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Calling**

*Helping people and parishes discover and
live their stewardship callings so that
they may have a good account before
the awesome judgment seat of Christ*

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**THIS IS AN ABBREVIATED VERSION OF THE ENTIRE SCRIPT FOR THE
APRIL 1, 2020 STEWARDSHIP CALLING FIRST WEDNESDAY**

**(This version merely includes the specific recommendations in 10 Key
Strategic Areas and some helpful resources. You can separately
download the full script text for a lot more information and inspiration.)**

**Parish Pandemic & Emergency Preparedness Planning - The 10
Strategic Areas In Which Churches & The Faithful Should Focus**

When the COVID-19 pandemic is nothing more than the story we tell, what will be the story you tell about it, and about what you did during the crisis? Will your story be about how you didn't go to work for weeks or about how you worked for weeks to help those who needed help? Will your story be about how you binge-watched a show on your favorite streaming service, or will it be about your service to others? Will your story be about how you missed going to church, or instead, about how you actually became the church?

If we truly wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ, this is our time. Orthodox Christianity was made to be a big part of the cure for the devastation of COVID-19.

In times like these, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ taught us that we were to be at our best. He instructed us to "**Go and do likewise**" and serve others who need help. So, the question is, what are you doing today to write the COVID-19 story you will want to tell in the future?

Here are specific recommendations in 10 critical strategic areas which you and your church might consider implementing in these trying times and some other helpful resources so that we can become the "**light of the world**" which the Lord called us to be in Matthew Chapter 5 Verse 14 as we write an incredible story we can tell about what we did during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We will explore specifically what our churches and faithful can do in following 10 specific areas in times of disruptive crises like the COVID-19 global pandemic to better serve our existing faithful and better witness to the message of Christ and serve others:

- 1) ADVANCE CHURCH CONTINGENCY PLANNING**
- 2) PARISHIONER SAFETY**
- 3) PARISHIONER COMMUNICATIONS**
- 4) TECHNOLOGY & INFRASTRUCTURE**
- 5) RESOURCES FOR PARISHIONERS, THE PARISH AND COMMUNITY**
- 6) PARISH FINANCIAL PLANNING**
- 7) PERSONAL FINANCIAL PLANNING**
- 8) BRINGING PEOPLE CLOSER TO CHRIST AND EACH OTHER
(while standing 6 feet apart)**
- 9) STAYING TRUE TO YOUR MISSION AND VISION**
- 10) PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS**

1) ADVANCE PLANNING

As I mentioned at the beginning of this program, best practices for all organizations is to have a continuity plan that address all contingencies in the case of the interruption of their principal activities. I know most churches do not currently have one. The exceptions are parishes in places where there are frequent hurricanes, tornados or other disruptive weathers events.

Now is the time to create the playbook for the future. The first thing I ask churches to do is to have every ministry and organization in your church begin by writing down the problems they are experiencing during this disruptive crisis, and what they are doing to continue their operations during the pandemic. After we get through this difficult chapter, we can fully document a comprehensive contingency plan that will form the continuity plan for the future.

One of the most critical advance planning tools that every person and organization needs is a financial cushion. This is what a rainy-day fund or emergency savings account is all about. For example, best practices would suggest that each church or church organization needs at least a 3-month financial cushion, and better yet, a 6-month safety net. By the way, the same advice applies to all individuals and households. However, this is often easier said than done.

This financial and resource cushion is critical and hopefully will be one of the lessons learned from this disruptive COVID-19 crisis. I am not talking about hoarding, just prudent planning. Money is not the only resource that can be righteously stored by a church. It is also wise to have a supply of certain paper goods, generic over the counter medical supplies, canned foods and other pantry items that can be shared with parishioners or anyone in their community who is in substantial need.

In the absence of a preplanned, fully vetted crisis continuity plan, what does a church do? A good starting point is to continue the rhythm of the church services and meetings of church leadership and ministries. Our churches should continue to remain on the same schedule as much as possible, especially during critical crisis times, even if they need to gather remotely through technology. Dealing with every aspect of the disruptive crisis **CANNOT fall only on the parish priest. He needs our help.**

While many church councils might only meet monthly, during a crisis they should plan to meet more frequently, either as a group, or at least as a smaller executive committee. This can be potentially very problematic because your leadership team typically includes many lay leaders with day jobs that also may be dealing with the consequences of the same disruptive crisis in the work place and in their homes that is negatively impacting your church. Their business lives and livelihoods are being devastated, so getting their bandwidth to focus on church challenges may be even more challenging than ever before.

