



Orthodox Church in America
Diocese of New York and New Jersey
Department of Youth Ministry

2023 Diocesan Assembly Report

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

I write this report with a heavy heart as it marks the end of my 11 years of lay leadership supporting our Department of Youth Ministry, 5 years (2012-2016) assisting Archpriest Jason Vansuch when he led the Department and the remaining 6 years serving as Chairperson (2017-2023).

I shared last year that I relocated to Chicago in August 2022 to pursue graduate studies at DePaul University. Over this past year I continued all Department responsibilities, planning and advertising events from afar and traveling back to the Diocese to be present with our young people. This report highlights undertakings from this past year, our online presence, my involvement in cross-jurisdictional initiatives, upcoming events, a short reflection on Department accomplishments over the years, and finally my vision for new leadership.

Undertakings

- **Fall Teen Retreat: November 18-20, 2022 at Camp Ramapo in Rhinebeck, NY**
 - **Attendance:** 15 teens
 - **Parishes Represented:** Randolph, South River, Trenton, Wappingers Falls (NJ Deanery); East Meadow, Yonkers (NYC Deanery); Elmira Heights (NY State Deanery); Philadelphia (OCA Albanian Archdiocese); Little Falls, NJ (Moscow Patriarchate)

- **Lenten Teen Retreat: March 22-24, 2023 at Frost Valley YMCA in Claryville, NY**
 - **Attendance:** 28 teens
 - **Parishes Represented:** Jersey City, Paramus, Randolph, South River, Trenton, Wappingers Falls, Wayne (NJ Deanery); East Meadow, NYC-St. Mary Magdalen (NYC Deanery); Ballston Lake, East Herkimer (NY State Deanery); Philadelphia (OCA Albanian Archdiocese); Little Falls, NJ (Moscow Patriarchate); Perth Amboy, NJ (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese)
 - Event reflection [here](#)

- **Altar Servers Retreat: May 13, 2023 at Holy Resurrection Church, Wayne NJ**
 - Organized by Fr. David Cowan, the retreat included a Proskomedia Service demonstration and teaching session explaining the rubrics and meaning of the different sections of the Divine Liturgy.
 - **Attendance:** 40+ altar servers, clergy, and faithful
 - Event recap [here](#)

- **Honoring our Graduates**
 - The accomplishments and photos of high school and college graduates from our diocese were featured in the Fall 2023 issue of Jacob's Well which can be viewed [here](#). This continues to be a highlight for parents, parishes, and students. May God grant them many blessed years!

- **Fall Teen Retreat: September 15-17, 2023 Frost Valley YMCA in Claryville, NY**
 - **Attendance:** 15 teens

- **Parishes Represented:** Jersey City, Randolph, Trenton, Wappingers Falls, (NJ Deanery); East Meadow, Shirley (NYC Deanery); Rochester (NY State Deanery); Philadelphia (OCA Albanian Archdiocese); Little Falls, NJ (Moscow Patriarchate)

Online Presence

- **Facebook:** 887 followers
- **Instagram:** 660 followers
- **YouTube:** 16 subscribers, 13 videos and various recordings from past events
- **Youth Department Website:** I updated our Department website several months ago to give it a cleaner look and to include recent photos/videos. It continues to be hosted on Wix.com with a Premium Light Plan. There is a cost associated with this which expires in October 2024. A decision will need to be made as to whether a website is warranted since I will no longer be able to maintain it.

Beyond Our Diocese

Our Department continues to be recognized by other OCA dioceses and jurisdictions, serving as inspiration for the building up of their respective youth ministry programs. Most recently in October I met with the Chancellor of the OCA's Archdiocese of Western Pennsylvania and several of its clergy to provide advice as they plan to revitalize their youth ministry efforts. May it be blessed.

23rd Annual Youth & Camper Worker Conference: The Orthodox Youth Directors in North America hosted its annual conference at St. Stephen's Retreat Center in Titusville, Florida from January 25-28, 2023. The objective of the Conference is to offer an enriching and uplifting experience to connect youth and camp workers, providing them with inspirational and challenging ideas to help them refine and improve their work. Our diocese was represented.

Registration for the 24th Annual Conference is now open and will be held at Antiochian Village Conference Center in Bolivar, PA from January 24-27, 2024. Clergy, youth directors, camp directors and counselors, youth group advisors, and church school directors and teachers are encouraged to attend. More information can be found [here](#).

Upcoming Events

- **Annual Youth & Camper Worker Conference:** January 24-27, 2024 at Antiochian Village in Bolivar, PA
- **Lenten Teen Retreat:** April 12-14, 2024 at Frost Valley YMCA in Claryville, NY

Reflection

The amount of joy I have experienced by serving the Department of Youth Ministry cannot be put into words. I am grateful to everyone who has entrusted their youth not only to me in recent years, but also to Fr. Jason Vansuch and James Worthington who laid the foundation of youth ministry initiatives following Archbishop Michael's consecration in 2010.

