

# "Go and Make Disciples: Evangelization and Outreach in US Orthodox Parishes"

## Executive Summary of the Study

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An urgent need exists in Orthodox parishes in the United States for a much stronger emphasis on evangelization and outreach. The national studies conducted in 2015-2016 indicated that without paying serious attention to evangelization and missionary outreach, the Orthodox Church in the United States is likely to stagnate, lose its vibrancy and vitality, and decline in members.

The *"Go and Make Disciples: Evangelization and Outreach in US Orthodox Parishes"* is the first ever national study on evangelization and outreach practices in US Orthodox Christian Churches. It examined the strategies and practices developed by some Orthodox parishes that can be viewed as "exemplary" in their evangelization and outreach efforts. The study summarizes the experiences of these "exemplary" parishes, so that they can be adopted by other - "normal" - parish communities. The selection of both "exemplary" and "normal" parishes for the study was done by seven jurisdictions participating in this study. The examples of what is discussed in the study report include:

- ❖ How do "exemplary" parishes achieve a high degree of involvement of their members in the life of a parish;
- ❖ Four distinct features of religious education in the "exemplary" parishes;
- ❖ The "secrets" of being a parish that attracts and welcomes new members;
- ❖ Eight good practices of welcoming first-time visitors and inquirers about the Faith;
- ❖ Six "lessons" that Church leadership (bishops) can learn from the "exemplary" parishes.

The study found that few clergy in both "exemplary" and "normal" parishes place a strong emphasis on an active "search for and bringing in" new members. Instead, a majority of clergy define evangelism in the Orthodox Church as "passive" (i.e. "Come and see") evangelism. In short, most Orthodox clergy - both in "normal" and "exemplary" parishes - believe that the people will be drawn into the Orthodox Church merely by discovering the power and truth of the Church's teachings and practices and the beauty of Orthodox Liturgy. This finding suggests that - when it comes to the question of "evangelism" -

Orthodox priests rely heavily on their perceived natural attractiveness of the Orthodox Church for many religious seekers.

However, while most priests adhere to similar definitions and general approaches to evangelization, the clergy in "exemplary" and "normal" parishes differ significantly in how they practice these approaches and embody them in reality. That is, all clergy believe in the power of witnessing the Orthodox Faith through the genuine Christian lives of the individuals and their entire parish communities, but "exemplary" parishes provide a much better example of such life than the "normal" parishes. Similarly, all clergy believe that the richness of Orthodox liturgical life lived out in a parish can attract new disciples to the Orthodox Church, but the "exemplary" parishes offer more inclusive, engaging and meaningful experience of the Orthodox worship than the "normal" parishes.

*"Go and Make Disciples: Evangelization and Outreach in US Orthodox Parishes"* describes in detail the distinct features of the "exemplary" parishes that make them "stronger magnets" for new members and inquirers about the Orthodox Faith than the "normal" parishes.

This study thus far was based exclusively on experiences, information, and perceptions on the part of the parish clergy. While the priests' approaches towards Orthodox evangelization and outreach are very important since they help "shape" their parish communities, the voices of the laity - both parish leaders and ordinary "people in the pews" - must be carefully heard as well. Accordingly, the next stage of study on Orthodox evangelism and outreach in the United States will approach our lay church members: old and young, cradle Orthodox and converts to Orthodoxy, those who are very involved in their parishes and those who participate "once in a while."

*"Go and Make Disciples: Evangelization and Outreach in US Orthodox Parishes"* has seventeen chapters as outlined in the Table of Contents at the end of this executive summary. Of a particular interest for the church leadership could be the chapter on **"Six 'Lessons' that Church Leadership Could Learn."**

The following table offers an abridged overview of the most salient features of the "exemplary" parishes that distinguish them from the "normal" parishes. The table also indicates the pages of the full study report where each of these features are discussed in greater detail.

