

PILLAR FOUR

Parish Health

...we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness...

(Rom 12:5-8)

Introduction

These words of St. Paul, together with the instructions that follow in the rest of the chapter, define the healthy parish and could well be placed as the preamble to the uniform parish bylaws. Indeed, if we lived in the way that the apostle exhorts the Church in Rome, we would not need to be discussing this issue at the All-American Council!

We hear much in the pages that follow about declining membership in the Orthodox Church in America and in our parishes. This is, of course, significant, and it reflects changing demographic and economic realities. But the more substantial issue is one of quality, rather than quantity. Numbers alone cannot be used to gauge the quality of parish life. Thus, much of what follows addresses precisely the need for spiritual growth in our parishes, the need for evangelizing those of us who remain, the need to take an honest look at where we are as parishes and what we can do better to live out the teachings of the Gospel. For the parish is where we live out our faith day to day. It is the basic building block of the Church. In fact all church structures and organizations – our bishops, our seminaries, the central administration, the departments – exist primarily so that our parishes, where the Gospel is preached, where baptism, chrismation, and the eucharist are celebrated, can function.

There can be no more important goal for us who gather in council than to labor for the health of each and every one of our parishes.

1970-2005 – An Overview

Parish life and health from 1970 to 2005 can be characterized by one very prominent and salient fact: since 1970, literally hundreds of parishes within the Orthodox Church in America have had to deal with the painful and obvious fact of a decline in their overall membership – in numbers of adults as well as of children and teens. Other areas of

church life offer a positive and welcome message of growth and change, such as the plethora of educational materials available from Orthodox publishing houses that did not exist in 1970, or the increase of practitioners of iconography and hymnography, or the recent rise of youth programs and camps. But the one issue that casts a pervasive shadow over the entire Orthodox Church in America is the “health” and growth, or lack thereof, of our parishes.

From 1990 to 2000, 177 parishes in the Orthodox Church in America were in numerical decline, and 134 of these were in double-digit decline. While much has been made of the more than 200 parishes planted since autocephaly, in fact, though we have roughly 50% more parishes than we did in 1970, there are roughly 30% fewer people. And while we can say that some of these churches, including a number of our older parishes, are doing well, and are even growing, many of these are in the South and West and thus simply reflect overall demographic trends that we can observe at a national level (whether that “nation” is the United States or Canada). In other words, Americans are leaving the Northeast – the so-called “rustbelt” that stretches from Maine to Illinois – and heading South and West. This is exactly what is happening to many of our parishes in these areas: members are leaving the north and east of the United States and moving south and west, and this trend has been in evidence for several decades now. Consequently, much of the “growth” that we have spoken about in the Church since autocephaly has been nothing more than transfer growth. But this does not minimize the fact that, in recent years, a significant number of parishes that can point to the majority of their growth coming from conversion rather than births or transfers; in some parts of the country, particularly in the South, this has been the case for quite some time.

In the wake of these developments, many of the parishes in the “rustbelt” find themselves with large, often beautifully adorned churches and other facilities (built for the most part from the early 1950’s to early 1960’s to handle growing memberships, including the multitude of baby boom-era children of that time) that are too big for their present needs and a financial challenge to maintain. Few parish members, if any, live in “the neighborhood” any more. Any form of parish ministry may be seen as a challenge – or a struggle – at best. Local economies, and parishioners’ incomes, may also reflect this decline, and they find appeals to “good stewardship” to be an affront to their already (as they perceive it) sacrificial giving. Some have all but given up (and others *have* given up) on church school and youth work, since there may be few if any children in the parish anymore. In short, a survival mode has set in.

Parishes in the South and West, however, may be faced with a different set of issues. Migration makes transfer growth possible, but people entering parish life in these new areas often bring with them their attitudes, customs, and “ways of doing things” from their former parishes. Better weather makes more year-round sporting and entertainment activities possible, posing a challenge to the parishes that now find themselves competing with Sunday morning youth and sports programs (although this is indeed a problem in many places).

