

How Does the Church Grow?

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This question is at the heart of any parish community struggling with stagnant plateaued growth or actual numerical decline.

Especially if your church is in “plateau” (i.e., no net growth) mode, you may be making new members, but not necessarily growing.

While the Holy Scriptures make very clear that it is God who grows the Church (Matthew 16:18; I Corinthians 3:6), the key to understanding parish growth is to identify the processes over which the parish has the most control and influence for parish health and growth.

traditional childbearing patterns are radically altered from past experience. More than ever, we need to keep our young people engaged in the Church, encouraging them to marry in the Faith, and have their children baptized and raised in our parishes.

Discussion: Take a look at the number of births and baptisms recorded in the parish over the last five years. How do those figures compare to the number of funerals as well as the number of people who have moved away? Are we replacing those that are leaving? Which of these “life events” – births, deaths, and moves – do we have control over?

“We Need More Members!”

In order to begin a discussion about bringing new people into the parish, let’s first consider the three ways (and the **only** three ways) parishes can grow:

- 1. Births** (leading to infant baptisms)
- 2. People moving in and out of the parish** (Immigration and Transfer Membership)
- 3. Conversion**

Births

In decades past, we could anticipate that our parish boys marry parish girls, and they have lots of babies that Father baptizes and incorporates into the life of parish. That may have been the norm until recently, but it’s just not happening that way anymore. Our parish boys are marrying Irish girls, or our parish girls are marrying Italian boys, the wedding may or may not take place in the Orthodox Church, and the family pressures from all sides may often result in the children not being baptized for some time, if at all. Combine this with the decision of couples to have fewer children, and parish growth rates based on



People Moving In and Out of the Parish

Immigration and membership transfers – the transfer of one demographic group, family or person from one church in one area to another church in another area – are not, strictly speaking, church growth. Father Thomas Hopko used to talk about this as moving “From the hills of Carpatho-Russia to the hills of Pennsylvania.” Or, nowadays, from the hills of Pennsylvania to Florida, Texas or Arizona.



And what immigration patterns and pressures can give to a church, immigration patterns and pressures can take away: Greek parishes are already experiencing reverse immigration in many places across the country. The Slavic people whom many OCA and ROCOR/MP parishes enjoy seeing coming into their churches now may or may not necessarily stay. The simple point here is this: just as we cannot rely on marriages and children's baptisms to grow our churches, nor can we assume that immigration and transfers due to moves or retirement will guarantee a steady and growing parish census.

Discussion: How does the presence of recent immigrants influence the life of our parish? Are we taking specific steps to welcome them and to encourage them to become involved in the ongoing life of our parish family?

Conversion



And then there's the 2,000 year-old method the Church has always known: **conversion**. So, in order to understand further how people (non- and lapsed Orthodox, “Nones”, non-religious, etc.) might begin to consider the Faith, and therefore joining our

Orthodox parish, we need to look at how people typically engage with a faith community. In the coming issues of *Beyond the Plateau*, we will take some time to explore these approaches.

Discussion Questions: How many adults have converted in our parish in the last five years? When was the last time an adult chrismation was done in our parish? List the reasons they say they converted, and the factors you think inspired them to become Orthodox. Are these conditions still present? What attracted them to our parish? Did they come even without intentional outreach by the parish, or did the parish do something deliberate that brought those people to church, and ultimately to the Faith?