

First Fruits

The Stewardship Newsletter of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

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Stewardship of the Parish

“The Parish is a local community of the Church having at its head a duly appointed priest and consisting of Orthodox Christians who live in accordance with the teachings of the Orthodox Church, comply with the discipline and rules of the Church, and regularly provide for the material support of their Parish. The Parish is a component part of the Diocese under the jurisdiction of the Diocesan Bishop and is canonically subject to him. The term Parish refers to parishes, missions, provisional missions, and mission stations.” (By-laws of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey, Article VI, Section 1).

Within the Diocese of New York and New Jersey, one can find parishes that have just been formed, those that have been in existence for over a hundred years, and many that find themselves somewhere in between on that spectrum of time. Regardless of their place on that timeline, each of these parishes fits under the above definition of “the Parish”. Each has its uniqueness, but without exception, each shares the description set forth in our diocesan by-laws. Each parish also shares the reality that at one time or another, it had a beginning, a birth.

When the idea of a new parish is conceived, it typically occurs under one of two scenarios. One is when parishioners of a large parish, in consultation and with the blessing of the Diocesan Bishop, propose to split off a portion of the parish membership and give birth to a new mission community. The other scenario is when several Orthodox Christians, living in a geographical area that has no currently existing Orthodox church, come together and express to that area’s Diocesan Bishop a desire to establish a parish within that territory. This is only the beginning of the process.

After receiving the bishop’s blessing, the next step is to determine viability, to ascertain the potentiality of membership and whether that membership has the capacity to materially support a parish – not only its establishment but its future existence.

To assess this, it is necessary to construct realistic

cost projections regarding certain essentials such as: procuring, insuring, outfitting and maintaining a facility; advertising; and perhaps most importantly, adequately compensating a full-time priest. Consideration must also be given to proper liturgical staffing (especially a choir director) and potential costs of compensating a staff.

Once the probable costs are identified, it is necessary to consider how these items will be funded. For a new mission parish, financial help is initially available by way of the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors program and can later be applied for through the OCA Mission Planting Grant program. These sources exist to help water the newly-planted seeds of a mission parish. However, it is now that plans must be made for the mission to eventually sustain itself when those income sources are no longer available and the parish faithful need to “regularly provide for the material support of their Parish” on their own.

Now, the foundation must be laid for the implementation of a sound, biblical, and joyful program of stewardship of the parish. It must be a program that encourages members to give willingly and even sacrificially. It must be a program that emphasizes first-fruits giving – where one gives from the first-portions of one’s income, and not from whatever money is left after the household bills and incidental expenses are paid. A parish stewardship program must impress on each person not only the spiritual need for them to give, but the financial dependence that the community has on their giving for its continuation so that God’s work may be done. The need for such a program cannot be emphasized enough.

Although a small group of faithful at any given time may be involved in beginning a new parish, most Orthodox Christians belong to established parishes, some that were founded over a hundred years ago. These parishes face a different set of stewardship challenges. Older facilities, dwindling membership, and deteriorating neighborhoods are a few of the realities

that some of our more mature parishes must deal with. Yet, despite these different challenges, these communities must strive to maintain the characteristics of “the Parish”.

As with the younger parishes, older communities must constantly remind themselves of the primary motivating principle that fueled the establishment of those churches – to bring the Good News of the Gospel to all people in all places. This is the “reason for being” for each and every parish of the Church. The living and sharing of the Gospel must motivate every activity of the parish; every project designed to beautify the church building, every endeavor to educate the faithful, every effort to raise funds to adequately support the good works of the parish.

As it is with fledgling communities, more mature ones need to have in place a stewardship program that provides for the continuation of the parish. In both situations, the spiritual needs of the people are the same, and the essential material needs of the parish are ultimately very similar. So, the programs in both the new and old parishes should look very much the same in structure and in purpose.

Establishing and being a part of the birth of a new parish is an exciting and awesome venture. Caring for an established parish may not have the same excitement and awe, but it is just as necessary and vital to the vision that propels both.

We must be good stewards of our parish if we expect it to thrive. We must understand that the life of our parish depends on how we support it. We must know that whether we are members of a new parish or a well-established one, God blesses all those who live and witness to His Gospel message. Please be encouraged to know the vision that your parish is pursuing, and support it with as much of your time, talent and treasure as you can muster. It is all well placed, for it is all done for the Glory of God.

Are You Bearing Fruit?

We all know the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand in the wilderness – there was no food, except for one boy who had five loaves and two fish – not much when you consider 5,000 men. But Jesus blessed the loaves, multiplied them and used them to feed the 5,000. That boy did his best with what he had. And Jesus used it to perform a beautiful miracle. Just like the boy who offered his five loaves and two fish, we offer what we have – however great or small our gift. If we do this prayerfully and in humility, God will take our gifts and multiply them in order to feed His people.

Orthodox Stewardship Resources

Among the growing number of Orthodox stewardship resources that exist for all to access, several are listed below:

Books:

Holet, Rev. Fr. Robert. *The First and Finest – Orthodox Christian Stewardship as Sacred Offering*. Bloomington; AuthorHouse, 2013. Print.

Scott, Anthony. *Good and Faithful Servant – Stewardship in the Orthodox Church*. Crestwood; St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003. Print.

Podcasts:

Marianes, Bill. *Stewardship Calling*. Ancient Faith Radio. March 2015. <http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/stewardshipcalling>. Web.

Holet, Robert. *First Fruits of Christian Living*. Ancient Faith Radio. August 2016. <http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/firstfruits>. Web.

Webpages:

Orthodox Church of America – Parish Ministry Resources – Stewardship Education. <https://oca.org/parish-ministry/stewardeducation>. Web.

St. John Chrysostom speaks...

How long shall we love riches? For I shall not cease exclaiming against them: for they are the cause of all evils. How long do we not get our fill of this insatiable desire? What is the good of gold? I am astonished at the thing! There is some enchantment in the business, that gold and silver should be so highly valued among us. For our own souls indeed we have no regard, but those lifeless images engross much attention. Whence is it that this disease has invaded the world? Who shall be able to effect its destruction? What reason can cut off this evil beast, and destroy it with utter destruction? The desire is deep sown in the minds of men, even of those who seem to be religious.

“Homilies on 1 Thess.” 10 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers XIII:502)