

## The Importance of Parish Stewardship in Today's World

By Diana Grina

I will start out by saying that I will not be speaking about money, and our budget, and the details of how we will pay our bills...or all the programs we want you to be involved in. What I WILL be talking about is survival...that is the survival of the Holy Orthodox Christian church, and our role in this, and how it relates to stewardship within the confines of our parish as part of the Church. I will take a worldview, and hope you will see the relevance to our mission and how our role as stewards here relates to the big picture - that each of you will realize how important you are to the future of the church as a whole. We have found comfort in our beautiful thriving community. BUT, without our impassioned active involvement to make step-fold progress, there is no guarantee that what is here now will be here tomorrow, no guarantee that it will grow and flourish.

**What is our mission as stewards of the faith?** It is to spread the faith, make it grow, and make sure it perpetuates into the future. If we don't take up that mission, this structure is perfectly fine for our needs. Yes Sunday school is a little cramped, but the sanctuary is not... and without growth, eventually the Sunday school will be quite comfortably spacious. If we are building a new church, and we want it to thrive and fulfill its mission from God, then our mission must be much bigger than to 'grow a little', get some parishioners from other parishes, etc. It needs to fully reflect our charge to spread the Holy Gospel beyond the confines of our four walls, to reach the un-churched and to bring them into the church. The organization, Orthodox Natural Church Development, cites quality characteristics of a healthy growing parish. One of them is 'need oriented evangelism'... to quote "the healthy parish is attempting to address the questions, fears and needs of non-Christians, the (literally) half of the country that isn't even baptized at this point in time." Why is this important? Because it really says that if we truly take up the mission we were given, there is no telling how big our church might be... 1000 families would not be out of the question.

**Stewardship** is, uniquely, an American phenomenon. It is in America that religious institutions are not funded by the government. This is drastically different from a good part of the world today and from the church in its infancy, which was funded by the Emperor, who used the imperial riches to build churches and pay the clergy... to the point that being a priest was one of the best paid jobs in town, and a parish's clergy was so plentiful, numbering in the hundreds, delivering the many services from morning til night...

In America, the parishioners steward the course of the parish for today and tomorrow, and ensure the resources will carry through the next generation and beyond - without the wealth of an empire, or hundreds of clergy at our side, but with a strong spirit of the faith. This role is so much more consistent with the precept that we are a member of the Body of Christ, and we are to protect it and nurture it. We sing "All who are baptized in Christ are clothed in Christ", to remind us of this. On the day of our baptism, each of us took up the cross and became part of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, which is the church. Yet, as I said, there is no guarantee that the Holy Orthodox Church will be here for our children and grandchildren. In fact, if you really follow the news and read the statistics, the conclusion would be just the opposite and you might conclude that we are dancing on the deck of the Titanic, just before it goes down.

**The national statistics** portray a disappointing picture of the Orthodox church going habits of Greek Americans. Let's look at the GOA, the largest Orthodox denomination in America. Indeed the number of practicing Greek Orthodox Christians pales in comparison to the number of people with any Greek ethnicity. Recent data from several census shows about 1 mm residents claim some Greek ancestry, less than half are somewhat connected to a GO church and of these only 100,000 are regular attendees. So, only 10% of the 'full or part' Greek ethnic population are orthodox church-goers. This 100,000 people are supporting the faith here, providing the new clergy, and supporting the Patriarchate abroad as well. A daunting task for such a small group.

Where'd all the people go??? And for a faith committed to spread the Gospel, why are the numbers so abysmal? One answer is that the church wasn't prepared for the only partially Greek population that emerged through sharply decreased immigration, and interchristian marriage-which represented the majority. Another is that it wasn't prepared for the challenges of youth and families of today. Both of these the Archdiocese is trying to address with dedicated ministries, but the efforts are late and modest. Suffice it to say, we are looking to grow our church at a time when church going isn't a priority. It will be a challenge to fight the statistical trend. But we must.

**The environment we live in** presents many challenges. Much of the evidence points to the fact that the church, the Body of Christ is under attack...and has been for quite some time... And it is in this environment that we are trying to build a church and to grow.