Clearly, flexibility is essential, and this is why having a nimble and dedicated church Executive Committee and other ministry leadership is critical. This is a good operational practice even when there is no pandemic or disruptive crisis. However, now is a great time to implement the best

practice of a well-organized and empowered Executive Committee and ministry leadership team.

One of the tools I feature in the Igniting The Flame of True Orthodox Christian Stewardship program is the formation of a Council of Ministries. This church organizational structure is highly effective at all times, and is particularly nimble and responsive in times of disruptive crises.

In the future I will be presenting a Stewardship Calling program here on Ancient Faith Radio that will be specifically focused on the Council of Ministries model. In the meantime, if you are interested in this topic, please email me at Bill@stewardshipcalling.com and I will forward more information from my Stewardship Calling website and the Metropolis of Atlanta Strategic Planning portal:

[\(https://atlstrategicplan.org/home/completed-goal-materials/1-5-council-of-ministries/\)](https://atlstrategicplan.org/home/completed-goal-materials/1-5-council-of-ministries/)

In addition to the proper leadership organizational structure, as far as they are empowered by the rules that govern your church, every organization should have what is generally known as a corporate delegation of authority policy, or a CDA. This CDA is what establishes the rules regarding who is authorized to approve each action and what signing authorities which officers have in each circumstance.

The reason I mention CDA delegations of authorities now, is because if they are in place in your church, then the officers and Executive Committee knows the extent of their authority to act without the need to convene an entire church council (or general assembly), particularly when getting together in person is not possible. I have prepared CDAs for several churches and if you want further information please email me at Bill@stewardshipcalling.com

Advance planning also requires having as many of your documents and policies in electronic form and accessible in the cloud to ensure that they remain easily available to clergy or other church officers who need them. Best advance planning also entails ensuring that you have electronic access to your funds and bank accounts so that you are not burdened with

the need to sign physical checks when you may not be able to gather together or access the office where they are housed.

Especially when you have a best practices 2 signature authority requirement for all checks and payments in your CDA, it is even more critical to have advance planning to ensure that your leadership will have full access to its financial accounts and resources in the face of any disruptive crisis, and that they know who has what authority. For example, do you have the remote ability to continue to pay the salaries for those church workers whose livelihoods depend on us, and the other service providers to whom our church owes payments?

When access to the physical church is restricted, or even prohibited, the church building's ongoing maintenance and safety practices must also be documented and accessible. For example, how do you ensure that you have access to air conditioning systems (or heating systems) to ensure that there is no damage to your physical plant? Do you have a backup plan with someone who lives within walking distance of the church who can ensure that things are properly addressed in your church or ministry buildings?

Similar attention now has to be devoted to ensure the continued availability of your technology. Whether it is your live streaming abilities, websites, online giving platform or other remote data storage, your church needs to have a detailed plan to ensure the right people have continued access to, and control over, everything they need in order to ensure safety, security, continuity and the ability to reopen as soon as possible when the disruptive crisis has passed.

There are many examples from governmental and business sectors of model plans that churches should adapt and consider implementing. I recently ran across one created in 2003 by the United States Department of Justice called their Systems Development Life Cycle Guidance Document. It is one example of such a comprehensive plan, and I have included a link to where it can be accessed in my program notes for tonight's show that you can access at stewardshipcalling.com under the internet radio tab by scrolling down to the April 1, 2020 program listing.

United States Department of Justice called their Systems Development Life Cycle Guidance Document

<https://www.justice.gov/archive/jmd/irm/lifecycle/table.htm>

The bottom line is that all of this requires advance planning. If you don't have those plans, now is the time to start documenting them, both for the present pandemic and for the next inevitable disruptive crisis that develops. Best planning practices were even taught in Holy Scripture.

In Jeremiah 29:11 we learn *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

Having begun to address the need for advance planning, let's transition to focusing on a narrower second specific strategic area for attention, namely:

2) PARISHIONER SAFETY ON CHURCH PROPERTIES

The topic of parishioner safety on church properties is well documented in most circumstances. Whether it is the need for proper disability access, ease of movement of seniors or young children or ensuring sufficient lighting at night, parishioner safety on the church property is a critical duty of all church leaders.

Disruptive crises present unique issues. Churches in hurricane zones understand the need to have resources to stormproof the church facilities. Those of you in the snow belt clearly understand the need for proper snow and ice removal equipment and procedures.

