

Ten Principles of Becoming: *A Small Orthodox Parish with a Bright Future*

At the 2017 Small Parish Forum attendees worked to create a consensus list of ten important “principles of vibrant small parishes”. The principles are based around the conference’s basic premise that:

Small is NOT Big. Small is OK.

Small parishes are different from large ones. Small churches are *not* miniature big churches. They think feel & act different. There is nothing wrong with being small. Small parishes can live a life in Christ without necessarily becoming “big”.

Bigger is not better. Better is better. The advantages of small parishes are love, community, fellowship and authenticity. Build on these.

While many more principles were suggested these are the key values, beliefs and standards that attendees felt are most important and should be shared with other Orthodox small parishes.

Foundations

1. **The Church is for Everyone** – Often parishes, particularly small ones, can have a tendency to welcome only “people like us”.

2. **Your Parish is a Living Organism** - Parishes can (and do) die. Not every parish can grow, but any parish can become more vibrant if it wants to do so.

Clergy and Laity are *co-responsible* for the health and future of their parish. Together they chart a course for change and a better future.

3. **Vision and Aspiration** – Small Parishes with a future *engage* with the future. They define their mission, their particular vision and understand their values. All with a spirit of hopefulness. They realistically assess gifts, talents and resources. They stop doing things that are no longer useful or do not fit their mission. They ask good, tough questions.

4. **Take Risks. Don’t Accept Mediocrity.** - Small parishes with a future try new things. They are not afraid to take (intelligent) risks. Adopt a spirit of hopeful dissatisfaction.

5. **Don’t Take on Too Much** – You cannot “fix”/strengthen everything at once. Your parish has become what it is, for good or not so good, over many years. Make the decision to intentionally work to strengthen one or two areas at a time. Be discerning in choices.

Critical Practices

6. **Build Fellowship** – Do everything you can to build on the strength of fellowship. Pray for one another. Assist one another. Build the social fabric of the parish. Engage across generations.

“Any Orthodox parish can become more vibrant. All that is required is that its members, beginning with its leaders, be firmly resolved to have it so.

Their afflictions will be great, as Christ has promised, but their successes are assured by His victory. ‘In the world you have tribulation,’ Jesus says to his apostles, ‘but take courage, I have overcome the world.’”

Fr. Thomas Hopko

“Revitalization is available to any small church that is willing to: work together; commit to a faithful vision; set out in pursuit of that vision; utilize all resources available to it; go where spirit of God leads.”

“Small Church is the Right Size” David Ray

7. **Active Worship** - Worshipping in the best manner possible is an imperative for Orthodox small parishes. Good Orthodox worship is active, participative, holy, joyous and thankful. It engages the mind and heart.
8. **Any Church Can be Charitable** - No church is too small to reach out to others in need. Serving others breaks you free from the shackles of self-absorption.
9. **Replenishing Is Imperative** – To be a parish with a future you must retain current parishioners AND attract new ones. Current parishioners may move away and they will die. Growing is good. Replenishing is imperative. Communicate the parish in an honest, attractive and positive way to the local community. Engage newcomers by ‘inviting them in’ to what may be a very close and (perhaps unintentionally) *closed* community.
10. **Reasonable Clergy Compensation** - Pay your priest according to reasonable standards. If the priest needs secular employment clarify the division of labor and priest’s expectations. (Saturday vespers? Sunday liturgy, Holy week schedules? Feast days? Visitations? Deanery meetings? Ministry participation? etc.) The greater the need for priest’ supplementary income (secular employment) the more lay persons need to assist. Regardless of time commitment, the priest can’t and shouldn’t do everything. Many tasks can be done by lay persons.

“...authenticity levels the playing field for small churches. Large churches have many obstacles to overcome to appear authentic.”

The Strategically Small Church

“The strong commitment of members to one another—to kinfolk’s ties, the concept of one big family with modest program emphasis tends to reinforce the *single cell nature* of the small church. When combined with the intergenerational nature of a small church these forces tend to enhance the caring nature of fellowship *at the cost of potential growth*. These unifying principles *tend to make the small church exclusionary*. This tends to make it hard for the small church to reach, attract and assimilate new members. *The more closely knit the fellowship the more difficult it is to achieve growth.*” *“The Small Church is Different”* Schaller

Questions? Need further info on building a future for your small Orthodox parish?

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