

## Orthodox Church in America Great Conversation in preparation for the 2025 OCA AAC

### Section 1

#### DEFINING OUR MOMENT

His Beatitude spoke of our time being a moment in the life of the Church. What is this moment like for you?

It is a challenging time. We live in an increasingly polarized world, and we no longer live in a time when one can assume basic Biblical literacy or some basic understanding of the tenets of Christianity in our society. It takes an enormous amount of time and energy to keep everyone we are working with "on the same page," as one can no longer assume anything approaching a common understanding or mindset. Indeed, even within the parish, a lot of time is spent on remediation—correcting misapprehensions and false understandings.

Maybe, in a sense, this is nothing new—we have always had to educate. However, what does feel new is having adults come to join us who are completely un-Churched, having no literacy at all when it comes to basic Biblical and Christian teachings and principles. However, viewed from a slightly different angle, this situation maybe in some ways advantageous, as it allows newcomers to come to the knowledge of the truth in Christ's Church as "a little child."

All that being said, we are energized by the gratitude and enthusiasm of so many newcomers.

Do His Beatitude's comments about the strong foundation we can now build upon resonate with you? Why or why not?

Yes, because the Lord instructed us that we must build our house on a strong foundation (Matthew 7:24-27). It is never an option to ignore the foundations of our faith. We must not build on "sand."

What has changed in the life of your community in the last few years? What has remained the same?

We are transitioning from being a legacy community, made up of the founders and their descendants, to being something quite different, a community built upon the personal commitment of people who have made their own serious commitment to be Orthodox Christians.

We are also in the process of consolidating with a neighboring parish—a challenging process that has been ongoing now for a number of years.

And, one specific initiative worthy of notice is that our parish sisterhood has been revitalized in a fresh new way after having all but ceased activities, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

However, all this has been and is built upon "the [unchanging] faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

Is your parish experiencing growth? Decline? Stability?

We are holding our own. Our numbers have declined by half over the last 25 years. But, the average member is, perhaps, more committed now as a person of faith. We no longer have many members whose connection is primarily ethnic or cultural.

We do worry about the fact that we, demographically, skew older, though we do have some younger people joining us. And, after many years without having any children in Church, we are blessed now with more children among us, even some newborns. Sadly, however, too few of the young people who grew up here over the last twenty-five years have remained observant Orthodox Christians as adults.

One advantage of having quite a few older members is that those among them who are active in retirement contribute in meaningful ways to parish life. Also, on account of their piety, we are better able to have weekday morning services, and do so much more regularly nowadays.

Have you discovered any expected or unexpected strengths in your parish life?

We have always endeavored to trust in our Lord's promise to the Apostle Paul as reflected in this passage from Holy Scripture: "...he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

The care our members have for others in our community and beyond is evidenced by how many people are on our parish prayer list, and by how the power of those prayers are valued by our parishioners.

Over the years we have come to understand that we can expect and rely upon the generosity of the faithful to support church activities and church needs, but more importantly to support others in time of need, especially financially.

We have, perhaps, not fully appreciated just how beneficial social activities, including something as seemingly routine as the Sunday Coffee Social Hour, are to the wellbeing of those who gather. Another example of this would be the "pop up" events sponsored by the parish sisterhood, which are social events, open to all members and friends of the parish, which build community and strengthen ties among all.

If you wish you knew about any potential pitfalls, struggles, or weaknesses your parish has experienced in the last few years, what would they be?

Perhaps, we should have been and still ought to be aware of the fact that, while the Internet has opened up many avenues for outreach and education, and, in many ways, is a great help, the Internet is also a deeply dangerous "den of iniquity." Strangely, while the parts of the Internet that are obviously sinful are dangerous, even more dangerous are the parts of the Internet that claim to be "Orthodox," but which are tragically skewed, and thus present distortions of the Faith that are damaging.

A factor we have always known about, but nevertheless should mention here, is just how challenging it is that our parishioners are spread across such a large geographical area. At the parish's founding over a century ago, the majority of parishioners lived close to the church, but now many have to travel a long way to be present.

Where do you think the Holy Spirit is calling your parish to be in the next five years?

To be faithful to the fullness of the call to discipleship, one day at a time. We have some sayings here: First, "Life is a mystery and we are not in heaven yet." Second, "Live one day at a time, from the perspective of eternity, and do not get caught in between." Third: "Acknowledge God's love. Receive God's love. Grow God's love. Share God's love."

## Section 2

### MISSION

What steps have you taken as a community to advance the Gospel in your area?

On a practical level, we maintain a simple, clear, very up-to-date website. We find that our website does not need to be cutting edge, but it must be current. In fact, the simpler the better.