In addition, these areas in the South and West are vast, wide-open spaces, and gathering the migrating faithful into localized communities has not been easy. Further, population growth in these major market areas has not necessarily motivated the Orthodox Church in America (until recently) proactively to target these areas for new mission planting: our entry into these new or growing communities has often been after other Orthodox jurisdictions have already established a presence there. The very fact that we do not have a full-time director of mission development, parish revitalization, and overall evangelization strategy clearly shows our lack of concern over this issue as a priority in church life. This lack of overall coordination at the national level has made decisive leadership difficult precisely when such was needed; the decision of the Evangelical Orthodox Church in 1986-87 to enter Orthodoxy through the Antiochian Archdiocese instead of the Orthodox Church in America is but one example of the consequences of such lack of direction and vision.

However, as was said earlier, there is much that one can point to that is positive. In the minds of many, the very fact that we have a full-time national Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries is one such example. The Church Planting Grant program has a proven track record and shows the effectiveness and rapidity with which a new mission can grow if it has a full-time priest from the very beginning. The very fact that people not only know what tithing is, but are actually practicing it in many places, both individually and on a parish-wide basis, is proof that stewardship education has been making inroads in the minds and hearts – and wallets – of a growing segment of our Church. The entrance of more converts into parish life throughout North America in the past two decades in particular is part of an on-going interest amongst both Protestants and Evangelicals, as well as unchurched “seekers,” to find “authentic” Christianity. As a result, many parishes are not only finding an increase in “guest traffic” but are having to start programs of education for both enquirers and catechumens – often in churches that have not seen adult baptisms in quite a long time! Add to this the very obvious fact that immigration, something many of our churches have also not seen for many years, has literally rejuvenated many inner city and even suburban parishes with an infusion of new Orthodox Christians, as well as with those

who discovered Christ after coming to America and joining one of our existing parishes.

Also, at this time we can see that approximately two-thirds of all Orthodox Church in America parishes serve entirely in English, with the rest serving either in a blend of English with another language, or exclusively in one of the traditional liturgical languages such as Church Slavonic. Mirroring emerging demographic trends in the Church as a whole is the fact that at least one-third of all clergy comes from a “convert” background.

Finally, the revival of church life that began in the 1960s and became joyfully evident in the 1970s revolved around the increase in the frequency of reception of Holy Communion at the Sunday Divine Liturgy. For many, a weekly encounter with the very Body and Blood of the Risen Lord, as opposed to the yearly “obligation,” as many called it, became the centerpiece of a liturgical and spiritual revival the effects of which we are still experiencing and feeling to this day.

These various issues continue to present to us both an ongoing series of challenges as well as the opportunity to experience the joy and fulfillment of a challenge met and won. However, diligence and faithfulness, as well as the strong conviction of our values and commitment to a future vision and the resultant (and necessary) strategic goals and objectives necessary to fulfill that vision, will continue to require that we avoid any sense of complacency and false notions of progress and success.

Changes Since 1970

	The OCA: 1970	The OCA: 2005
# of parishes	452 parishes, mostly of Slavic background, with large contingent of Romanian churches	680 parishes, encompassing Slavic, Romanian, Albanian, Bulgarian and all-American (i.e., “convert”) backgrounds
Average parish size	90 (approximately)	75 in the dioceses comprising the old “Metropolia;” 66 for the entire OCA
Financially supporting membership	36,000	25,000

Total Membership	40,000	45,000
	The OCA: 1970	The OCA: 2005
Demographics	2 nd and 3 rd generations	4 th and 5 th generations
Calendar	90% “Old Calendar”	Mix of “Old” and “New”
Language	90% Slavonic	60% all-English; rest a mix of English and other languages or entirely in a non-English tongue
Clergy	Mostly Slavic, very few converts	Converts make up 1/3 of total clergy
Episcopacy	Four bishops are American-born; Primate not fluent in English	Four bishops are non-American born.
OCA’s Geographic center	Harrisburg, PA	St. Louis, MO
Attitude towards “American Orthodoxy”	Positive spirit	Indifferent, for the most part, and abandoned in some quarters.

