).



Milwaukee Liturgical arts workshop was funded by Parish Health Grant



A Parish health grant enabled the Chisago Lakes MN mission to present themselves to the community.

Communicating the Orthodox Faith to Visitors

Rochester MI Grant Team Picks Up Momentum

What is an example of a good Parish Health grant topic?

St Mark Church in Rochester MI received a grant to address the need for a prepared congregation to better receive non-Orthodox persons into its midst. Specifically the grant team is attempting to understand the obstacles these persons find as they confront Orthodoxy and to compassionately and effectively "undergird these Seekers as they enter our midst."

These issues can be both doctrinal and communal -- how to accept new people and assimilate them into the parish community.

Thus far the grant team has:

- Designed and undertaken a broad survey of Orthodox converts to understand their experiences and what they found attractive and difficult in their journey to the Orthodox faith.
- Surveyed internal members of their parish as to what areas and aspects of the Orthodox faith they find *least prepared* to explain and discuss with inquirers.



Next steps are to:

- Digest the results of these surveys
- Build a set of training classes that help parishioners to become better prepared for visitors and serious inquirers.
- "Pilot" the use of these materials to actually deliver classes to parishioners
- Share what they have learned with other parishes in the Diocese.

Watch this space! The team expects to complete their work by the end of May.

Survey of Orthodox Converts

Learning Tidbits

A large number of you (194 to be exact) contributed to the "convert" survey referenced above as part of the St. Mark's parish grant. We want to share with you some tidbits from the results of the survey. (The St Mark's team will share a broader summary in late May.)

Church or Cultural Center?

In a previous *Parish Pulse* we shared some results from the question "What aspects of the Orthodox faith were attractive or difficult for you?" The only survey answer that showed a preponderance of respondents who classified it as "difficult" was "the ethnic features of the church culture." About sixty percent more respondents found this difficult than attractive.

This seems to us to speak for itself. Not all persons are attracted to ethnic, food, dolls, hats, recipes, language, assumptions and dancing. (Huh? Who knew?) Many eventually embrace and truly enjoy these aspects of Orthodox communities. But that is not usually a starting point.

*** The ethnic features of the church culture.**

Answer	0%	100%	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Attractive			37	22.4%
Neutral			67	40.6%
Difficult			61	36.9%
No Response(s)			0	0.0%
Totals			165	100%

Who is Entering the Orthodox Faith in America- Education Level?

Another tidbit that we found interesting in the survey response data is the background of people who are finding and embracing the Orthodox faith.

One question asked about the education level of respondents at the time they began to explore the Orthodox faith. Assuming that the survey sample is an accurate representation of the the overall population of those entering the church after the cradle, people coming to Orthodoxy are highly educated --certainly much more than the typical population of the US.

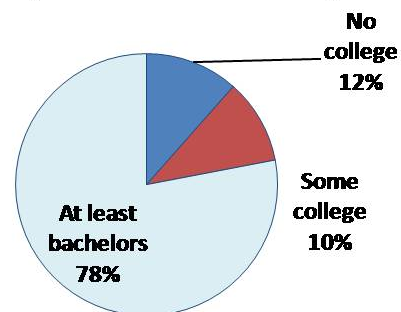


College Students are encountering the Orthodox faith.

The data required a bit of "interpretation" due to the open ended answers to the question, but we believe the following is an accurate portrayal:

- *No College* - At the time of "the start of exploration" 12% of respondents had not (yet) gone to college. Some were in high school. Probably most have subsequently completed high school but such data is not available.
- *Some College* - 10% of converts were in college or had some college and had not yet completed a bachelors degree when they first seriously began to explore the Orthodox faith. Some, presumably many, subsequently completed a degree and no doubt some did not.
- *At least a Bachelors Degree* - 78% of respondents had already completed a bachelors degree. (We counted open ended answers like "16 yrs of education" and "four years of college" in this category.) Many, many respondents indicated they had advance degrees at the time of beginning their Orthodox journey.