**Major Distinct Features of the Parishes that Are "Exemplary" in their Evangelization and Outreach Efforts in Comparison with "Normal" Parishes**

Area of church life	"Exemplary" parishes	"Normal" parishes
<p><b>MEMBERSHIP</b>  <b>Demography of membership</b>   <i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 32-35 of the full study report</i></p> <hr/> <p><b>Other distinct features of membership</b>  <i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 36-39 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Much stronger presence of converts to Orthodoxy among parishioners;</li> <li>❖ Significantly higher percentage of persons with college degrees among parishioners;</li> <li>❖ Significantly higher percentage of persons who are new to the parish in the past 3 years among parishioners;</li> <li>❖ Significantly smaller percentage of senior citizens (age 65+) among parishioners;</li> <li>❖ Significantly higher percentage of households with children at home</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ High ethnic and cultural diversity among parishioners</li> <li>❖ Steady growth in number of parishioners which is typically accompanied by increasing diversity among members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Much lower percentage of converts to Orthodoxy;</li> <li>❖ Significantly lower percentage of persons with college degrees among parishioners;</li> <li>❖ Significantly lower percentage of persons who are new to the parish in the past 3 years;</li> <li>❖ Significantly higher percentage of senior citizens (age 65+);</li> <li>❖ Significantly lower percentage of households with children at home</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ More homogenous social and ethnic-cultural composition of parishioners</li> <li>❖ No significant changes in membership over period of time</li> </ul>
<p><b>PRIESTHOOD</b>  <b>Demography of priesthood</b>  <i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 41-44 of the full study report</i></p> <hr/> <p><b>Changes in priest's understanding of his role of a pastor and leader of a parish over period of time</b>  <i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 48-51 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ More converts to Orthodoxy</li> <li>❖ Clergy have typically much longer "tenure:" i.e. they stay longer time with their churches</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The original focus on "running programs and administration" shifted towards being a good teacher, preacher and a "role model" for parishioners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Fewer converts to Orthodoxy</li> <li>❖ Clergy have typically much shorter "tenure:" i.e. they stay shorter time with their churches</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ As the years go by, clergy are becoming increasingly involved in administration, management and fundraising tasks</li> </ul>
<p><b>INVOLVEMENT of parishioners in the life of a parish and in evangelization and outreach</b>  <i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 52-54 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Typically, half or dominant majority of parishioners are actively involved in all aspects of a parish life</li> <li>❖ Outreach efforts and evangelization are often perceived as the way the entire parish community lives and sees itself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Relatively small "core" group of parishioners does everything in a parish</li> <li>❖ "Program approach" to evangelization: outreach efforts are typically carried out by the designated groups of parishioners</li> </ul>
<p><b>RELIGIOUS EDUCATION</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Along with religious education for children strong emphasis is given on continuing faith formation of the adult church members.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Religious education focuses primarily on children and is typically limited to Sunday school</li> </ul>

<p><b>RELIGIOUS EDUCATION</b> (continued from previous page)</p> <p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 58-61 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Religious educators are "experimental." They design parish's own religious education programs, employ a variety of forms of learning about faith, and "tailor" their religious education programs to the needs of particular groups within the parish community</li> <li>❖ "Total Parish Education" approach with the double goal: a) involve everyone in a parish in continuing religious education and b) encourage as many as possible parishioners to become religious educators and teachers themselves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Religious educators prefer to use the standard religious education curriculum and formats developed and recommended by their respective dioceses and jurisdictions</li> <li>❖ A limited group of parishioners is involved in parish's religious education programs</li> </ul>
<p><b>PARISH GOVERNANCE</b></p> <p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 62-67 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ "Conciliar model" is typical. The entire parish community is involved in the process of decision-making. Decisions are often made by "consensus."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The parishes are typically "run" and decisions made by a limited group of people - the members of parish councils/boards.</li> </ul>
<p><b>SYSTEM OF FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS BY PARISHIONERS</b></p> <p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 67-69 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Along with "pledging/stewardship" and "tithing" models, many parishes successfully employ a "free will offering" model. In this model, parishioners are encouraged constantly to give to the best of their ability, but are not required to commit in advance any specified amount of money or percentage of their income.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Along with "pledging/stewardship" and "tithing" models, many parishes remain with "membership dues" model: a fixed amount of contributions is required to be considered a member.</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROGRAMS AND MINISTRIES</b> Changes in programs and ministries over period of time</p> <p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 71-75 of the full study report</i></p> <hr/> <p><b>Top two areas of ministries that are seen as the most important by the parishes</b></p> <p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 76-79 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Parishes typically embrace changes in ministries and keep trying new programs and activities even if they "don't work out"</li> <li>❖ Understanding that "nothing is carved in stone," that programs and activities come and go depending on the parish's life-cycle and changing circumstances</li> <li>❖ Parishes are more likely to expand intentionally and significantly the diversity of new ministries</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Parishes pay primary attention to religious education and faith formation of church members. Parishes offer variety of religious education and faith formation programs that address different subjects and issues and are geared to the needs and interests of the various categories of church members.</li> <li>❖ The second in importance are outward oriented "social outreach and charitable work in the local community" ministries and programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Parishes are more indifferent with regard to developing new programs and ministries</li> <li>❖ Parishes tend to "hold" to existing programs and activities</li> <li>❖ Parishes typically add new or improve existing programs in only limited number of areas of a parish life</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Parishes pay primary attention to religious education and faith formation of church members. Parishes prefer to use standard and uniform formats of religious education: e.g. Sunday school for children, Bible study for adults, etc.</li> <li>❖ The second in importance are ministries and programs that focus on "social life and fellowship" within a parish</li> </ul>