Second, we try to be a healthy community (generous, kind, truthful, moral, ethical, accountable, humble, repentant, resilient, hopeful, etc.) within the walls of our own parish. The healthier we are spiritually, the better situated we are to meet the needs of others. We endeavor to make our love and care evident for one another in worship and fellowship, so that others might witness that love and care and want to participate in it.

We can also mention here that our online Bible Study has been opened up to, and has participants from, outside our parish, and, thus, serves to advance the Gospel more broadly.

What examples—from our saints, our holy Tradition, and beyond—have inspired your community's missionary outreach?

The example of Saint Herman of Alaska's steadfast faith. He shows us that the key to mission is personal faith and personal repentance. For much of his life, Saint Herman was prohibited and prevented, and even punished, for doing missionary work as he saw fit. Nevertheless, in the end, his manner of living came to speak loudly, and saved many. As Saint Seraphim of Sarov said, "Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved."

What forms of outreach have you used successfully, if any?

The most effective form of outreach has been an up-to-date website. Also, person-to-person contacts are effective, but, regrettably, rarer than we might like. Sometimes, we lack courage to invite people to Church. It is daunting, and we fear rejection. Notably, we have found that being a healthy, warm, drama-free community helps tremendously when people visit us, brought here, we hope, by God's grace. We try to be a place that is

welcoming in a low-key, low-pressure way. It is amazing how many people just want to be in a setting that isn't "stressed out."

Have you tried mission initiatives that didn't see the desired/expected results? In what ways did they fall short? Why do you think they fell short?

We tried some conventional things that did not have any great results--open houses, signage, pamphlets, etc. It seems that what works best is having a good, clear, up-to-date website, so that when people search the Internet we are easy to find, contact, and visit. Also, people need to reach out to people. One challenge to missionary work in our locality is the extremely stubborn perception in the community at large that our truly pan-Orthodox community is still "the Russian Church on the hill." We just cannot seem to overcome that perception easily.

Have some forms of communal missionary outreach proven especially sustainable/durable?

It seems that the most durable form of outreach is to follow the model of Saint Herman of Alaska, which is, under challenging circumstances, to remain calm, resilient, hardy, and faithful, while also being hospitable and charitable.

We also pray specifically for growth with an added petition to the litanies during liturgical worship.

What lessons can other communities / the Church at large learn from your community's mission efforts?

If we have anything worth sharing, it is the conviction that people are the most important factor. You can have a great plan or program, but, in the final analysis, it is people that make a difference. If, when people are brought to us by God, we are ready to be the people our new friends need us to be (faithful, helpful, humble, honest, penitent, kind, generous), things work out well.

### Section 3 EDUCATION

Does your community have programs for children's education? Adult education? Education for inquirers? Education for members?

Children's activities are, at the moment, *ad hoc*, because most of our children are very young. Soon they will be ready for more formal educational programs. We do have some members of our parish who personally engage in effective ministry to children, researching and providing for them all sorts of materials that are now, thankfully, increasingly available.

We have adult education for an hour every Sunday, and online Bible Study ninety minutes a week. We meet with inquirers on a one-on-one basis, tailoring instruction for each inquirer's personal needs.

What educational programs have proved popular?

Our Bible Study online, via video-teleconference, is quite popular. And, the inquirers enjoy the one-on-one instruction that our pastor provides with the commitment of a lot of time. People are surprised and honored when the pastor will actually, without complaint or anxiety, simply spend time with them, talking about what they need to talk about! We try never to tell anyone that we are too busy, or that we need to limit our time. People find it refreshing when they feel that we are not in a hurry to "get done."

Also, we have a young men's group that meets about every other month. The young men in our parish find it not only educational, but also deeply nurturing and encouraging, to spend time together and with older, more experienced members of our parish.

The parish sisterhood also arranges, organizes, and hosts educational opportunities for all the women in the parish, such as a pre-Advent retreat, and a community Psalm reading program during Great Lent.

What are the goals of your educational program? How do you set these goals? Do you have ways of measuring progress and assessing outcomes?

Our goals are really two, one practical, one spiritual. Practically, we want to build concrete knowledge--we want learners to learn the basic teachings of our Faith, and to feel competent in their knowledge. Spiritually,

our goal is to build up strong and healthy, balanced Christian people who are confident, resilient, and hardy, but also truthful, humble, disciplined and loving.

Some people today are so very, very wounded—we want to bind up the wounds and help people to feel strong and healthy, made strong in their weakness by God who is Strength! These goals seem basic to us, and for us participation and process are progress. We try hard to keep people involved and active as worshippers, learners, doers of charity, and followers of disciplined living.

Do you see impacts from your educational programs in other areas of parish life?