Respondent Education Levels at Time They Encountered Orthodoxy



Discussion Questions:

- What aspects of this data do you find

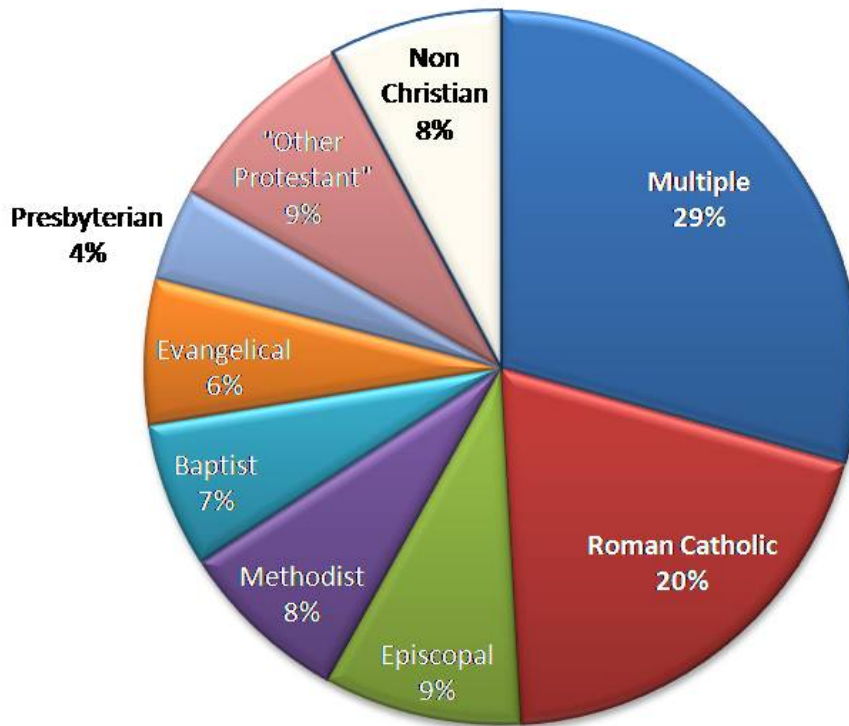
- encouraging?
- What aspects may be troubling?
- What challenges does this create for parishes?

Former Religious Affiliation

Another question asked was what previous religious affiliations survey respondents had or have. (About 10% of respondents have not yet become Orthodox.)

- Non-Christian - Only 8% were/are non-Christian (Jewish, agnostic, etc.)
- Of the 92% that came from at least a nominally Christian background (some indicated they were hardly practicing their faith):
 - 43% had Protestant backgrounds. The largest sub group was Episcopalian which comprised 21% of those with Protestant backgrounds.(9% of the total)
 - 20% had Roman Catholic backgrounds
 - A large portion (29%) had *multiple Christian backgrounds*. Some were entirely from Protestant traditions. Others were formerly Protestant *and* Roman Catholic. Sometimes multiple times.

Previous Religious Backgrounds of Respondents



As the St. Mark's team continues their effort perhaps they will discover other useful insights.

Lessons: Permission Can Be Empowering Core Group Projects Put Parishes in Motion

We feel compelled to share a few recent encouraging conversations and experiences.

1. Grant team leader Edith Marshall Roberts of St Mark's church shared with us recently that the St Mark's team is now meeting *weekly* to move their project forward. "One of the really great things about this effort has been the enthusiasm and commitment that has developed among our team. We've planned this project and it was our idea. Our discussions are enjoyable and stimulating and our team really feels like we're doing something important -- not only for our parish but hopefully we're doing something that can be valuable for other parishes as well. And, our group's interest is beginning to be felt by the rest of our parish," said Edith.

2. In another parish the rector blessed a book discussion on a book outside the normal realm of Orthodox study. "I was amazed and pleased. Normally it is difficult to get people to attend our education sessions. In this case they all decided to meet regularly on Saturday AM. I'd have never expected it --but attendance has been good. They made time for it. Our discussions are very engaging and useful." said the pastor. A priest in Connecticut channeled similar

parishioner energy, on the same book, in the same empowering manner -- and got the same results.

3. In a third parish a "Church Health Team" formed to bring renewal to a contracting parish that had lost some of its zeal and "saltiness". The parish community was virtually unaware of team's existence -- or the important challenges confronting the parish that caused the team to be formed years earlier. With prodding the group came to a renewed understanding of its important role in bringing momentum and fresh approaches to the parish. This core group planned a Saturday workshop for parish leaders and over 25 people attended the day long session. Using the Diocese' Parish Health Inventory Model to structure the day's discussions, leaders agreed on Gospel Centered Vision and Christian Formation as areas of focus for the next year. The workshop's decisions led to important proposals and decisions at the annual parish meeting -- significant decisions that were made *openly, intelligently and maturely*. New projects and initiatives are now scheduled and parishioners of all ages are being nudged into a palpable feeling of momentum and renewal. The "health team" feels valued and is brimming with energy and enthusiasm.



4. A parish council at another parish recently held a similar Saturday workshop. They used the workshop to put a period of parishioner losses and overall decline behind them. Instead, they spent part of the day outlining a healthy new structure for ministries for the parish as it exists and as it can become in the future. Other groups worked on defining efforts that could build community and formation. Nobody knows what the future will hold but the group left with a feeling of hope and vision of vibrancy.

