



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

DIOCESE OF NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH MINISTRY

2020 Diocesan Assembly Report

Your Eminence, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ!

It is my continued joy to serve as your Youth Department Chairperson, even during these unprecedented times. When I first started getting involved in our youth initiatives back in 2012, never did I think that our in-person events would come to an abrupt, indefinite halt. This report highlights what the Department of Youth Ministry has done prior to and during COVID-19, our social media presence, my involvement in cross-jurisdictional initiatives, and goals for the year ahead.

Annual Events

- **2019 Annual Girls' Retreat: November 22-24, 2019 (after the 2019 Assembly concluded)**
 - **Speakers:** Lara Galis, Danielle Geeza, and Matushka Dennise Kraus
 - **Theme:** *Come as you are: A friend loves at all times!*
 - **Location:** Camp Shiloh, Hewitt NJ
 - **Registrants:** 13 Participants, 2 Chaperones/Adults
 - **Parishes Represented:** Brick, New Brunswick, Paramus, Wappingers Falls (NJ Deanery); Christ the Savior NYC, East Meadow, (NYC Deanery); Endicott, Syracuse (NY State Deanery)
- **Annual Teen Retreat: April 3-5 at Greenkill YMCA Retreat Center, Huguenot, NY – POSTPONED**
 - **Speaker:** Father Benjamin Tucci
 - **Theme:** *Prayer and Saint Herman of Alaska*
- **Annual Altar Servers Retreat: May 15-17, 2020 at St. Basil Academy, Garrison NY – POSTPONED**

New Undertakings

- **Additions to the Youth Department Website: April 2020**
 - As the threat of COVID-19 intensified and all of us were instructed to “shelter in place”, a new [page](#) on the Youth Department website was created, which included links to COVID-19 resources, along with a message to our youth from me. An “Orthodox Christian Ministry at Home” [calendar page](#) was also created to share programming available to young people across jurisdictions.

- **Archbishop Michael's 10th Consecration Anniversary: May 8, 2020**
 - Archbishop Michael celebrated his 10th Anniversary of his consecration to the episcopate on May 8th. In honor of this special occasion, youth and families from across the diocese were invited to submit messages of love and gratitude to His Eminence, thanking him for ministering to the youth of our diocese. You can view the video montage [here](#).

- **Honoring our Graduates**
 - For the first time ever, we honored high school and college graduates from our diocese by featuring their accomplishments and photos in the *Spring/Summer 2020 Jacob's Well*, the official magazine of our diocese. This was well-received by students, parents, and parishes, so I plan to continue this recognition initiative at the end of each school year. If you haven't already, learn more about our 2020 graduates [here](#); their achievements are quite impressive! May God grant them many blessed years!

- **Virtual Teen Reunion: Keepin' it Real with Danielle & Fr. Martin: July 1, 2020 via Zoom**
 - Between COVID-19, cancelled youth retreats, civil unrest, virtual graduations, and racial justice... a lot was happening at the start of the summer, there was a lot to process, and a lot to talk about. Recognizing that our teens may be struggling, Fr. Martin Kraus (Youth Department Chaplain) and I hosted a roundtable discussion on Zoom for high school students who were in Grades 9-12 during the 2019-2020 school year, including 2020 high school graduates. We started and ended with prayer, giving teens the opportunity to share whatever was on their mind in a safe zone, or simply listen to their peers. Father and I fielded questions, shared our own pandemic experiences, and encouraged them to persevere. There was an interest in having more open discussion forums like this on a regular basis; now that a new school year has begun, it is my hope to host sessions like this on a regular cadence.

- **Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) Info Session: August 20, 2020 via Zoom**
 - Archbishop Michael and I hosted a Zoom Information Session with 3 members of Orthodox Christian Fellowship's Student Leadership Board: Andrew Gluntz (Chairman), George Powell (Northeast Regional Student Leader), and Tino Kayafas (Mid-Atlantic Regional Student Leader) on the evening of August 20th. The purpose of this was to encourage incoming college freshman, current college students, parents, youth/young adult coordinators, and clergy across the Orthodox Church in America to learn more about the organization, the leaders' personal experiences, and what's in store for the 2020-2021 Academic Year. You can listen to a recording of the session [here](#).

- **Archbishop Michael's 70th Birthday: August 29, 2020**
 - Youth and families were contacted and invited to help Vladyka celebrate his milestone birthday by sending cards/drawings, calling him at the Chancery, sending e-mail messages or electronic greeting cards, or submitting a video message. Vladyka, I hope that you enjoyed whatever greetings you received!

