

# Insights into Orthodox Parish Revitalization

## INSIGHTS INTO PARISH DECLINE & REVITALIZATION

Archdiocese of Western Pennsylvania, OCA

Parish Development Ministry

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1. **“One Christian is No Christian”** St. Cyprian + 243AD  
*Your parish is necessary to live your life as a Christian.*
2. **Parishes Can (and Do) Die**  
*For some it takes decades. Others wither rapidly.*
3. **Conversely, Any Parish Can Become Healthy & Vibrant...**  
*...if the parish truly wants to do so.*
4. **Decline and Denial Go Hand in Hand**  
*“The greatest danger is the illusion that all is well.” C.S. Lewis*
5. **Typical Decline Pattern**  
*All is well >> Denial >> Assign blame >> Seek replacements >> Grab an answer >> Continued losses >> Turn further inward*
6. **Many (most) parishes are in ruts**  
*Trapped by limiting assumptions, bad habits and nostalgia. See separate box – next page.*
7. **“The view of the gallows clarifies the mind”**  
*Get serious about renewal now. Most parishes wait too long.*
8. **“Do you want to be made well?” John 5:6**  
*Like the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, not everyone who is ill actually desires healing. Some prefer to remain infirm in order to have license to complain, avoid responsibility and receive pity of others. Who do we blame for our parish limitations?*
9. **I’ll do anything to lose weight –except diet and exercise.”**  
*What are we unwilling to do? Sacred cows?*
10. **“...clothe yourselves with the new self...created according to the likeness of God.”** Ephesians 4:24”  
*Parish renewal is not about recreating the ‘good old days’. We are establishing a new model for our life in Christ. Rooted in: Holiness. Sacraments. Service. Apostolic zeal.*
11. **Unprofitable Parish?**  
*In the context of MT 25:30 (parable of talents/“unprofitable servant”) is there such a thing as an “unprofitable parish”? What return is expected by the Master from a community?*
12. **God grows parishes; we prepare soil for growth.**  
*(Paul) planted, Apollos watered but God gave the increase.” 1. Cor 4:6; “...and the Lord added to their number daily” Acts 2:47*
13. **“When you don’t know what to do you do what you know.”**  
*It is hard to create fresh ideas from a closed environment.*
14. **Renewal starts internally.**  
*Parishes are highly resistant to outside change efforts. Yet change can happen quickly from within.*
15. **But Don’t “Copy”**  
*You can learn from the practices & behaviors of other vibrant parishes. But every parish is different. There are no universal solutions.*
16. **“The man who treats himself has a fool for a patient.”**  
*Fresh eyes can be valuable to understand our situation. “We deal not much in fact when we are contemplating ourselves.” Mark Twain*
17. **“For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound who will prepare for battle” 1 Cor. 14:8**  
*Decide on a path; engage the parish; push forward.*

## GOOD QUESTIONS

### -- for a Robust Parish Conversation

A key to renewal –and avoidance of decline is parish conversation and dialogue.

1. What is the purpose of this parish?
2. How long do we want our parish to live?
3. What do we value in this parish?  
*Individually? Collectively?*  
*Do our behaviors reflect these values?*
4. Who owns this parish?
5. Do we want our parish to grow? *Why?*
6. Do we need to change?  
*In what ways?*  
*Can we change?*  
*Conceive of our parish in new ways?*
7. What changes in practices has our parish made recently?  
*Why? How? Effective? Ineffective? Why?*
8. What changes in *your personal behavior* toward the parish are you unwilling to make?
9. Is Mastering the Gospel, knowing God, and bringing others to him a priority of our parish?
10. Does our parish outshine the ‘best that unbelief can offer?’ (*If not people stay home!*)
11. Can persons believe that Christians have *good news* to share if we are not keen to pass it on?
12. Are we *truly* open and welcoming of *anyone* in our parish?  
*In what ways “yes”?*  
*In what ways “no”.*

### Stewardship related

13. How do you decide how much to give to your church?
14. Is generosity a core value of a Christian?  
*“Is it possible to lead miserly lives (or lives of great indulgence) while giving little to the church (or other charitable organization) yet attending and considering oneself to be a person of faith?”*
15. Do we have a big enough vision to attract large donations?
16. How does our personal financial status compare with those people who built or founded our parish?  
*Who is more affluent?*  
*What sacrifices did they make?*  
*What sacrifices do we make?*

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**“To whom much is given much will be required.” LK 12:48**

We are accountable for the knowledge, resources, abilities with which God has blessed us.