<p><b>PARISH COMMUNITY: Relations among members</b> <i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 86-89 of the full study report</i></p> <hr/> <p><b>Attitudes towards visitors and inquirers</b> <i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 90-95 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Parishes foster mutual care, support and practical help among parishioners.</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Strong emphasis on welcoming inquirers about the Faith and first-time visitors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Parishes maintain overall atmosphere of welcoming and hospitality, but do not pay much attention to mutual care and support among parishioners</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ No particular emphasis on welcoming inquirers about the Faith and first-time visitors</li> </ul>
<p><b>PARISH AND ITS LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD</b></p> <p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 103-104 and 107-111 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Most parishes think that they are "well known in the local community and surrounding neighborhoods"</li> <li>❖ Majority of the parishes have made "considerable effort" to make themselves better known in their local communities</li> <li>❖ The parishes think that they are well known in their local communities primarily <b><i>because</i></b> of their participation in various community's events/initiatives and consistent effort to be a "good neighbor."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Minority of parishes think that they are "well known in the local community and surrounding neighborhoods"</li> <li>❖ Minority of the parishes have made "considerable effort" to make themselves better known in their local communities</li> <li>❖ The parishes think that they are known in their local communities primarily <b><i>because</i></b> of their "ethnic" culture and parish-based events (food-sales, festivals, fundraising events, etc.).</li> </ul>
<p><b>RELATIONS WITH NON-ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS</b></p> <p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 116-117 of the full study report</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ More parishes are involved in local inter-Christian relations/cooperation.</li> <li>❖ The parishes engage in a variety of inter-Christian activities: charitable work, ecumenical worship services, joint social and cultural events (picnics, concerts), work in the area of social justice (addressing issues of immigration, criminal justice reform, urban education, etc.), working together on reducing crime in the neighborhoods, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Fewer parishes are involved in local inter-Christian relations and cooperation.</li> <li>❖ Ecumenical cooperation is typically limited to either strictly charitable work (running homeless shelters, soup kitchens, food drives, etc.) or to participation of the Orthodox priests in local clergy associations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>APPROACHES TO "HOW TO WITNESS ORTHODOX FAITH IN AMERICA" (continued on the next page)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Pay attention to personal growth in Faith and personal witnessing by everyone in parish community. When Church and Faith become more "meaningful" for parishioners, it makes them both more engaged in the parish and eager to share their Faith.</li> <li>❖ Pay attention to having a vibrant and full liturgical life (not merely formal worship services) as one of the key-elements in successful Orthodox evangelism</li> <li>❖ Serve the community you are in - not only your own people. Be present in multiple settings/venues in the local community and offer your own "parish</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Orthodox Christians should hold firm to Orthodox Faith and traditions; be proud of them and be willing to explain them to "others," when (and if) they find their way to Orthodox Church;</li> <li>❖ Witnessing Orthodox Faith to America can simply be done by setting a personal example of being a good Orthodox Christian and living faithful life</li> </ul>

<p><i>Detailed discussion of this subject is on pp. 136-144 of the full study report</i></p>	<p>space" for community events and initiatives.</p> <p>❖ Make Orthodoxy "understandable" for the others. Make a conscious effort to disassociate the image of the Orthodox Church as being "ethnic church" and, instead, try to make it more "approachable" for the others.</p>	
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