We recall that in 1453, Constantinople, the seat of the Orthodox Church, collapsed under siege by the Ottoman Turks. The beautiful Hagia Sofia was turned into a Mosque. The wealth of the church was taken, the leadership disbanded or killed, the Christian faithful persecuted. Can you imagine trying to build a church in this environment? Over the next several hundred years the Christians who lived under Turkish rule adapted to the Turkish culture to survive, speaking the language in public, wearing the local dress. Any Greek had to be spoken in private. Yes in Greece this changed in 1821. Yet all was not restored. The Hagia Sofia is still not a church. Our Patriarch is still under Muslim rule, who make it virtually impossible for there to be a successor. In fact there was an inspiring article written entitled "The last Patriarch?" And we see the economic turmoil in Greece. How long do we think the church there will survive??? And then there is Egypt, the largest stronghold of Christendom in the middle-east, with a very uncertain future right now.

The siege that began in 1453 is not over. The church is still under attack from many forces. Some overt and some covert. If we look at the past few decades, we will see that much of what was assumed would be forever is gone. We live in a time where the use of the words "Merry Christmas" in public is looked at with disdain. We are encouraged to say it only in private. Schools no longer teach Christmas carols...Some tried to ban 'St. Valentines day'. In some public schools wearing a cross on a chain has been challenged, and the public display of even the American flag, which stands for religious freedom, has also been challenged. And higher education in America, originally founded on Christian principles, is at odds with Christian teachings -and the liberal thinking pervading institutions of higher learning goes against everything our church stands for... and this has spread into the educational system across the globe, at all levels. So, how much different are we from the persecuted Christians living under Ottoman rule for centuries? We have adapted to the popular culture even when at odds with what we believe in and perhaps we are numb to the changes that have taken place over the years and the dramatic effect it has had on church attendance.

**Churches of all denominations** are struggling with the emptiness of their parishes. Recently in Raritan, NJ, a 168 year old Reformed church- much larger than this building- was sold because the remaining 15 families could no longer support it... and the buyer immediately re-sold it for top dollar and it became a Buddhist temple... the 15 families were so upset that this was the ultimate end for their 168 year old Christian church. Look at this structure. Surely its founders had a bigger plan in mind than the small congregation that now exists. Without real growth, our new church can become something we never intended, such as a mosque, or a Buddhist temple. It is interesting that the only house of worship destroyed on 9/11 was St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox church ... and a decade later there is 'endless discussion' about whether to rebuild it, while a mosque gains planning board approval.

**So, how do we steward St. Anna in this environment?** Is it just simply Time, Talent, and Treasure? In my opinion, before one can contribute any of those, in a way that really makes a step-fold difference, the first element of Stewardship is a fighting protective spirit to prevent the

extinction of the Orthodox Christian faith, to 'spread the good news' and share it beyond the four walls of the church. And if we think of the society we live in, and the stats, without our active involvement, extinction is the mathematical conclusion ... But we can steward it to a different conclusion. When you think of your Stewardship pledge, and your ability to help with the various ministries, think first that without your support, the church as a whole will not thrive. Think that the more people we have, the more priests we will have, the more teachers, the more stewards to spread the faith and continue to grow, the more soldiers of Christ to fight the onslaught of everything working against living a life according to the faith. Think of the history that has transpired, and that which has yet to be written: The history we want to see written.

We are happy that we have grown to app.100 families. I remember when that number was 30. Now we have to get to 200 or 300. We need to find people who are not regular church goers...they need to be inspired to come, to stay, and to become new stewards. And this is not as easy as finding Greek surnames in the phone book and inviting them to church, assuming they are Orthodox and just haven't discovered us yet. We need to be prepared with need based evangelism. What is it that we can provide that other churches aren't? Once they come, if they come, we need to inspire them to stay. In this way, not only will our own community grow, but the faith will grow overall.

The Stewardship committee is putting together an outreach plan to identify, call and invite families to the church through a series of small informal gatherings. We need help not only to do the initial outreach, but to sustain the relationships with people and help them to find value in our community and the faith. And every event we pour our energy into going forward must have outreach as a key element. I hope everyone will be able to take up the challenge, with a strong spirit, and a sense that this must be done. We have come so far...let's make it really last and mean something for future generations. Thank you....

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