If we achieve the goals described above, there is certainly a carryover effect to all aspects of parish life. If we help ourselves and others to be spiritually healthy this inevitably makes everything better, everywhere.

The Lord tells us, "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart."; Christians have always considered themselves disciples of the only Master, Christ our true God, who is our Teacher and Rabbi. How does this / can this shape our approach to education?

Our approach to education should always be that of Lazarus's sister Mary, who humbly sits at the feet of Christ. We have little to teach and everything to learn, and all that we teach must be of the Tradition and "in accordance with the Scriptures." (See, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.)

Has your community seen success with educational initiatives that can be undertaken elsewhere or scaled up at the deanery/diocesan/national level?

Perhaps, we might be so bold as to suggest that the best goal of educational initiatives is not to have strong plans or programs, but rather to have strong people. People make the difference. Everything we do in the Church must be about healing and strengthening people. This said, it seems to us that the single most important practical thing the Church can do going forward is to prepare well-suited and well-trained men to be parish priests. There is an old saying, "the parish goes as the priest goes." A strong, healthy, humble, repentant, truthful, courageous, well-supported priest can do much good, even when resource-starved from a material perspective. But, all the material resources, programs, and plans that we can come up with cannot be put to use by a priest who is unsuited (not called!) and ill-prepared to fulfill his ministry. Education in the parish so often comes down to this: "Father, I have a question..." And, what happens next depends on the character and formation of the man answering the question. Lord, have mercy.

#### Section 4 FINANCE

What does financial stewardship look like in your community? How does your parish determine a yearly budget?

We vigorously teach stewardship. We vigorously teach first-portion, percentage giving. We teach that each parishioner should consider donating 5% of their gross income to the local parish, and 5% in support of other charitable initiatives. Over 25 years this has resulted in a situation whereby last year, in a parish with about 70 adult members, we realized just under \$150,000.00 received in annual financial giving income. We determine our budget based on what we need to do (pay bills) and what we are obliged to do (support the diocese and the OCA) and what we want to do (in-reach and out-reach).

Does your community put the Gospel at the center of its approach to finances? If so, how so?

We believe so. We believe that the approach outlined above, in answer to the first question in this section, is Biblical. Besides what is mentioned above, we further teach that everything we have (not just 10% of it) must be used in service of God. For example, we say this, "Even if you are paying for a vacation or other leisure activity, that spending should be 'worthy of a blessing,' for everything is done before the Face of God. He sees and He knows."

Have you undertaken special finance-related projects recently (e.g. fundraising)? Did they succeed? Why or why not?

We recently applied for and were awarded a charitable grant of \$20,000.00 to upgrade the HVAC system in our Parish Community Center, wherein is housed the local community food pantry, which monthly meets the needs of about 400 people in our community.

Also, recently our parish paid the costs of a parishioner receiving formal training in prison ministry through the auspices of Saint Tikhon's Seminary and Orthodox Prison Ministry.

We have also raised, by soliciting direct cash donations, more than \$10,000.00 over the last several years to meet the needs of needy persons.

Are finances an obstacle to Church life and growth? Why or why not?

Practically speaking, yes. But, as a matter of faith, no. God has always provided what we need, when we have needed it. Sometimes, however, our faith has been tested. For example, this past year, we expected to finish the year in deficit. In fact, even while suffering some very expensive happenings, by the Grace of God, and through the generosity of His faithful people, we finished the year with the total financial condition of the parish being essentially unchanged over the course of the previous twelve months—a just about miraculous outcome. Humbling and remarkable.

At a moment of stability, such as His Beatitude Metropolitan Tikhon believes the OCA is experiencing now, what should be our overall approach to finances?

Our approach to finances must be rooted in transparency and accountability. In all relationships truth and trust are necessary for thriving. Also, we must not be ashamed to ask for money, as long as we can make a good case for how that money will be used, and then keep meticulous accounts about how it is used. At the same time, we do not ask anything of the poor, but seek to meet their needs. In our parish the annual pledge form instructs that if you are truly in need you must not give the parish money, but rather must humbly ask for help.

What lessons in finances, stewardship, budget, fund raising, etc., can the OCA at large learn from your community's experience?

First of all, if someone is actually poor and needy, help them! Then do this: Teach stewardship. Be specific. Set expectations. Be transparent. Be accountable. Be generous beyond what you think your capabilities are "for the Lord loves a cheerful giver," and generosity is always rewarded. Don't be afraid to ask. Remember that asking a rich person to give is offering that person a solution to the vexing problem that person faces of which Our Lord spoke. For He said that it is hard for a rich person to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. Also, we are called to be thrifty, but not miserly. There is a difference.

