Principles of Becoming a

*Small Orthodox Parish with a Bright Future*

As part of our discussions at the 2017 Small Parish Forum we will undertake the task of creating a consensus list of 10-12 of the most important “principles of vibrant small parishes”. These are key values/beliefs/standards that we as the 2017 attendees believe are important –and should be shared with other Orthodox small parishes.

Below are starting nominations prepared by the Small Parish Forum Steering team. We will begin this discussion on Thursday evening of the Forum. At this time we will break into small groups and attempt to pare the list down – as well as receive additional nominations. On Saturday morning we will try to arrive at a final list –based on what we’ve learned at the Forum.

This set of “Principles” will be an important product of the “Forum”.

Please read over the nominations and be prepared to contribute with zeal. With which principles do you most resonate?

1. **Small is OK. Really.** There is nothing wrong with being small. Small parishes can live a life in Christ without necessarily becoming “big”. Bigger is not better. Better is better.

“Any Orthodox parish can become more vibrant. All that is required is that its members, beginning with its leaders, be firmly resolved to have it so.

Their afflictions will be great, as Christ has promised, but their successes are assured by His victory. ‘In the world you have tribulation,’ Jesus says to his apostles, ‘but take courage, I have overcome the world.’"

*Fr. Thomas Hopko*

1. **Small is NOT Big** - Small parishes are different from large ones. Small churches are *not* miniature big churches. They think feel & act different. A clinic is not a major hospital. Both are valuable.
2. **Intentionally small is wrong.** Small is OK but remaining intentionally small is not. The desire to stay small is just as dangerous as the ambition to grow large.

“Revitalization is available to any small church that is willing to: work together; commit to a faithful vision; set out in pursuit of that vision; utilize all resources available to it; go where spirit of God leads.”

*“Small Church is the Right Size” David Ray*

1. **Parish is a Living Organism** - Parishes can (and do) die. You are responsible for health of your parish. Not every parish can grow. But any parish can become more vibrant if it wants to do so.
2. **Strengths** - The true secret weapons of small parishes are love, community, fellowship and authenticity. Don’t lose authenticity by trying to be something you are not. But don’t be satisfied with the status quo.
3. **Build Fellowship** – Do everything you can to build on the strength of fellowship. Pray for one another. Assist one another. Build the social fabric of the parish. Engage across generations.

“…authenticity levels the playing field for small churches. Large churches have many obstacles to overcome to appear authentic.”

*The Strategically Small Church*

1. **Obstacles** - Key issues facing most small parishes are: overcoming denial, self-pity and insularity. ‘Small parishes with a future’ limit the impact of these obstacles by regularly ‘facing facts[[1]](#footnote-1)’, having dreams/goals and engaging with their locale.
2. **Any Church Can be Charitable** - No church is too small to reach out to others in need. “Serving others breaks you free from the shackles of self-absorption that choke out the joy of living.”[[2]](#footnote-2)
3. **Complement Don’t Compete** - Understand the needs of the community in which you live to find underserved areas and what is it that you can offer? When designing ministries don’t be afraid to partner with others – Orthodox or not.
4. **Active Worship** - Worshipping in the best manner possible is an imperative for Orthodox small parishes to have a future. This includes (primarily) music. (Singing). Think: Active, participative worship.
5. **Vision and Aspiration** – Small Parishes with a future: *engage* with the future! They discuss their vision, mission and values. They examine and understand their values as church and community. They understand their gifts, talents and resources. (space, people, time, money)
6. **Ask Good Questions** – As part of building a sense of mission, ask good questions like: Do we live our vision and mission. Where should we go? What’s next? What should we become? Where are we now? Where are we going? What lies in our path to either help or hinder us? What must we do to get to “where” and what we should be?
7. **Build on Success -** What past parish choices and actions worked and why? What went well?
8. **Take Risks** - ‘Successful’ small parishes with a future try new things. They are not afraid to take risks. What (intelligent) risks should your parish consider? What is your level of risk taking and trying new ideas, methods and programs?
9. **Leaders Lead** – Clergy and Laity need to be co-responsible for the future of the parish. Together you need to chart course for change and a better future.
10. **Priest’s Time Commitment** – In parishes where the priest has secular employment it is necessary to clarify the division of labor and priest’s expectations? (Only Sunday liturgy, Sat vespers, Sunday liturgy, holy week schedules, feast days, visitations, deanery meeting, etc.?) The greater the need for priest’ supplementary income (secular employment) the more lay persons need to assist. Regardless of time commitment, the priest can’t & shouldn’t do everything.
11. **Priest Skill Set** - Priests often need a different skill set in small parishes. Particularly important small parish pastoral capabilities are: Developing people in areas of giftedness; jack-of-all “tradesmanship”; building a social fabric of the parish; getting people to like being around one another and feeling a common goal; trusting others to do things.
12. **Reasonable Compensation** - Pay priests according to reasonable standards.
13. **Replenishing Is Imperative** – To be a (small) parish with a future you must be able to retain current members/communicants AND to attract new members/communicants. People (i.e. current members) move away and they die. As a minimum you need ‘replacements’. Growing is good. Replenishing is imperative.

“The strong commitment of members to one anotherto kinfolk’s ties, the concept of one big family with modest program emphasis tends to reinforce the single cell nature of the church**.** When combined with the intergenerational nature of a small church these forces tend to enhance the caring nature of fellowship *at the cost of potential growth*. These unifying principles tend to make the small church exclusionary. This tends to make it hard for the small church to reach, attract and assimilate new members. *The more closely knit the fellowship the more difficult it is to achieve growth*.” *”The Small Church is Different”* Schaller

1. **Communicate Strengths Well.** – To *replenish*, small parishes must communicate themselves and build awareness in an honest, attractive and positive way -- emphasizing their inherent strengths. What are your methods of communication? *(Oh yes, parishioners and the parish needs to live/reflect the Christ centered qualities/values that are communicated.)*
2. **Welcome** - Attracting new faces requires actively working to engage newcomers – to invite them in to what may well be a very (perhaps unintentionally) closed community.
3. **Laity have a responsibility to know *and live* their faith**. If we find we are limited in our understanding of the Gospel and Orthodox doctrine and practice we need to take action. It is part of being stewards of our parish future.
4. **We CAN learn from other parishes** – Every parish is different. Yet many practices and insight are transferable.
5. **Don’t accept mediocrity** – Adopt a spirit of hopeful dissatisfaction. Make things better than you found them. This is the essence of stewardship.
6. **The Church is for everyone** – Often parishes, particularly small ones, can have a tendency to welcome only “people like us”.
7. **Effort pays off**. Believe this. Don’t be impatient.
8. **Work on one thing at a time**. – You cannot ”fix” everything at once. Take a modest step. Celebrate and thank. Then start again. Parish renewal takes years.
9. **The Orthodox Church in North America is not “diaspora”** - We’re here (in North America) to stay. Maintain a respectful reverence for the inheritance from traditional Orthodox lands *while also* appreciating that the Church here is a living form of Orthodox Christianity. A Church that should build upon the best qualities and cultures of North America and has put down deep roots in a new homeland.

Thank you for your attention to this.

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1. Facing facts is essentially a serious examination of parish life and practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *“The Servant”* James C Hunter, Pg 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)