Other changes since 1970

In North American culture:

- *Roe v Wade*
- Internet; “e-converts”
- Birth rates
- Terrorism
- Political polarization
- Bioethics
- Gender issues
- Clergy sexual misconduct
- “Drive-in” church and communion
- Breakdown of traditional schooling
- Rise of home schooling
- Breakdown of nuclear family

In World Orthodoxy:

- Fall of communism; rebirth of Church in Eastern Europe
- Growth of Church in Africa, Asia
- Ecumenical Patriarch's vision of World Orthodoxy

In North American Orthodoxy:

- Ligonier
- Eastern European immigration
- EOC/AEOM/CSB
- Serbian and Antiochian unification
- Orthodox Christian Laity issue
- Diverging, not converging

The Healthy Parish

Describing or assessing the health of a parish is one of those tasks that appears at first to be easy but is in fact quite difficult. We live in a culture that *worships* good health. The media bombard us with images and drugs, along with mental and physical techniques which guarantee both a healthy mind and body. Being healthy has become a full-time occupation as well as a booming industry. We are consistently reminded by our culture that longevity, an active life style *à la* the upper middle class, and a mind connected to reality are the benefits of good health. Yet anyone who can peel away the veneer that gives shine to good health promoted by aggressive advertising will discover that appearances can be deceptive and that feeling good about one's self can open the way to a selfish and false assessment of one's life.

From the perspective of the Gospel, the healthy person is one who has a living and therefore healthy relationship with God. *Discernment* and a willingness to *change* are necessary for acquiring a healthy relationship with God. The same discernment and willingness to change are also necessary for the parish. Because each person and each parish is unique, there can be no universal prescription for attaining a healthy relationship with God. Nevertheless, the Gospel does instruct us where to begin.

The Gospel's image of good health begins with *repentance*, i.e., the antidote to selfishness and delusion. Our Lord commands us to repent because the kingdom of heaven, made known and revealed in his very person, is at hand (Mt 4:17). Repentance is an awakening of that desires to change or restore one's image. A parish comprised of people who strive to "bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49) recognizes that it is complete and whole only when it is faithful to Christ.

Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change in the way life is oriented. This change in *direction* affects both the person and the community. Often, repentance is associated with the realization that what passed for a full and healthy life was in fact very sick. Consequently, a parish can present itself with all the necessary externals pointing to good health – a full liturgical cycle, education and outreach programs, financial stability, and growing membership – while remaining distant from any real understanding of repentance.

The path of repentance gives credence and integrity to the work and life of a parish. On this path, which leads to Christ and the kingdom, a parish is given whatever is needed to live (cf. Mt 6:33) and continue the Lord’s ministry here and now.

Across North America, Orthodox parishes vary socially, economically and ethnically. On the one hand, this attests to a robust tapestry of parish diversity within the unity of the Orthodox Church in America. On the other hand, however, diversity within a pluralistic cultural context can belie true unity and the common vision necessary for living and proclaiming the Gospel. While diversity has always been a reality of the Church, it is still to be looked at with a discerning and critical eye.

Too often, we hear how the rich tapestry of Orthodox Christianity is held together by the celebration of the eucharist. Is this in fact true? Given the jurisdictional pluralism in North America and Mexico, the eucharist is constantly being undermined. On the parochial level diversity shows itself in ways that undermine eucharistic unity. Given the new waves of immigrants from Russia and the Balkans, ethnic parishes are again being established. What hindered the unity and work of the Church for most of the 20th century is again becoming a rationalized standard for the 21st century. Under the same roof and around the same altar different communities gather at different times using different languages and calendars to celebrate the breaking of the one bread and the sharing of the one cup of the New Covenant.

Politics of the right and of the left are prominent threads woven into the tapestry of Orthodox Christianity in America. From these conservative and liberal threads has emerged the *conservative and liberal parish*. Vital signs – language, calendar, rubrics, involvement or non-involvement in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, social and moral issues – now determine a parish’s overall health. Yet, as long as a conservative and liberal agenda diagnose a parish’s health, eucharistic unity will continue to be a formality and will no longer be the very context from which life in the kingdom is revealed and unfolds.

The writer cites the American attitude of self-sufficiency and independence as a reason that the parishes do not communicate, do not coordinate or are not concerned with the other. What other attitudes contribute to parochialism? What can be done to change this and make parishes out-reaching and cooperative?