The trick comes from having parishioners' safety plans that address an even wider array of possible disruptive crises. Who could have imagined that a pandemic would require significant stocks of very particular cleaning supplies, from large quantities of soap, to hand sanitizer and Clorox wipes (or their equivalents) to other ways to properly sanitize the facilities and properties from the scourge of the day? Yet here we are.

Again, doing the research well in advance to anticipate as many different types of disruptions is critical, even though it is difficult to imagine all likely

scenarios. Having written plans for as many of them as we can is equally as essential.

No one would argue that providing for the physical safety of everyone entering the facilities is critical. Thus, such contingency plans must start from the outside in. They must include physical access to the parking lot and driveways, as well as access and egress to and from all buildings and facilities themselves.

These methodical parishioner Safety Plans should at least address: evacuation, sheltering-in-place, lockdown and lock out. Of course, in the face of the current COVID-19 pandemic we naturally prioritize limiting access and completely sanitizing all surfaces with which humans interact. But this facility planning must also include another disruptive crisis that regrettably in today's troubled times several churches have faced, namely an active shooter intrusion. So, what is your church plan if someone enters your premises with the intent to cause harm to persons or property?

These facilities contingency plans must also include contingencies for when hazardous elements are physically introduced into the ecosystem. Whether those substances are hazardous wastes, dangerous substances, or in the case of COVID-19, airborne viruses. And this is where it can get difficult, particularly if you are trying to reinvent the wheel.

In the COVID-19 scenarios, one must ask what surfaces should you clean and how should you clean them in order to minimize the spread of any virus? A few weeks ago, when parishioners were still attending live services, I was heartened to hear of parishes taking thoughtful precautions. This included things like checking temperatures of people before they entered, wiping down all human contact surfaces (both inside and outside the church and even the restroom facilities), shutting down drinking fountains and coffee hours, and even ensuring the proper sanitization of the Liturgy books after their use by anyone.

As laudatory as all of these practices are, they regrettably are the tip of the iceberg. Fortunately, churches do not need to start from scratch in creating these protocols and plans. The CDC, Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention, located here in Atlanta, has produced many helpful resources from which you should begin your plan.

For example, in addition to extensive guidelines, the CDC has published directives for any healthcare facility or place where elderly or young people reside or congregate. They have recently updated and released a specific guidance they call *Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility - Everyday Steps, Steps When Someone is Sick, and Considerations for Employers*.

This helpful tool can be found on the CDC website, and I have included the specific url links to this item and many other similar helpful online resources on the script for tonight's program that you can access by going to stewardshipcalling.com and the internet radio AFR tab and scrolling down to the April 1, 2020 programs notes.

SELECTED CDC RESOURCES REGARDING FACILITY AND OTHER SAFETY

Resources for Businesses and Employers

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/businesses-employers.html>

Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility - Everyday Steps, Steps When Someone is Sick, and Considerations for Employers

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

List N: Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2

<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

Resources for Clinics and Healthcare Facilities

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/index.html>

We could devote a lot more time to the critical considerations of physical and parishioner safety; however, because our church access is currently being limited, in the interests of time please allow me to move onto the third critical strategic area of focus in a disruptive crisis:

3) PARISHIONER COMMUNICATIONS

We could devote a whole hour to the topic of church communications and still not begin to scratch the surface. But given its paramount importance at this critical time, I will start by focusing your attention on 4 specific things: Frequency, Tone, Content and HITA, yes, I did say HITA. HITA is an acronym for Honesty, Integrity Transparency and Accountability. Let's spend a few moments on each of these four critical areas of Frequency, Tone, Content and HITA.

#1 Frequency- In a time of crisis, more frequent communication is generally better than less frequent, particularly in the beginning when there will be the most questions, doubts and confusion. So, I would suggest that at the very minimum, you should communicate with your church family at least weekly throughout the course of the crisis. However, at the beginning of a disruptive crisis, more frequent communications are even better. Obviously, you also need to communicate immediately if there is any important or time-critical item or change, such as a cancellation in services or similar disruptions to the regular rhythm of your church life.

The key is to set the expectation of regular communications with your church family without inundating them with information and causing them to tune out. Let your faithful know that you and their church will be a source of information on which they can rely, particularly when they need it, not just when the church needs something from them.

#2 Tone – The second point I want to make about your regular communications involves the tone of your communications. The simple rule to remember is to please just be yourself and don't be "tone deaf." Communicate to your faithful in the tone, spirit and style in which you regularly communicate. This approach is helpful, calming, and comfortable.

