

**Commission on Mission and Evangelism Diocesan Assembly Report 2023**  
**Diocese of New York and New Jersey**  
**Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, DMin - Director**

*“It is not a question of ‘can we?’ but of an imperative command ‘we must.’ ‘Go ye therefore and teach all nations.’ ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.’ There is no ‘consider if you can,’ there is only a definite, clear cut command of Our Lord... If we let ourselves rest peacefully in this habitual inertia in the matter of missions, we are not simply keeping the pure light of the Faith ‘under the bushel,’ but we are betraying one of the basic elements of our Orthodox tradition. For missionary work has always been a tradition within the Orthodox Church...Missionary activity is not simply something ‘useful’ or just ‘nice,’ but something imperative, a foremost duty, if we really want to be consequent to our Orthodox Faith.”*

*Archbishop Anastasios of Albania*<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

When His Eminence Archbishop Michael appointed me to be Director of the Commission on Missions and Evangelism, he asked me a simple question, “What do we need to do?” My immediate reply was that we, as a Diocese, need to start thinking as missionaries and evangelists. This is the very lifeblood of the Church. Every parish needs to become a mission. Every parishioner need to think like a missionary. Every action we do as a parish needs to measure itself against the basic tenet, “how am I reaching out to those around me?”

There are many parishes and parishioners who are doing precisely this but there are also some that are have not yet begun to think in this manner. Where there is missionary activity there is life and dynamism in the parish and where there is not, we see a level of comfort and even stagnation. We must reach out and draw persons to the Church. Right now, as we speak, there are parishes in this Diocese (and across the OCA) experiencing an influx of new people, many of them young, who are looking for the very spiritual life and worship that we embody. We need to reach those people and draw them into a deeper relationship with Christ which can be found in the Orthodox Church.

Part of that process of reaching out is to learn how and what we can as persons and parishes do. This was precisely the reason that the CME established the Evangelism School so that parishes can learn from experienced clergy who have done this in their own context. The Diocesan publication *Koinonia* was established so that writings, ideas and examples can inspire members of the Diocese to think more critically about missions and evangelism and mutually support one another. All of these efforts are beginning to take root in the Diocese and we are seeing the fruit of this work. We must continue and the work we do has consequential effect on the future of our Diocese.

## **Work of the Commission**

As Director, I continue to interact with the five missions on a regular basis. We have established a new mission in Plattsburgh and we have a new mission station being established near Fort Drum, NY. There a few other possibilities being explored which are not ready to be reported on. As His Eminence stated at the last Evangelism School, there is much open area north of Route 90. Some of the missions continue to

go through transitions of new clergy and to new locations. I keep His Eminence Archbishop Michael, the Chancellor, Mitered Archbishop Joseph Lickwar and the two Deans with missions, Archbishop Gary Breton and Archbishop Alexey Karlgut informed and include them in various communications. Some have attended the online meetings and the in-person meetings.

The Diocese sponsored the Second Annual Evangelism School at St. Gregory the Theologian Orthodox Church in Wappingers Falls, NY from August 7 to August 9, 2023. The theme and speakers were the same as from last year. We had 14 participants including His Eminence. We ask each deanery to send a clergy and layperson (preferably from the same parish) and His Eminence to select “at-large” persons to attend, each on a rotating basis. This year we also had four seminarians from St. Tikhon’s Seminary in attendance who are future clergy in the Diocese. We will plan for a school next summer but perhaps a change to emphasize parish revitalization for established parishes. A reminder that the school is fully funded by the Diocese and at no cost to the attendees. We should be very grateful for the commitment to this process by His Eminence and the Diocesan Council.

I am planning an on-site visit to a mission before the end of the year. I will not recount the details of each of the missions in the Diocese as you can read about them in their own reports.

1. We continue the monthly online forms that each mission submits for the previous month’s activities. These forms are compiled and evaluated in a quarterly report sent to His Eminence, the Chancellor and the Deans. Each quarterly report highlights specific items that may be of interest or concern. His Eminence reviews these with the Chancellor and Deans at periodic meetings.
2. There are quarterly meetings (via Zoom) with the mission clergy in which each share details of their ministry with one another as well as discussing challenges and issues that are of mutual benefit to the life of the missions. These are recorded and a summary is sent to His Eminence. His Eminence, the Chancellor and Deans are invited to attend these meetings and some of whom have participated on an ongoing basis.
3. We were unable to have an in-person meeting of mission clergy after the clergy retreat at the end of August due to scheduling conflicts. We are trying to schedule one in the upcoming year. The goal of these meetings is to have an annual gathering and to be able to concentrate on specific topics in-depth and have a detailed discussion.
4. The quarterly newsletter on missions and evangelism entitled *Koinonia* continues to be published and disseminated to the Diocese. The newsletter contain articles on a particular theme as well as reflections and a review of missionary activities of the Diocese. This year’s theme has been on unpacking key passages from the Gospels on evangelism. All parishes and clergy in the Diocese receive the electronic newsletter and it is posted on the Diocesan website.
5. We continue to look for various liturgical items and vestments which can be distributed to the missions. If you have any items that are in good condition, please contact Fr. Eric. We are still planning to establish a mission fund for the Diocese to assist with the needs of the current missions, plan future missions and support the work of the CME in activities such as training. If you are interested in contributing or participating in this, please contact Fr. Eric.

6. As mentioned in the introduction, we are discussing new mission possibilities with His Eminence. The pace of establishing these missions depends on the availability of clergy interested in serving and building them. As a challenge, every priest/parish in the Diocese should be looking around their area as to where the next mission could be established. For example, is there a cluster of Orthodox or parishioners who live in a certain area and travel some distance for services? If so perhaps this is a place to look into and establish monthly services. Is there a lay leader who is passionate about mission and would like to assist in identifying new communities? That person should be encouraged and supported. There is always one more possibility out there for us to explore.

## Conclusion

*“Whenever our parishes – these cells of the Church – really shine with the virtues, the dynamism, the faith of true Christianity, they also perform the mission. This mission – because it is the mission of the Church, and not of an individual, or of a human agency – can take many forms and be performed by a variety of ministries, all equally legitimate.”*

*Protopresbyter John Meyendorff<sup>2</sup>*

I have seen the changes in thinking in the Diocese that I referred to in the introduction. The Diocese is beginning to think about missions and evangelism and some parishes are becoming more effective in their outreach. I am heartened when I have seasoned clergy come to the school and comment on how much they learned and how much they have to think about in their own parishes. While the Commission cannot give a “boilerplate” approach to each context, they can give ideas and inspiration that can be carried into these parishes. Ultimately, it is up to each person to make the commitment and enact change. The harvest is waiting, are we ready to bring it in? Just look around and see what is being presented at the front door of each parish and open that door to the possibilities. Think as a missionary.

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<sup>1</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, “The Forgotten Commandment,” from *Poreuthentes*, 1(1):1-5, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> John Meyendorff, “Many Ministries, One Mission” from *Witness to the World* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 180.