In a sense my experience with diocesan youth events has come full circle. In 2004 my mother organized the first retreat for middle and high school students at Fairview Lake YMCA Camp in Newton, NJ which was led by John Cassar and Fr. Michael Medis. John Cassar took the reins in the years that followed with Fr. Martin Kraus and continued these events throughout my time in high school—I have many wonderful memories and greatly benefited from their spiritual guidance. After I completed my undergraduate studies, I chaperoned an overnight retreat at Holy Resurrection in Wayne where I met Fr. Jason. I expressed my interest in helping at future events and with the blessing of Archbishop Michael, my involvement became a reality. I learned so much by collaborating on retreat themes, selecting guest speakers, and being present with our young people. And to my surprise, I have remained in touch with former event participants (many of whom are now in college) and their families which has been an incredible blessing.

Our diocesan retreat attendance experienced incredible growth since the years of our overnight retreats in Wayne. We began holding multiple events at Saint Basil Academy in Garrison, NY which provided ample space for full weekend retreats, proper lodging, and private accommodations for His Eminence and our staff. This worked well for us until 2018 when we reached full capacity at Saint Basil's. In 2019 we moved to a new retreat venue, Camp Shiloh in Hewitt, NJ, that offered more activities and modern accommodations. Since then, I continued to explore other venues in more centralized locations hoping to increase attendance from parishes in the New York State Deanery. Frost Valley YMCA Camp in Claryville, NY has proven to meet all our needs, and its staff has been a pleasure to work with.

Our Youth Department website launched in August 2016 and received worldwide recognition. This also allowed us to move away from hard-copy event registration forms to online registration platforms which streamlined the process.

Upon my appointment as Chairperson, I completed the [Youth Ministry Certification program](#) offered by St. Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Theological Seminary. This training was essential for my formation and provided opportunities to collaborate with Youth Directors and other youth workers across jurisdictions.

Youth Days continued under my Chairmanship, apart from this year, thanks to Fr. Matthew Brown and other members of diocesan administration who organized trips from 2017-2019 to Six Flags Great Adventure, Seabreeze Amusement Park, Broadway, and Yankee Stadium.

The pandemic prevented the Department from having in-person retreats for nearly two years, however we hosted several successful virtual events including a Winter Retreat in December 2020 and Lenten Retreat in April 2021 that brought together youth from all OCA Dioceses and jurisdictions, including Alaska, Canada, and Poland. Building on the success of our virtual encounters, the Fellowship of Orthodox Christians in America (FOCA) followed suit in consultation with me. In June 2021 we began honoring our diocesan high school and college graduates in Jacob's Well. Matushka Dennise Kraus organized quarterly Deanery Socials to reintroduce in-person events leading up to our Fall 2022 Teen Retreat, and we have successfully returned to a full calendar of events since last year's Assembly.

Hopes for the Future

"The primary lesson for life must be implanted in the soul from the earliest age. The primary lesson for children is to know the eternal God, the One Who gives everlasting life." -Saint Clement

I have spent time over the past several months looking at 11 years' worth of event photos along with video and slideshow presentations. Our diocese has offered so much to our youth, helping them grow in their faith through worship, witness, service, and fellowship. And while it's wonderful to have hosted events that brought together 75+ youth, I have found that it can be more gratifying having an event with only 15 participants—with smaller groups more intimate and lasting relationships are often made. That said, one of my hopes for the future of the Department is that a large emphasis is not placed on the number of attendees, but rather, the spiritual formation of the young people who do show up.

My second hope for the future is that all clergy and lay leaders will continue to spread the work of our Department by actively engaging with the parents, guardians, and young people in parishes. Studies have shown that the most important influencing factor in the spiritual lives of young people is the spiritual lives of their parents and the adults that surround them. Youth programs—at the most basic level—supplement the teachings of the church, receiving the sacraments, being an active parishioner in a church community, and the relationships young people have in their lives who, by their actions, show what it means to be an Orthodox Christian. Participating in diocesan youth events cannot guarantee that our youth will remain connected to the church beyond high school, but by offering activities for Orthodox Christian fellowship and prayer outside of parishes and homes, adult leaders show that they are loved and cared for in a world that so often deprioritizes God.

My final hope for the future of the Department is that whoever steps in to lead the ministry will make it 110% better than it is today. Provide them with formal training. Encourage them to think outside of the box. Create new events. Utilize untapped talents and ideas of individuals within our diocese. Most importantly, never lose sight of the fact that Youth Ministry is to be Christ-centered.

Closing

I express my sincere thanks to Archbishop Michael for his support, guidance, and presence throughout my tenure; Fr. Martin Kraus, Department Chaplain, for being a wonderful spiritual father to our young people when we gather together, and to his Matushka Dennise for her support; Ms. Janet Drobish-Neis for directing the choir at retreats and encouraging young people to take an active role in chanting and singing; diocesan administration for their administrative assistance; and the many volunteers, chaperones, and parents who have supported me in the building up of this ministry.

My prayer is that the good work of this pivotal ministry continues to bear fruit throughout the Diocese and beyond not only in the coming year, but for many years to come. God bless all of you.

Respectfully submitted,



Danielle Geeza
Former Chairperson, The Department of Youth Ministry