

Rochester NY: Evangelism Task Force

Saint John the Baptist Orthodox Church was founded in Rochester NY on the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearing Women (May 17) in 1964. That year, a group of Orthodox faithful joined together with the desire to establish a parish where the Divine Services would be conducted entirely in the English language. Faithfully enduring many difficulties and overcoming obstacles, the parish grew and found a home at its current location, a truly inviting and lovely place of worship centrally located and easily accessible from the entire greater Rochester area. The parish has become an icon of Orthodox diversity and unity as parishioners from numerous ethnic heritages and cultural roots, "cradle-born" and converts, gather in faith, love, and worship. At the beginning of 2014, the parish launched an Evangelism Task Force (ETF) comprised of twelve members from teenage to eighty. The following is an update from the ETF chairperson, Blake Keller.

"What great things has God done in your life? "

A profound and wonderful question, to be sure! It's also a question central to our evangelism efforts. We, like the healed Gadarene demoniac (Matthew 8:26), are commanded: "Go and proclaim all that God has done for you!"

So began the much-anticipated visit by the Chairperson of the OCA Department of Evangelism, Father John Parker, to Saint John the Baptist Orthodox Church in Rochester NY on November 12, 2014. The parish Evangelism Task Force (ETF) had been actively working for over six months, and found both affirmation that their efforts were heading in the right direction and also new ideas to consider in the coming months.

When formed, the ETF set a lofty goal of increasing attendance at Liturgy 20% by the parish birthday in May of 2015. The realization was that to achieve this goal the ETF didn't need to reach much farther than those people already known to us and friends of the parish -- those who come infrequently, children of regular attendees, people who were married or baptized in the parish, and so on. Committing to a concrete goal encouraged actionable and measureable steps, which included:

- Count attendance every Sunday: a baseline is necessary to measure against.
- Create a parish directory available on-line with parishioner photos.

- Form a Ministry of Ushers to ensure every visitor is welcomed warmly and contact information is gathered, if possible. As an extension of this, a Liturgy guide has been created which includes not only the text of the Liturgy but also helpful explanation, illustrations, and quotations.
- Redesign the parish website to optimize it for search engines; create the infrastructure to allow easy content posting appealing to "seekers" and informative to parishioners.
- Design and manufacture a new, more visible exterior church sign to provide both service information and a clear message of invitation: "Ancient Christianity for Everyone!"

A “Blessing of Animals” was held on Saturday, October 4, 2014. Over 2,400 invitations to residents within a half-mile radius of the church were delivered by US Mail as an outreach of neighborly welcome. Parishioners were also asked to bring flyers to their neighbors, friends, and coworkers with a warm and welcoming invitation. A highlight for those attending was participation by members of the Mounted Unit of the Rochester Police Department. Information and photos are available at: http://nynjoca.org/news_141007_1.html

Future efforts will include a program the ETF is calling “Brother’s Keeper” which will actively reach-out to those not attending, contacting them and warmly letting them know we miss them. Social media opportunities are also being explored.

Father Parker encouraged the ETF to keep all efforts personal, as much as possible. The Internet and social media offer promise, but they must always point toward a personal contact. Telling our personal stories is always the best way to connect with others. That proves true in our case with many, including the parish's own Proto-Deacon, who began attending the church after a simple invitation by a neighbor, or friend. Invite someone to Vespers! The service is short and accessible, and a great way to introduce others to the beauty of Orthodoxy.

Father John offered three key principles that have helped his parish grow:

- Hospitality
- Beauty – the church building is clean and accessible
- People telling others

There are two methods of outreach -- a personal method such as sharing our own story with others, and a more broadcast oriented method where many are reached by vehicles such as the Internet or other advertising/marketing.

As an example of one way Father John's parish reached out to a large group: During a speaking engagement by the popular Joel Osteen at a large venue in town, members of the parish positioned themselves in an appropriate and orderly location nearby while passing out flyers inviting attendees to a post-event dessert social at their church. About a dozen people came, and one is still attending. There are many events in our community, and we should seek ways to piggy-back onto them with "our story" and a welcoming invitation.

Another idea was to host and invite neighbors to a movie night at the parish. Some seasonally-appropriate movies mentioned were: "Babette's Feast," "Bella," and "Calvary."

The gathering with Father Parker was energizing and the ETF is more excited than ever to continue our efforts. It's especially exciting to know that other parishes are also working hard to rekindle the zeal that characterized those who brought Orthodoxy to North America!