Social Media Presence

Ever since launching the Youth Department website, a concerted effort has been made to have an active (and positive!) social media presence. Many other jurisdictions consistently post inspirational quotes from the holy fathers, scripture, and saints—in addition to advertising their youth events and photos. Using this as inspiration, our Department has a presence on the platforms listed below; click the links if you wish to view the pages, **and follow us!**

- **[Facebook](#)**: 543 followers; mainly used for advertising our own diocesan sponsored events, sharing photos and write-ups from our past events, in addition to promoting and other activities. Parishes are

welcome to send announcements for youth events that their parish is hosting and submit photos to be featured. Please feel free to email any of the above to me at nynjocayouth@gmail.com.

- **Instagram:** 369 followers; mainly used for sharing Orthodox inspirational quotes, photos from events, and greetings on Feast Days. This platform is most popular with the teens who have attended our events, and is intended to showcase live events/real-time updates from events to keep parents informed of what is happening throughout the weekend.
- **YouTube:** Our channel has gained traction this year. If you visit our page, please subscribe. You will find video montages and various recordings.
- **Youth Department Website:** Since its launch in August 2016, we have had over 5,470 visitors to the site. The website has allowed us to “Go Green” and have event participants register online, which has been much more efficient and easier to keep track of attendees’ paperwork. There is a Media Gallery filled with pictures, videos, and articles from past events, in addition to a page dedicated to Upcoming Events.

Regarding social media, the Department recognizes that some parents/guardians are concerned about having their children and teens’ photos being made public. **We understand and take this very seriously**, and so require that a “Photo Release Form” be signed in each participant’s event registration packet. The Department leaves this decision up to the guardian’s discretion, and if they choose not to sign, please be assured that their photos are not posted.

Beyond Our Diocese

In December 2019, I was asked by the National church to represent the Orthodox Church in America as a member of **The Orthodox Youth Directors in North America (ONYDA)**, a working committee of individuals who serve as the departmental heads of the youth, college and young adult ministry departments of the different Orthodox churches represented in the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States. Every jurisdiction recognized by the Assembly of Bishops has a representative; the full list can be viewed [here](#). Because the OCA’s Department of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Ministry remains without a Youth Director, and because the majority of the other OCA dioceses do not have fully-established Youth Departments, I sit on the Committee representing the OCA.

Each year I attend its [Annual Youth & Camp Workers Conference](#). The objective of the event (held at the end of January) is to offer an enriching and uplifting experience that will connect youth and camp workers, and provide them with inspirational and challenging ideas to help them refine and improve their work. Each jurisdiction has a turn to host based on a rotation schedule. **This year it was hosted by the Serbian Orthodox Church in North and South America at St. Sava Cathedral in Phoenix, Arizona, and featured many wonderful speakers.** In addition to simply participating in the conference, I also attended the Committee’s Annual Meeting Retreat during which we finalized an [official document](#) addressing **Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation** from both theological and practical perspectives. It has been a blessing to put into practice what I had learned in my Youth Ministry Certification coursework, a certification that I received from St. Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Theological Seminary in May 2018.

Similar to prior years, the OCA had only three other individuals in attendance at this year’s conference. People need not be an official “youth worker” or “camp worker” to attend, so if you have an interest in ministering to our young people, I encourage you to join us... especially next year because The Orthodox Church in America will be co-hosting the Annual Youth & Camp Workers Conference *virtually* in January 2021. **In 2022, optimistically hoping that travel and hotel accommodations will be deemed “safer”, the annual conference will be fully hosted by the OCA.** Location is still to be determined, but Cleveland is at the top of our list given that there are large OCA parishes in that area with halls/centers that can accommodate 150-250 people. If you are interested in learning more about the conference, please get in touch with me via [email](#).

ONYDA meets on a quarterly basis during the calendar year. I encourage you to visit its website which is filled with a wealth of information for all things youth and camp ministry related. A great emphasis was placed on providing **COVID-19 resources** to youth workers at the start of the pandemic, and ONYDA continues to do so today. In addition to its annual conference and numerous resources, we host **monthly webinars and Orthodox Camp Directors Townhall Gatherings**. If you would like to join or listen, the schedule and replays can be found [here](#).

Goals for 2021

- **Finalize our Parish Youth Advisors/Contact Database:** When I took on the role as Department Chairperson in 2017, I put out a call to action to all parishes and clergy asking for the name of at least 1 individual who can communicate youth initiatives quickly and effectively when announced.

