

Young Adults and Young Adult Ministries in American Orthodox Christian Parishes.

by Alexei Krindatch

Young adults pose an urgent and difficult challenge for American religious congregations. Orthodox parishes are not exempt from this challenge. On the one hand, young adult members are crucial for church growth and vitality. This is true both demographically (i.e., growing young families with children) and also because young adults are more likely than older church members to bring into a congregation new energy, talents, approaches and capacity to “think out of the box.” On the other hand, recent studies show¹ that today’s young adults are less church affiliated, have more religious “Nones,” and are less inclined to actively participate in organized religion than ever before. Young adults (defined as persons ages 18-34) comprise 23% of the total US population, but *only one in ten* American congregations has this percentage of young adults among its members. In nine of ten congregations, the presence of young adults is lower than their presence in the overall population.

The report “Young Adults and Young Adults Ministries in American Orthodox Parishes” is extracted from the 2016 national study “Orthodox Christian Parishes in 21st Century America” (the full study report will be released in the near future). The study was conducted via a national survey of 580 parishes (about 30% of all US Orthodox parishes). Five Orthodox jurisdictions had a sufficient number of participating parishes that allowed for statistically reliable conclusions: American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, GOA, OCA and Serbian Orthodox Church. **Here are some key-findings:**

- ❖ Young adults (persons ages 18-34) constitute 12% of active Orthodox church members. This figure (12%) is only half of the presence of young adults (23%) in the US general population. In only 8% of Orthodox parishes the percentage of young adults is equal or higher than 23%;
- ❖ Among individual jurisdictions, the American Carpatho-Russian Diocese has the lowest percentage (8%) of young adults among parishioners, while the Antiochian Archdiocese has the largest presence (15%) of young adults among regularly participating members;
- ❖ Only a small minority (15%) of Orthodox parishes consider young adult ministries as one of their top priorities. There is no significant difference among individual Orthodox jurisdictions in this prioritization.

¹ See, for example, the report on “American Congregations 2015: Engaging Young Adults” prepared by the Cooperative Congregation Study Partnership: <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/Engaging-Young-Adults-Report.pdf>

- ❖ Only one-in-five Orthodox parishes (22%) evaluated their young adult ministries as "Good/Excellent," while 37% of churches judged their young adult ministries as "Poor;" Compared to other jurisdictions, the Antiochian Archdiocese has more parishes (31%) with "Good/Excellent" young adults ministries;
- ❖ Only 9% of parishes developed strategies that are geared to creating opportunities or programs specifically for young adults;
- ❖ Only one-third (35%) of parishes have designated leaders whose primary responsibility is to work with young adults (including 28% with volunteers serving as young adult leaders and 7% with part- or full-time professionals);
- ❖ Survey data show that having designated young adult leaders is *very important* for thriving young adult ministries and growth in young adult members. Parishes with designated young adult leaders are much more likely to grow in the number of young adults and report "Good/Excellent" young adult ministries than the other parishes. Remarkably, this survey data also suggest that it does not make much difference whether these leaders are volunteers or paid professionals (although this answer may change if the survey were expanded to youth leaders): what is most important is to have a person whose clear responsibility is to engage young adults;
- ❖ The five activities/programs that are offered most frequently to young adults in Orthodox parishes are: "community service activities" (offered in 57% of parishes), "fellowship groups" (offered in 52% of parishes), "web, social media sites" (offered in 46% of parishes), "engagement, premarital groups" (offered in 45% of parishes) and "scripture study groups" (offered in 44% of parishes). On the opposite end are four activities/programs that are rather rarely offered to young adults. These "rare" young adult ministries are "parenting groups/classes" (only 18% of parishes offer this ministry), "worship services specifically for young adults" (13%), "dating groups" (10%) and "singles groups" (9%);
- ❖ Offering young adults the opportunities (1) *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 (2) the possibility *to reach out into wider community* (via "community service activities," "mission trips") are the two most crucial areas of activities for the overall success of young adult ministries and attracting young adult church members. Conversely, 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 a relatively small effect on attracting and engaging the young adult church members;
- ❖ If Orthodox parishes desire to improve their young adult ministries and attract more young adult members, they should pay much greater attention to "mission trips," "prayer groups, spiritual retreats" and "theology and contemporary issues study groups/classes" specifically designed for young adults;

- ❖ Out of seven characteristics describing the style of worship in an Orthodox parish, the words “joyful” and “inspirational” have the strongest relation with a parish’s growth in young adult members and presence of “Good/Excellent” young adult ministries. In other words, *the parishes where worship services are “joyful” and “inspirational” are the parishes that are very likely to grow in the young adult members and have “Good/Excellent” young adult ministries.* On the opposite end are two characteristics of worship that have relatively little or no influence: worship being “reverent” or “innovative.” In other words, the fact that a parish has a “reverent” or “innovative” style of worship has no impact on parish’s growth in young adult members and presence of thriving young adult ministries;
- ❖ Young adults are especially attracted to the parishes that offer vibrant spiritual life and are open to and welcome new people into a parish community. The presence of various small interest groups in a parish, effective usage of social media, parish’s readiness for innovation and change, mutual support and help among parishioners, involvement of a parish in a social justice work, clarity of vision for a parish’s future and other characteristics also have a positive influence on attracting young adults. Yet, it is spiritual vibrancy and openness to newcomers that have special appeal for the young adults;
- ❖ The vast majority of parish clergy (71%) believe that the greatest problem in ministering to young adult members are young adults themselves, because they have little interest in participating in parish life;
- ❖ The involvement of a parish with a local OCF chapter and parish’s success in serving its own young adult members go hand in hand with each other. That is, compared to other parishes, the parishes that are involved with local OCF chapters:
 - Have significantly higher presence of young adults among parishioners
 - Have experienced growth in the number of young adult parishioners in the past three years
 - Are much more likely to evaluate their young adult ministries as “Good/Excellent”
- ❖ Typically, the work of a parish with a local OCF chapter is limited to a parish priest who serves as its spiritual advisor. Less than half of the parishes that are involved with OCF either offer to OCF chapters some financial support (48%) or sponsor various OCF events (42%). And only one-in-seven (14%) of parishes that are involved with OCF have permanent boards/committees whose primary goal is to work with OCF chapters.