The local parish exists to continue the ministry of our Lord and to reveal God's inaugurated kingdom. This implies that we who make up the parish possess a love and desire to abide in this kingdom "which is to come" (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). We who celebrate the eucharist – clergy and laity – are to base our concelebration on being Christ's *disciples*, and this begins with the cross. If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34).

Belonging to Christ, made possible by the Holy Spirit, is the obvious but often ignored basis for a healthy parish. In every place and time the work of the Church is the same – to proclaim and reveal the person of Jesus Christ "in whom we have redemption [and] the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:14). The local parish, seeking to draw all people into Christ's saving death and resurrection, is assured by the Lord himself that it will receive all that it needs to fulfill its missionary vocation. Faithful to Christ and his Gospel, the local parish maintains the necessary and creative tension between the world and the inaugurated kingdom. From within this tension the healthy parish is able to sojourn through an ever-changing environment, offering those seeking healing new and eternal life.

Orthodox Church in America Programs for the Parish

What exactly is a healthy parish? This was the focus of the discussions of the Thirteenth All-American Council held three years ago in Orlando, Fla. In the preparatory papers, Fr. Thomas Hopko wrote, "We experience our life in Christ primarily in the parish." This experience is guided by our Lord's commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk 12:30-31). The ministry of the parish includes all of these elements: the "heart" of liturgical worship and sacramental service; the "soul" of spiritual life and pastoral care; the "mind" of education and enlightenment; and the "strength" of mission and philanthropy. The theme for the All-American Fourteenth Council, "Our Church and the Future," must also include these ministries as critical components of a healthy parish community.

Since the 2002 13th All-American Council, the outward structure and organization of ministries within the Orthodox Church in America have changed, but the fundamental purpose remains the same: "To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). The Orthodox Church in America Church Ministries have been given the mandate to provide resources for parishes. Some goals have been realized. The web site of the Orthodox

Church in America has been expanded and enhanced to be one of the leading internet resources about Orthodoxy with new educational units and resources are being added to it monthly, music files for the *Menaion* is available, a stewardship handbook and the first volume of the mission handbook are also now available, with a wealth of articles and additional information are provided. Pastoral, Evangelization, and Parish Ministries Conferences were held in 2004 and area beginning to bear fruit. But each parish must decide for itself how to best utilize these tools, taking into consideration its particular circumstances.

For a parish to be healthy, it must be a giving as well as a receiving community. It cannot live in isolation from its neighborhood, its diocese, the national church, or the world. A parish gives through mission and philanthropy. The care for others in material ways, through charity, almsgiving, and service can take countless forms. The support that a parish can provide in spiritual and pastoral care is desperately needed by so many in today's society. Liturgical worship is continually offered; and education should be a lifelong pursuit, since no one ever finishes learning about the Orthodox Faith.

Sometimes, it is more difficult for a parish to be on the receiving end. To accept help from others, including the Church Ministries of the Orthodox Church in America and the dioceses, implies that there is some sort of need. And this means that a parish must honestly assess itself: discern its strengths and weaknesses; admit its failures; and be realistic in its goals. American culture tells us that we must be strong, self-sufficient, and independent, and this phenomenon has permeated the lives of many of our parishes and church organizations as well. We do not communicate; we do not coordinate; we are not concerned with the other. Because of this attitude, many of our resources are underutilized, efforts to produce materials are duplicated many times over, and ultimately, legitimate needs are not met. Imagine the limitless possibilities for ministry if all of our parishes and organizations networked, shared ideas and materials, offered suggestions and assistance, and complemented and completed each other in strengths and weaknesses. Parishes would be united in this common ministry because "we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (Rom 12:5).

The vast majority of those working in our departments are volunteers. They offer their talents to the best of their abilities with very limited resources. But this does not mean that they should not be accountable for their work. Ideally, the departments and parishes should be in a partnership relationship of giving and receiving. Mutual trust and accountability should follow naturally. In this relationship, cynicism and condemnation do not help; constructive criticism and suggestions should be welcomed and encouraged by both partners.