On a purely practical level, we make sure that all parishioners are informed about the parish's financial needs, and that they have the information and tools to respond generously to meet those needs. For example, every year we inform the parish members and supporters of two fundamental facts: We tell them what budget income is required for the coming year, and we tell them how many financially supporting members we have. With those two numbers every parishioner knows what they need to do to help make sure the income budget is met. Most years, we even do the math for them: Budget Income divided by Number of Members equals Average Pledge Needed.

## Section 5 and PHILANTHROPY

What roles can an Orthodox Christian community play as a philanthropic institution? What are the special challenges? Are there any special advantages?

Every Orthodox Christian community should be renowned for its philanthropy. Philanthropy is at the center of the Gospel: "Love your neighbor, as [being] yourself." The challenge is that sometimes we fall prey to self-identifying as "poor." We must be careful about making such a self-assessment. Most of us in the USA are, in fact, quite materially wealthy. In the Orthodox Church, as regards this matter, the great advantage we have is that God will help us do His Will. When we surrender to His Will, He pours out His blessings upon us.

A specific role that the local Orthodox parish can play in philanthropic work is to identify, provide and support charitable activities as they present themselves to parishioners and groups of parishioners who need

help to organize, fund, host and accomplish worthy initiatives. In this way the parish serves to facilitate the fundamentally Christian activities of its members and others in its locality.

How do you connect your community's philanthropic efforts with your broader approach to finances?

They must be one and the same: Our community's approach to finances must be rooted in the strongest possible commitment to philanthropy. Loving our neighbor is a command of God. We must be there for one another. The Christian life is about relationship—relationships to God, and, in God, to one another. The secular philosopher may see the neighbor as "other," but the Christian sees himself or herself in the other.

We endeavor to actualize this understanding with practical initiatives. Thus, much of our charitable giving, both within our church, to other churches, the Diocese, the OCA, the Seminaries, the local community, and to other broader charitable organizations (such as IOCC), are all integrated within our budget and finances.

Do your philanthropic efforts connect with your broader mission-oriented work, and if so, how?

We are not in the business of "buying" converts. We simply aim to help others, with self-sacrificial giving. We teach that we do not just give away what is "extra" or "leftover", but we make actual sacrifices so that we can be givers. Giving begins when it actually costs me something. No doubt, God's Truth is something we, as subjects of the One True God, are privileged to share. But, it is a sin to share only the faith, without also providing the material things a person needs. That is the mindset we try to have here in our parish, though, to be sure, it is always aspirational, for we are sinners.

What approach or approaches has your community taken to philanthropic outreach? Have they, borne fruit? What sorts?

As reviewed in the section above about fundraising, we recently applied for and were awarded a charitable grant of \$20,000.00 to upgrade the HVAC system in our Parish Community Center, wherein is housed the local Food Pantry, which meets the needs of about 400 people a month in our community. We have also raised, by soliciting direct cash donations, more than \$10,000.00 over the last several years to meet the needs of a veteran, a widow, and other needy persons.

Our parish and parishioners are active supporters of "Stewards of the New England Diocese" which supports the youth in the Diocese (the annual Youth Rally), Diocesan Missions, our Seminaries and Seminarians, and Diocesan Charitable outreach. The parish sisterhood gives support as needed to a variety of both church needs, individual needs, and other charitable activities.

What lessons can we as a Church learn from your community's philanthropic experience? What new programs/approaches can your experience inspire?

One initiative we are blessed to be part of is the work of the local food pantry in our town. 25 years ago the food pantry was housed in a closet in the basement of the local Congregational Church. 19 years ago our parish made the decision to rent the present premises of the food pantry, which is the ground floor of our (then underutilized) Community Center building, to the food pantry for a dollar a year, plus the cost of utilities.

Several years ago the food pantry premises were renovated fully at a cost of about \$80,000.00, all raised through charitable donations. Then, this year the food pantry was awarded, through our parish's efforts and initiatives, a \$20,000.00 grant, which was used to fully upgrade the HVAC system. Previous to that, a federal grant of about \$30,000.00 was obtained to install an industrial grade emergency power generator.

Today, with a staff of volunteers, led by a 25-hour a week paid executive director, the food pantry serves about 400 people a month, from about 165 households, here in our town of about 13,000 people. Annually, the food pantry obtains and then distributes about 200,000 pounds of food, in service of its goal to defeat hunger in our area.

Members of our parish have served in leadership positions on the food pantry board, and parishioners still volunteer as staff members now. Our pastor is an *ex officio* member of the food pantry board (in his capacity as head of the parish that owns the building), and is also a past president of that board. And, of course, we continue to collect and donate food to the food pantry for redistribution.

+ + + + + + + + + + +