So -- What's Going On Here? How Are These Related? What Can Be Learned?

Drawing conclusions from a limited set of anecdotal situations can be dangerous -- but here are the relationships and themes we see in the above stories.

Ruts are Bad

OK, you knew that! (But we needed a good way to create relevance for the great photo at right. Any conceptual resemblance to your parish?) Perhaps we can try a new path on occasion.



Stuck in a rut? Let's try a new path on occasion

Getting out the rut is hard. For suggestions read on.

Permission

Many clergy are realizing the amazing power of trust. By giving people *permission* they often --not always -- respond by undertaking important, valuable efforts that fit their hopes dreams and concerns for their church. They find the things for which they have gifts and talents. They begin to work on tasks that they feel called to do. And the outcomes are often



infectious. Try to say (or imply) "No" less often. Instead work on "Sure, let's try it".

Core Groups

Small groups can be potent hotbeds of fertile ideas for strengthening parishes. It takes time for such groups to blossom but when they do they often form a core for changing and strengthening an important dimension of parish life. People are learning to talk to one another about Christ and building his church --and many of those conversations are happening in small groups. Find ways to stimulate formation of small groups. Give guidance, assistance and boundaries. But mostly offer encouragement and when necessary be prepared to *get out of the way*.

Tasks and Projects

Ongoing ministries are important but can often become stale and tired. Find groups that are willing to tackle a "project". Find something that won't continue indefinitely but instead has a clear end point and a "product". Such products can be an event such as a retreat, a class, a video or a document or a major revision to an existing ministry etc. One parish is exploring a major renovation to its youth activities to find ways to strengthen how the youth program helps generate well formed Orthodox Christians -- while also having fun and creating friendships. Once the renovation is complete the team can disband. Or, find a new project!



Structure and Process

Too much structure and process can impede progress, but we find that the preponderance of anecdotal evidence indicates that structured approaches help groups to coalesce on something significant. In the above cases either a book, the expectations and planning associated with grant funding or the framework of the Parish Health Inventory Model all helped focus the work of core groups on something stimulating.

From Few -- to Many

Sometimes the product of a core group can be a ministry carried out by that group in relative isolation from the remainder of the parish. In other cases however, approaches need to be found for the work of the small group to touch the entire parish. Various tools can be used to propel these efforts into the parish's consciousness. One team used a parish wide survey to gather insight for an education program -- as well as to raise interest in their effort. In other cases presentations and discussions and concrete proposals enabled to the parish annual meeting to offer its "Amen!" to the work of the team. Other obvious approaches involve newsletter articles and coffee hour presentations.



Parish group explores ideas and suggestions.

Orthodox Christians Love Their Parish

Its true. As we work with parishes we *consistently* notice that most people seem to love their parish. Yes, sometimes it can be too much or misplaced. This can lead us to a sense of insularity or even entitlement. It can lead to competitiveness vs. other communities or a lack of connectedness with others. We may love the building more than the people. This focus may set up "the parish" as the object of our love --rather than God.

Nonetheless our church is where we worship and where we --hopefully-- learn to "love one another". A first step on the path to building a love of God can be to harness and channel parishioners' energy to make their church community *a good place*.

As we travel around our Diocese we notice *that as parishes find ways to engage laity on a project that is valuable, important and interesting to them -- good things start to happen*. Energy builds and this energy can become infectious for the whole community's life in Christ.

Urban Parish Conference --and More

Watch This Space!

Last summer's highly successful [Parish Health Summit](#) has given rise to ideas of offering similar 1-2 day summer sessions on topics of importance to significant subsets of Diocesan parishes. Once again combining our Diocese' mission and parish efforts provides necessary budget to pursue this idea -- and to offer travel grants to enable participation by clergy and laity from deserving, financially strapped parishes.



The image of Lazarus at their door step encouraged this parish to connect with their neighbors.

The Needs of Urban Parishes

Twenty -five to thirty percent of parishes in our diocese can be classified as urban or semi-urban. These parishes face most of the same challenges as other parishes but also encounter unique opportunities and challenges not faced by rural and suburban parishes.

Cleveland OH Chosen as Tentative Site

Currently we are working on defining a conference that focuses on these unique challenges. We have *tentatively* (as in *not final!*) selected the site as St. Theodosius Cathedral in Cleveland OH. A very loose target schedule of sometime in latter half of the week of July 6, 2009 is being explored.