A healthy parish should know what is available from our diocesan and national departments and utilize what best fills its needs. The “heart” of a healthy parish is worship. Resources and materials are made available from the Department of Liturgical Music and Translations, guidelines are provided from dioceses and liturgical support is given to new parish communities by the Department of Evangelization. As the Orthodox Church in America celebrates the 35th anniversary of its autocephaly, it is also important to remember that our church has the ability to canonize saints on its own, and has a Canonization Commission to review the lives of those people whose lives are revered by the faithful and are presented to the Holy Synod for possible glorification. Liturgical commemoration of our North American Saints is a blessing that conveys the fullness of the “heart” of worship where we live and where our parishes minister.

Spiritual life and pastoral care of a healthy parish is dependent upon its leadership, namely its clergy. Without healthy pastors, the life and ministries of a parish suffers. The Department of Pastoral Life, the Board of Theological Education, and the Committee for Late Vocations were established to support the training and regularly review the education and qualifications required for ordination to Holy Orders.

The “mind” of a healthy parish continually needs to be challenged to grow through education. The Departments of Christian Education and Youth, Young Adults, and Campus Ministry offer educational materials, provide guidance and support, and are available to lead retreats, workshops, educational programs, and conduct local gatherings. Do church school coordinators and teachers receive the educational materials that arrive with each church appeal? Are successful programs and curricula shared with others?

The Office of Humanitarian Aid and the Department of Christian Witness and Service are directly involved in building up lay ministry efforts on the local parish level. The Resource Handbook and the Parish Ministries Conference are two ways that parishes can take advantage of the sharing of ideas from other church communities along with new ideas and recommendations for parish ministries. And helping with the vital task of missions and outreach is the Department of Evangelization.

The Fellowship of Orthodox Stewards helps financially support all Orthodox Church in America Church Ministries. In addition, the Department of Communications provides a means to share their work. Are all of our faithful aware of www.oca.org? Is *The Orthodox Church* newspaper read? Local and diocesan newspapers, as well as church bulletins, are important avenues of disseminating information

A great number of resources both human and written are available to OCA parishes. Do you feel that the average parishioner knows about them and benefits from them? Why or why not?

to all parishioners. All ministries are useless unless they are communicated to those who would venture to use them.

The purpose of enumerating these ministries is to show just a few possibilities of parish participation and partnership in them. Support and resources can be offered, but only in their acceptance is the partnership complete. Only together, being one in heart, soul, mind, and strength, can ministry occur most efficiently and effectively. Every level of church life, especially parishes, will share in the common goal and vision of equipping “the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” (Eph 4:12)

The Healthy Parish of the Future – 2015

The healthy parish of the future will fundamentally be the same as a healthy parish in any age. It will be composed of persons who understand their identity as sons and daughters of the living God through their belonging to Jesus Christ in baptism. They will know in their hearts that they are members of the family of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, who have been brought together by God himself for the purpose of worshipping him and working out their salvation. They will know that Jesus Christ is the head of body of which they are members and that each member has unique gifts given to him or her for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ, the Church. They will know the work of the Church includes continually incorporating new persons into God’s family as this is his utmost desire, the salvation of every single human being.

What characterizes a healthy parish in every age, where such life as described above can be lived, is that the parish be a place where love reigns. For as Scripture tells us, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). The story we have to share with others is the story of God’s love as seen in his incarnate Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. A healthy parish is a place where the clergy seek to love the people God has entrusted to their care and where the people of God themselves seek to love their leaders and each other. It is a place where forgiveness reigns and not judgment. It is a place where the members of the Body of Christ are encouraged to discover their gifts and to use them for God’s glory. It is a place where rendering kindness to another is the rule, not the exception. All this is necessary for true Christian fellowship to form and be lived out. It is what every single person hungers for – a place to love and be loved. Where else but in the family of God?

How will parishes in 2015 be different from today’s apparently healthy parishes? It won’t be in deviating from the above, because these are eternal truths about God and us. The differences will, however, be the result of our having to meet the challenges of the continuing changes in the society in which we find ourselves. For example, during the last

half of the twentieth century, the world in which we live has become increasingly smaller. As a result of the rapid advances in the field of technology and communications, it is now possible for one person with a computer and a modem to communicate instantaneously with another person on the other side of the world. This includes conversing with someone whom we may never have “spoken to or met” before. We live in what has been termed a “global village.” Such technological advances have radically impacted our day-to-day living and will continue to demand our attention on a parish level.

