

"Orthodox Christian Churches in 21st Century America: a Parish Life Study."

Executive Summary of the Study

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The study "Orthodox Christian Churches in 21st Century America" offers a comprehensive picture of the lives of local American¹ Orthodox parishes, including such aspects as membership, worship, programs, religious education, youth, usage of electronic technologies, and much more. In addition, the study also addressed the crucial question: "How are Orthodox Christian parishes faring today among the many other American local religious communities?"

580 parishes (about 30% of all U.S. Orthodox parishes) participated in the study. Five Orthodox jurisdictions had a sufficient number of participating parishes to allow for statistically reliable and sound conclusions: the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese, the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, the Orthodox Church in America, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The study report discusses the similarities and differences among the parishes of these five jurisdictions. Further, the study "Orthodox Christian Churches in 21st Century America" was part of a much larger national study of American religious congregations titled "Faith Communities Today²" (FACT). Accordingly, one chapter of the report provides a glimpse into what are the most remarkable differences between Orthodox Christian parishes and the Mainline and Evangelical Protestant congregations.

Of particular interest are subjects that have never been studied previously, such as:

- ❖ The Vision of Parish Clergy for Orthodox Church Unity in America
- ❖ Similarities and differences between American Orthodox parishes and Protestant congregations
- ❖ The Use of Electronic Technologies in U.S. Orthodox Parishes

Here are some interesting findings from the study "Orthodox Churches in 21st Century America:"

¹ Throughout the report, unless specifically noted or otherwise required by the context, the terms "America" and "American" refer to the United States of America. The terms "U.S." and "American" are used interchangeably.

² The national report of 2015 FACT study² ("American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving") is available at: <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/American-Congregations-2015.pdf>

- ❖ Between 2010 and 2015, the GOA and OCA parishes grew in the number of regularly participating church members, whereas the churches of the Antiochian Archdiocese declined in the number of parishioners who are actively involved in the lives of their parishes.
- ❖ Less than half of US Orthodox priests think that their parishes adjust successfully to changing circumstances. Only 39% clergy reported that their churches are either "are doing pretty well making the necessary changes."
- ❖ 7% of clergy believe that their churches are "where they need to be and do not need to change."
- ❖ More than half of US Orthodox parishes (54%) face a need for a change, but are either too slow in implementing the changes or ignore altogether this need. Indeed, 32% clergy reported that their parishes "are slowly changing, but not fast enough nor significant enough," and 22% clergy think that "we need to change to increase our vitality and viability, but the parish does not seem to realize it or does not want to make the necessary changes."
- ❖ A significantly higher percentage of American Orthodox priests (71%) than bishops (58%) envision the future of Orthodoxy in America in the form of an administratively united Church.
- ❖ 89% of clergy feel that the word "reverent" describes worship in their parishes "quite or very well." They were significantly less likely to say that "inspirational" and "thought provoking" were also good descriptions of the worship services in their parishes. Only 73% and 69% of respondents, respectively, agreed that these words accurately describe their worship services.
- ❖ American Orthodox parishes are more prone to internal conflicts and disagreements among their members than Mainline and Evangelical Protestant congregations.
- ❖ A smaller percentage of Orthodox priests than Protestant ministers evaluate their congregations as being "spiritually vital and alive." Similarly, fewer Orthodox priests than Protestant ministers have a clear sense of their congregations' purpose and mission.
- ❖ An absolute majority of American Orthodox priests are intense users of electronic technologies and social media. When asked "Does the parish priest use electronic technology and social media?", 53% of clergy replied: "Yes, a very frequent user." Only one-fifth (20%) of American Orthodox clergy said that they are either "infrequent users" or "not users." Among different jurisdictions, Serbian priests use the Internet and social media the most. Two-thirds of them (66%) reported that they are "very frequent users." The OCA clergy are the lowest users of online technologies: only 49% of OCA priests think of themselves as a "very frequent user."

- ❖ American Orthodox churches lag behind Protestant congregations in terms of their usage of various online technologies. Compared to Protestant congregations, fewer Orthodox churches use Twitter (12%, versus 22% for Protestants), live streaming of sermons (12%, versus 19% for Protestants), blogs (12%, versus 17% for Protestants), online meetings (17%, versus 22% for Protestants), WiFi access in parish's buildings (64%, versus 71% for Protestants) and texting³ (53%, versus 76% for Protestants);
- ❖ There are significant differences among the parishes of various Orthodox jurisdictions by how much attention they pay to developing various programs and ministries:
 - Compared to the parishes of other American Orthodox jurisdictions, GOA churches pay more attention to developing "fellowships and social activities," "community service activities and helping those in need," "youth activities/programs," and "scripture studies other than Sunday school."
 - "Prayer groups and spiritual retreats" are much more present and stronger emphasized in the lives of AOCA churches than in the parishes of other American Orthodox jurisdictions.
 - "Music programs" play more important role and receive much greater attention in both AOCA and OCA parishes than in the churches of other American Orthodox jurisdictions.
- ❖ The American Orthodox parishes that place strong emphasis on "Bible, Scripture studies other than Sunday school" and "prayer groups and spiritual retreats" are very likely to report that they "are thriving and this is likely to continue in the future."
- ❖ The Orthodox practice of fasting is seen as an important by two-thirds of American Orthodox priests: 66% of the parish clergy reported that their parishes place "a lot" or "quite a bit" of emphasis on this practice. Among five individual jurisdictions, the Serbian Orthodox priests place the greatest emphasis while the GOA clergy place the smallest emphasis on the practice of fasting.
- ❖ Only 12% of the regularly participating American Orthodox church members are young adults (age 18-34). Among individual jurisdictions, the Carpatho-Russian diocese has the lowest percentage of young adults, while the Antiochian Archdiocese has the strongest presence of young adults among its regularly participating members: 8% and 15%, respectively.

³ The usage of texting by an Orthodox parish could be especially important for reaching out to and communicating with the young people for many of whom this is a preferred way of communication.

- ❖ Only 15% of American Orthodox parishes consider young adult ministries one of their top priorities and there is no significant difference among individual Orthodox jurisdictions in this regard.
- ❖ Two program areas are most crucial for the success of young adult ministries and attracting young adult church members: a) the opportunity to learn more about the Orthodox Faith (via "Scripture study groups/classes," "theology and/or contemporary issues study groups/classes," "prayer groups, spiritual retreats"), and b) the possibility to reach out into wider community (via "community service activities," "mission trips"). At the same time, offering young adults various "social activities" (such as "engagement, premarital groups," "recreational, sport groups," "marriage groups/classes," "parenting groups/classes," "dating groups," "singles groups") has relatively little effect on attracting and engaging the young adult church members.

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