Those persons interested in contributing ideas, issues or content to this event can [contact Anne Marie Mecera](#) of the Diocesan Council and St Gregory of Nyssa parish or [Joe Kormos](#).



Potential Concurrent or Sequential Satellite Conferences?

In addition we are also exploring satellite conferences or seminars on other topics important to building vibrant Orthodox parishes. These may occur concurrently with the Urban parish event or sequentially. One of the topics likely to be chosen is Liturgical Music. Those interested in contributing ideas of content to this potential session are asked to contact [Michael Pilat](#), choirmaster at Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Parma OH or (by now you've guessed it!) your [parish health facilitator](#). You can contact the latter if you have thoughts about church school teachers retreats, Deaconal training, or other topics of value.

Diocese Represented at First Annual Sophia Institute Conference

Union Theological Seminary, New York City was the site for the first annual Sophia Institute One Day Academic Conference held December 5, 2008. The conference title was "Women in the Orthodox Church: Past Roles-Future Paradigms."

Diocesan Seminarian Juliana Mecera-a student at St. Vladimir's Seminary-as well as her mother Ann Marie Gidus-Mecera, Diocesan Council member, presented short papers that expressed their shared passion for utilizing women's God-given gifts for the good of the Church and its people.

Keynote speakers included Orthodox scholars Prof. Valentina Izmirlieva, Fevronia Soumakis, Teva Regule, and Stamenka Antonova. Conference host and Director of the Sophia Institute is the V. Rev. Dr. John McGuckin, Nielsen Professor in Late Antique and Byzantine Christian History at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Byzantine Christian Studies, Columbia University.

A common theme that recurred throughout the conference was evidence that women played a significant role in the early church, with the deaconess being ordained at the altar, serving in a liturgical capacity, and ministering to women and children.

Juliana presented a reflection of her experiences of growing up in the Orthodox Church and studying at St. Vladimir's Seminary. She spoke enthusiastically of parish life in which she had been highly active and in which many women had served as mentors to her. "I have realized what effective ministers of the Gospel these many women are." She acknowledged that seeking ways to continue serving the larger Orthodox Church in America seems to require great creativity as a woman. "Additionally, my interaction with ordained women and those on the path to ordination in other traditions has encouraged me to take my responsibility as a leader in the Church more seriously... and has encouraged me to be more faithful." Juliana will continue further graduate studies in theology to pursue doctoral work in systematic theology.

Ann Marie presented a condensed version of a paper she originally presented at a University of Leeds conference in England entitled "Women as Lay Ministers in the Orthodox Church," which explored numerous instances in which women could minister in an official capacity to women, children and converts in the contemporary church. "The Orthodox Church and its faithful sadly suffer in many ways by not utilizing the gifts and talents of women," Mrs. Mecera points out. "We have graduated bright, dedicated women from our seminaries who disappear into a non-related vocation because their talents and gifts are not used in the Church. Imagine the pool of talent that could immediately be available!" Ann Marie sums up her observations by saying, "Without the role of the deaconess, Orthodox Christians fail to experience the fullness of the Faith as Christ intended."

Reflecting on the first annual conference theme, the V. Rev. Dr John McGuckin commented, "The Conference initiating the work of the new International Orthodox Sophia Institute, revolving around the theme of women's social and spiritual ministry in the Orthodox Church, was a great success, and demonstrated quite clearly the immense spiritual gifts that Orthodox women have to offer in the mission of the church today, not merely in the past."

According to Fr. McGuckin, next year's conference will be "a study of Orthodox Philanthropy past and present- our collective work continuing to ask the 'connecting' questions between

the Church's historical and theological tradition, and the lived-out praxis of its role in the contemporary world."

The Sophia Institute is an Advanced Research Institute and Philanthropic Foundation that focuses on the historical culture and ethical outreach of Orthodox Christianity. It is an independent foundation that functions in association with a number of university partners and collaborators, notably: The Harriman Institute (Columbia University), The Center for Early Christian Studies (Catholic University of Australia), The School of Early Christian and Eastern-Christian Affairs (Louvain University), The Institute of Ecumenical Studies (Lviv University, Ukraine), and The School of Global Ethics, Leeds Metropolitan University. The primary goals of the Sophia Institute are to encourage the study of the Eastern Christian Tradition - its history, thought, liturgical and spiritual cultures, as well as issues concerned with its ecumenical and socio-ethical engagement with the contemporary world.

Thank you for reading these newsletters and for your feedback and encouragement.

In Christ,
[Joe Kormos](#)
Parish Health Facilitator
Diocese of Midwest
513.683.1911