I ask that the following 27 parishes officially complete this [Google Form](#) so that this goal can *finally* be closed. Regardless of the size of your parish, the number of young people you have on your census, or whether or not you have an official youth advisor, I still ask that you submit the name of an individual—even if it is yourself—so that I can close out this goal.

If you believe that your parish contact needs to be updated, please submit your response again. Many thanks in advance.

1. **Brick, NJ** - Church of the Annunciation
2. **Brooklyn, NY** - Church of the Holy Trinity
3. **Brooklyn, NY** - St. Nino Mission
4. **Brooklyn, NY** - Mother of God of Minsk Mission
5. **Brooklyn (Williamsburg), NY** - Cathedral of the Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord
6. **Buffalo, NY** - SS. Peter and Paul Church
7. **Clifton, NJ** - Assumption of the Holy Virgin Church
8. **Dix Hills, NY** - St. Andrew Church
9. **East Herkimer, NY** - SS. Peter and Paul Church
10. **Glen Gardner, NJ** - St. Gregory Palamas Church
11. **Jackson, NJ** - Nativity of the Holy Virgin Church
12. **Jersey City, NJ** - SS. Peter and Paul Church
13. **Lansing, NY** - Holy Apostles Mission
14. **Mays Landing, NJ** - Church of the Mother of God
15. **New Brunswick, NJ** - St. Simon of Cyrene Mission
16. **New York, NY** - St. Mary Magdalen Church
17. **Oneonta, NY** - St. Innocent of Alaska Mission
18. **Passaic, NJ** - St. John the Baptist Church
19. **Perth Amboy, NJ** - St. Spiridon Church
20. **Princeton, NJ** - Holy Transfiguration Chapel
21. **Rahway, NJ** - Holy Trinity Church
22. **Sea Cliff, NY** - Our Lady of Kazan Church
23. **Wantage, NJ** - Holy Spirit Church
24. **Wappingers Falls, NY** - St. Gregory the Theologian Church
25. **Wayne, NJ** - Holy Resurrection Church
26. **Whitestone, NY** - St. Nicholas Church
27. **Yonkers, NY** - Holy Trinity Church

- **Host at least 1 virtual retreat** between now and the end of the 2020-2021 school year. While this may not seem like enough, I do not want to over-promise and then under-deliver. Planning will be discussed further with His Eminence and Father Martin.
- **Host recurring informal chats with high school students in Grades 9-12** with our Youth Director. The format would be similar to the session which was hosted in July: an open forum to talk about what's going on in their lives, a "weekly refuge" of sorts to remind them that they are not alone in their faith. Cadence is to be determined.

Closing

At this point in time, no overnight events will be held in 2020 or 2021. Being immunocompromised, I cannot risk exposing myself to COVID, nor would I host a larger scale event out of concern for the health of all (not to mention that nearly all retreat venues are temporarily closed). I pray that the state of the world will normalize enough so that by our 2021 Diocesan Assembly, a more "normal" calendar of events can be put together for 2022. Please be assured that I have not forgotten about our youth. I pray for them every day, think about them every day, and hope that they are remaining close to the Church and Christ as best as they can.

In November 2018, Archpriest Martin Kraus, Rector of Holy Trinity Church here in East Meadow, was appointed as our Youth Department Chaplain. Father Martin stepped into this role effortlessly and has been of great support not only to me, but also to all of the youth entrusted to us at our events by acting as a true spiritual father to those who have questions about the Faith, or who simply need a listening ear. He serves the services reverently, and has gone above and beyond by building both a portable altar table and table of oblation for our "chapel" setup at non-Orthodox retreat venues. It has also been a blessing that Matushka Dennise Kraus stands by Father Martin's side, supporting both he and I in our respective leadership roles. Together, their new ideas and fresh perspectives have been a welcomed addition the past two years. The present and future of this Department is very bright. **Thank you, Father and Matushka, for your service, and may God bless you, your family, and your parish family abundantly.**

I wish to thank Archbishop Michael for his continued support, guidance, and active participation not only in the planning stages of our events, but also for his **presence** at all of these events. Our youth love spending time with **him**, just as much as he loves spending time with **them**. It continues to be my joy to serve the church in this capacity, helping our young people grow in their faith through worship, witness, service, and fellowship.

Respectfully submitted,



Danielle Geeza
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*"The youth are not only the future of our Church, but they are also the present."
 -Archbishop Michael*