

Fix This Urban Parish – Case 1

A Heritage Parish – Founded 1900

Location Info

- Rustville - a major Midwestern industrial city. City population is 80% of what it was 35 years ago.
- *Many* Orthodox alternatives. Numerous substantial OCA parishes are in the city along with 1-2 of every ethnic group. 20+ Orthodox churches within 30 miles.
- Urban location -8 minutes from city center.
- Neighborhood, once dilapidated, has enjoyed a rebirth/gentrification as an urban arts area in recent years. Hardly suburbia, boutique coffee shops, art galleries starting to sprout. Low cost housing was torn down and new condos are available.
- Demographics of neighborhood includes a spectrum of ethnic, socioeconomic, age groups and interests.
- Drug dealers are still easily found nearby. Poverty, though much of it relocated to other places, is not hard to find.
- A major urban University exists in the city. This parish is closest to that University.

Building

- Russian style onion domed building vintage 1905. While “Russian” label long ago was dropped from street sign, the visage still proclaims “Russian”. This is not a typical “American church”.
- A landmark in the city. A distinctive element of the *neighborhood*, the church is highly visible from a major expressway. Hillside perch embosses it as part of the city skyline.
- Parking is available. Modest parish hall is good enough.
- Old and expensive to maintain. Registered landmark status limits various actions.

Parish Membership

- A parish of 450 adults thirty-five years ago, today there are (liberally) 200 adults and 40 children. Trend has been slowly consistently drifting downward.
- Median parishioner age is 59. Burials outpace baptisms by 5:1. Without new people parish will decline by >40-50% in 20 years.
- Once a totally blue collar community a clear white collar feel coexists with once calloused hands.
- 80% of the households have at least one “cradle” (husband or wife).
- *Many* parishioners come to *this parish* because it is their family parish. Raised here. Mom still goes here. The family lived in this neighborhood –then moved to the suburbs. Since it’s a family thing this may not always be *about* Jesus Christ to some.
- Most parishioners drive over 25 minutes (on Sunday AM) to get to this church. 90% of them drive past one or more OCA churches to get to this church. A few --very few – actually live in the neighborhood.

- *There are converts in this parish.* In some families both spouses are converts. Some single converts are present on the parish rolls. Though the parish clearly has a Slavic ethnic feel it is far from a totally closed “club”. Paschal “baskets” will have a variety of foods.
- 15 new households have been added to the parish in ten years. Many more have left due to death, job or parish transfer and fading away.

Parish Atmosphere and Ministry

- Attendance: Divine Liturgy - 140. Vespers 20+ persons. A full liturgical schedule is offered. Gospel is preached well.
- The historic colorful building attracts visitors/tourists on Sunday AM. Many come looking to be “entertained” by a big cathedral, foreign experience.
- Parish is capable of change –though this is never easy. Liturgy has been updated to offer a post autocephaly OCA style feel. Services are 98% English.
- First Orthodox parish established in a city now with many Orthodox churches. Yet, other than distinctive architecture, parish is quiet it and enjoys no real “primacy” on the Orthodox landscape. No particular differentiating identity that would draw new members. Parish is probably not less vibrant than most others, if people move to town they likely will not live closest to this parish.
- Stewardship is a challenge -- though better than in some parishes. Typical donation per household is \$850/yr. 12% of households donate more than \$3000/yr to the parish. Because per capita donations are low, Diocesan/OCA assessments eat up 16% of the budget. Pledge program begun recently.
- The parish, due to the generosity of 2-3 recently departed parishioner patrons, has an endowment of 1.2 million dollars.
- As they reflect on the parish status many wince. Remembering yesteryear; deep down the parish senses it ain’t what it was but they’ve not totally confronted it. Most external characteristics are same as in past – just smaller, slower or less frequent.
- Laughter is present on Sunday AM. People are happy to see one another. Though little happens in between.
- Parish “board of trustees” populated with a spectrum of personalities. Mostly long standing members. Most of the meeting discusses M&M --- money and maintenance.
- Most new ideas die limited by laity time and energy to execute them. *People are busy ya know!*
- Church school: OK. The curriculum could use facelift. Many teachers would enjoy a break.
- Adult ed/Bible study – very low attendance.
- An adult FOCA chapter limps on struggling for a raison d’être.
- Youth events occur sporadically.
- The parish participates in a few neighborhood street fair events. Groups often tour church.
- Modest charitable activity collecting canned goods has recently begun. Prior to this “charitable” meant IOCC, “Christmas stocking”, and aid to seminarians. Less than 1% of parish income is directed to charitable purposes.

Your Assignment

DON'T BE TEPID IN THESE ASSIGNMENTS. LOOK FOR NEW, BOLD, CREATIVE (THOUGH NOT RIDICULOUS) IDEAS

Group A

You have been assigned as the new priest in this parish.

1. What do you see as the key strengths of this parish? What would you build upon?
2. What assets and strengths are underutilized?
3. What actions would you take and Why
4. What assumptions are you making?
5. What would you do with the endowment? What ground rules would you set for its use?
6. What key competencies need to be developed in this community? What does this parish need to become “good at” to flourish.

Group B

1. Which would you work on first to strengthen this parish and to begin to build a clear identity? Where would you put your efforts? Select from:
 - a. Authentic Community -- Building community internal to the parish?
 - b. Respectful Evangelization & Growth --Seek to grow by
 - i. Learning to engage the neighborhood? lost sheep??
 - c. Active service -- Reaching out to the charitable and human needs of the neighborhood; expecting nothing in return
 - d. Inspiring Worship – Truly Orthodox & American
2. Describe one or more key change you would make?
3. What are some first steps you might take?

Group C: Newspaper Article -- 2019

1. Write 6-12 bullet points (sentences *with verbs and nouns* --not just 2-3 words) that would be the key content points for a “Religion in Our City” section newspaper article¹ to be written about this (now “successful”) parish in 5 -10 years. What would this place look like?
 - a. You could include a number of before and after points.
 - b. Or a sort of timeline story: “In 1900 it was... in 1970 ... in 2009 ... and now this parish approaches its 120th anniversary having remade itself into”

¹ Assuming newspapers exist!