A healthy parish in 2015 will recognize the reality that for as much as we are connected to one another via technology, we still need to have relationships of substance on a local level. A healthy parish in 2015 will find creative ways to foster building relationships of some substance among its members. The parish is the local manifestation of the Church, where we met Christ in a most intimate way, i.e., communion, and where we work out salvation through our relationships within the congregation of the faithful.

A healthy parish in 2015 will also have to deal the trend of increasing urbanization. During the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States, more and more people left their rural surroundings for employment in the cities and then in the later quarter of the century moved to the suburbs. We will continue to experience the increased urbanization of the American people. This presents challenges to healthy parish life on both fronts: the urban as well as the rural communities.

Urban parishes (including the suburban communities) will have ample opportunities to reach out to new people moving in their area. A healthy parish will understand and embrace the opportunity to introduce Orthodox Christianity to its new neighbors. It will offer educational and social programs as a standard part of its ministry efforts. It will need to give serious consideration to the size of the community as well. How big should we as a community be? What is the appropriate size for a parish community, so that each person can have a rich, rewarding, and meaningful experience as a member of the Body of Christ? These are challenging and difficult questions, but they are of paramount importance.

The questions raised above are critical because they bring the whole issue of mission to the fore. As many of the fathers and mothers of the Church have said throughout her existence, mission is absolutely central to the life of the Church. Mission is the fulfilling of the Great Commission of our Lord, “Go to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). This is our work. It always has been

and forever will be. This work is accomplished on a one-to-one, person-to-person, parish level. Growing, healthy parishes in 2015 will have to be engaged in the process of discernment on this issues – e.g., where and when to begin new communities so that others will have the opportunity to experience and live the saving message of the Gospel in vibrant healthy parishes?

Rural parish communities that see significant numbers of their young people go off to university or the cities in search of employment ought to themselves be as mission-minded as their urban/suburban counterparts. As long as there are still persons living in the area of an established parish, there are souls to be introduced to Jesus Christ. A positive aspect of rural communities is that they usually already have a sense of family and the importance of relationships. Parish life can, and ought to be, a catalyst for supporting and broadening them.

Like their rural counterparts, urban/suburban parish communities can help give relocated people a sense of family and belonging in a parish family. All too often, our urban/suburban lifestyles are marked by isolation and a lack of relationships of any depth. Parish communities can offer a supportive, caring environment that marks extended family life. Urban/suburban parishes can make a deliberate effort to meet the challenge of a hectic, isolated, urban/suburban life.

Given the above, the top three challenges facing the North American Orthodox parish in both the near and the long term are as follows:

Effectively communicating to our faithful who we are as Orthodox Christians and what this means, so that each of us is able to be a witness to the faith in a world woefully ignorant of Orthodox Christianity.

Establishing a culture in our communities where our identity as Orthodox Christians is lived out in such a manner that anyone who enters can see the hallmarks of Christian community: love, selfless giving, mutual encouragement, forgiveness, kindness, patience, and compassion.

Embracing mission as central to our lives, and therefore for the life of the parish and the Church as a whole. This will involve each person on an interpersonal level.

On all levels of Church life these challenges and trends can be addressed. The Central Church Administration, dioceses, and parishes can and ought to continue working together to achieve the goal of living out and expanding God's kingdom on earth, the Church. Educational opportunities offered through seminaries, through diocesan, parish, or small group retreats can be offered and

What benchmarks could a parish use to evaluate itself as a Christian community where those who "come and see" will want to stay?

encouraged. Nurturing this vision and identity in our publications, national, diocesan, or local, will continue to be important. Finally, the continued use and development of the technology of the internet on national and local levels is essential to meeting the challenges ahead of us. For more and more people, particularly those under 35, the internet is their primary source of information. The Web is therefore a tremendous tool for evangelizing, educating, and communicating our vision and life to the world.

Provided that we, individually and corporately, are committed to Christ our Lord, the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us safely through these future challenges – As the Spirit has done throughout the Church’s history. Our job is to discern the Spirit’s leading and faithfully to follow, especially on the level of the parish, where salvation is experienced and lived out. Engaged in this spiritual quest, a parish will, in every time, place, and age, be a healthy and life-giving community.