**Which Parish Do You Prefer?  
Which Parish Will Be Blessed with Growth?**

<b>A Model of Decline Burying Our Talents</b>	<b>A Model of Vibrancy &amp; Hope -- Providing a Return to the Master</b>
For us and our needs	Proclaim Christ. Do His work in the world
Complacent & comfortable	Seeking & Reaching
Stern & sober	Cheerful & Hopeful
Let's attract people "like us"	Serve all in our locale.
Social Events & Clubs	Social Events <u>and</u> Ministry Charitable Outreach: Time & \$
Reproduce "Old World" Orthodoxy	Bring Orthodoxy to America; Local & Indigenous
Ancient; Foreign	Apostolic, Authentic, Alive
Water it down; Make it easier	Meaningful, important, understandable challenging
Primarily Sunday Liturgy	Active Weekly/Annual Worship Cycle
Good enough	Sense of excellence
We don't do it that way! Won't work	Let's try it
Orthodox by birth & heritage	Orthodox by choice
Control & Power Rules & Battles	Teamwork & collaboration Discernment & dialogue
No risk; conserving; protecting; maintaining	Hopeful risk taking; "investing"; creating; "building"
"Ownership" Voting; majority; "Robert's Rules"	"Stewardship" Consensus; conciliarity
Dues, minimum equal share Compulsory, fund raising, "appeals"	Proportional, meaningful amounts, Personal generosity; from the heart
Free agents; autonomy; independence; Optional participation & responsibility	Constitutive element of archdiocese Shared responsibility

**Factors that Cause Us to Remain Frozen**

- Naturally tend toward stability
- Orthodoxy settled; not oriented to new ideas.
- "Intentionality" not our strength
- Aging parish ; Stuck in past
- Self interest ; Lack of trust
- Gatekeepers
- Fear uncertainty
- "Just hang on 'til I die"
- Effort focused elsewhere; I'm busy
- Sympathy – prefer 'struggling parish'
- DKWYDK - (Don't know what you don't know)
- Old assumptions

**Balancing Factors: Drivers of Change**

- Smelling the coffee –view of gallows
- Love of Christ – sense of mission
- Love of parish/inheritance
- Realize past is gone
- Glimpse of something better
- "Not gonna take it" -*motivated leaders*
- New questions/conversation "Why can't we..."
- New arrivals/ new ideas
- An external change (neighborhood etc.)
- Catastrophe (exemplary faith in face of adversity)

**20 OBSERVABLE TRAITS:**

**VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISHES**

*In my (JK) observation/opinion many of the following qualities are apparent in most vibrant, growing Orthodox parishes. \*\**

1. Worship participation more than Sunday.  
*Vespers, feast days*
  2. Decent music - *Careful, well executed participative*
  3. Good preaching.  
*nourishing; challenging; timeless yet practical*
  4. Updated liturgical practice
  5. Atmosphere of Lenten discipline/ fasting
  6. Active adult teaching/ education  
*Various delivery methods; library, bookstore*
  7. Email/blogs etc.  
*Used regularly: communicating; teaching*
  8. Living wage for priest
  9. Diverse -- *No single ethnic group*
  10. No ethnic "label" – *Name; sign; web*
  11. Growth from converts; always catechumens
  12. Good Web site  
*Attractive, updated, focus on inquirers, photos*
  13. Guests made to feel welcome
  14. Limited/no fund raising
  15. No "dues"
  16. Some people tithe; high median donation
  17. Focus on neighbor/charity
  18. Parish Council – not just 'bills, budgets, buildings';  
*Focus: vision, planning, ministry, oversight.*
  19. Job pruning/updating  
*Stop doing what no longer works*
  20. Attractive outdoor sign
- \*\* Note: These traits correlate with growth - but they may not be causes growth. (Do parishes grow because parishioners worship more often? Or, do they attend more often because the parish is vibrant/ growing?)**

**TEN KEY METRICS TO WATCH**

1. Ratio: Vespers : Sunday attendance
2. # Converts/yr. # Catechumens.
3. Median age of parishioners
4. % parish income from fund raising
5. % donation income from parishioners > 70
6. % donors (households) > \$2K/yr.
7. % budget for charity; education
8. % parish youth who continue to be Orthodox 10 yrs after HS graduation
9. Ratio: (Priest salary + housing) vs. County MHI
10. Ratio: Ed. or charitable event attendance vs. Social or fund raising event attendance

**SOME APPROACHES TO LEADING CHANGE**

- Get specific – what really changes?
- Clarify downside of not adapting/ changing
- Small steps – focus on one thing
- Communicate regularly / consistently