Future Programs

Future programming for healthy parishes can be examined from several different perspectives and depends greatly upon the other pillars that are being explored. First, some foundational principles must be agreed upon before progress can occur. A common vision is needed. This is the aim of the “identity pillar.” Healthy parishes know who they are and what needs to be accomplished. St. Paul articulates such a vision “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13). With a clear direction such as this, each parish will envision the ultimate goal and determine its individual areas of need and weaknesses. All will be united in a common effort, even though there are countless possible paths to reaching the goal. Striving towards a common goal does not mean that every parish will do the same things. Unity and diversity are not antithetical. This is where programming can be helpful.

However, programs alone can never create healthy parishes. They can only strengthen and augment what should already be present: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22). But there is ALWAYS room for improvement, and parishes must seize every opportunity for strengthening themselves. So, what are parishes to do? Since there are so many areas of church life that need improvement, people easily become overwhelmed and respond with nothing but hand-wringing and finding blame. At other times, enthusiasm leads to so many new ministries that these become

What ministries or tasks are best accomplished at the parish level, the diocesan level and the national level? For instance, the setting of music, the development of Church School materials and the organization of youth camps.

unsustainable, short-lived, and parishioners get burned-out with so much work. In both cases, nothing gets accomplished. More effective is a balanced approach, but this requires a great deal of reflection and honesty within a community. Ministries must be prioritized, implemented gradually and with realistic and attainable goals.

This takes effective leadership and requires that clergy and laypeople work in cooperation. This is where the “clergy formation pillar” becomes so important. Without educated, motivated, enthusiastic clergy who are continually developing their skills and building one another up in fellowship, parish health is in jeopardy. One resource that is often neglected is drawing on the strengths of other Orthodox, both within and outside the Orthodox Church in America. This is the “Orthodox relations pillar.” If attitudes of competition, fear, negativity and apathy can be overcome, imagine what great things could be accomplished: complementing each other in educational events and charitable works, filling in where others are lacking, and bringing to life the exhortation to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). This could prove to be a powerful witness to those outside the Church, which connects directly the last “evangelization pillar.”

As these points apply to healthy parishes, so they apply also to departments at the diocesan and national levels. Every part of the Church, from the Holy Synod to parish priests to lay leadership to youth, needs to take an active part in the process. The vision must be articulated, and realistic goals formulated. To carry out these goals requires departmental leadership. At the very least, it must be realized that someone who already has a full-time job and a myriad of other responsibilities cannot fulfill these leadership positions effectively. This is not to criticize those who are already serving with enormous amounts of effort and time, but simply to be realistic. If there is a vision that includes and desires quality results from central departments, a commitment must be made to compensate talented people to fill these positions.

Whenever possible, there should be members on our departments from each of the dioceses to align needs and projects. Of course, some needs can only be fulfilled by individual dioceses, but communication and cooperation must be increased beyond the minimal amount that presently occurs. Similarly, some resources are specific to jurisdictions, but there are certainly areas where much more cooperation is possible. All departments should at least be in communication with their corresponding departments in other SCOBA jurisdictions.

In this challenging time of shrinking resources, the Orthodox Church in America must have the courage to be creative and to “think outside the box.” One of the most popular concepts in education today is teaching students to be “risk-takers,” and the church can benefit from this concept. Being a positive risk-taker does not mean that one haphazardly delves into unknown territory; rather, it means carefully weighing costs and benefits and being willing to try something new. It is also an ongoing process. If a solution does not work, no one is “beaten up” over the failure, but everyone moves on to discovering yet another approach. It is analogous to the concept of falling down, getting up, falling down and getting up again. The important step is to get up again.

All of this is easy to talk about, but much more difficult to put into action. To be honest, the faithful of the Church have many things to be thankful for in the work of its departments. On the other hand, there are areas needing close examination, repair and rejuvenation. The All-American Council is one venue where questions, concerns and suggestions can be made. Yet another is through the website, where all departments can be contacted directly via email. Input and communication are imperative, but they must be backed by investment and commitment of resources. Investments do not bear fruit overnight, but seeds that are planted today may be of great benefit to our children and grandchildren.

May God help us to serve each other and persevere with foresight and wisdom “running with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1)

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