Otherwise, if you try and communicate in a style and voice other than your own, it will be clearly visible and appear inauthentic. It may actually also create confusion and doubt or arouse suspicions. Like "I wonder what he is hiding or who told him to say that because that clearly doesn't sound anything like him."

If you are good at using humor, well placed and good taste humor can actually help alleviate some of the tension, pressure and fear. If this is not how you regularly communicate, then this is not the time to try out your “new material.” Just be yourself.

However please be as positive and encouraging as possible. Uplifting crisis communications in times of trouble are usually better received than gloom and doom pronouncements.

#3 Content. In any communications, content is king. If you get the aesthetics of your communications wrong but have amazing content, you’ll be OK. If you get the style perfect, and have lousy content, you can really mess things up. Nothing new here. But even more care must be devoted to crisis communications.

When we talk about critical and compelling content, please try and make sure it is not theoretical or just historical stories. Some relevant historical stories can be helpful, but only if you bring it to the current application or moral of the story.

In whatever crisis you are experiencing, people are living through something unusual or untraditional or downright scary. They don’t need a professorial lecture. They need something that either gives them hope, specific answers, context or resources from which they can discover the answers themselves.

Please make sure your communications are practical and helpful. Perhaps you might find it valuable to think about what you would say if you were communicating with your older parents or grandparents in a crisis. You likely would not deliver a historical diatribe or educational lecture. Instead, you would give them useful information they needed, in a language they would understand, and encouragement and faith they can actually apply in their daily lives.

Even if you were to refer to a Biblical character, you have to try and make them alive in today’s time in your messaging to receive the highest relevance. In other words, please make it real.

The more current, real-time stories you can share of people overcoming their fears or adversity in the face of crisis, or helping someone else during the crisis, or just doing something good and nice for someone, the more you will help inspire positivity and augment faith.

There are an enormous number of studies that show how positive messaging is both biologically and psychologically motivating, empowering and uplifting. Give hope and you point people to the brighter future and away from whatever darkness they are experiencing.

In the last week, I fielded calls from concerned laity complaining about how long it took before they heard from their clergy. I also received a few calls from concerned clergy about the confusion they experienced before they received clear instructions from their Hierarchy. In both situations, I told them that it takes a lot of extra time to get every aspect of the crisis communications correct, and it is critical that all the information be correct and delivered with the proper tone.

Perhaps most critically when we talk about getting the content right, we mean to provide that which the reader or listener needs to know. That doesn't always mean what they want to know, although you should make every effort to provide them the information they want to know as long as it passes the triple filter test created by Greek philosopher Socrates.

Socrates reportedly tried to get people to stop spreading rumors or unhelpful innuendo. He said all communications should pass three tests: #1 "Am I sure that what I am going to say is true?" #2 "Is what I'm going to say a good thing?" And #3 "Do I really need to say it and is it useful?"

I'm not just talking about stop sharing fake news, although that is a very good rule. It's just that sometimes we might pass along harmful or hurtful information under the guise of being transparent. You should not hide important truth, but there is no need to make things worse by sharing information which is not useful or does not need to be shared.

Social media has its benefits as well as its proven weaknesses. It is so easy to start, or spread, a story and see it go viral. How often have we all

succumbed to such stories that were mindlessly, albeit not maliciously, passed along by our friends or social media contacts.

Just this past weekend, many of us were told that the monks from Mount Athos wanted us to do something immediately. It turned out not to be true, but I received this message from many good friends before it was debunked.

In this case, nothing bad would have happened if we followed those instructions. But at the same time, a lot of energy was wasted spreading misinformation, and had it a malevolent intent, it might have caused injury or hurt or emotional pain. Moreover, it misrepresented the guidance from our blessed monastics on the Holy Mountain.

So, please I ask everyone to put into practice the great ancient wisdom of brother Socrates and not share anything unless and until you know #1 it is true, #2 it is a good thing, and #3 it is useful to share.

#4 HITA Honesty Integrity Transparency Accountability. Finally, allow me to offer a very few, simple points about the imperative of speaking with HITA - Honesty Integrity Transparency Accountability. Indeed, I presented a Stewardship Calling program here on Ancient Faith Radio devoted to this critical topic in church-world. I recommend you listen to the Ancient Faith Radio Stewardship Calling program dated July 29, 2018 which you can access either through the AFR Stewardship Calling pages or through the Stewardship Calling website under the internet radio tab.

The importance of communicating with complete honesty, integrity, transparency and accountability cannot be overstated. How many times have we heard our leaders, or their underlings, trying to find a way to change what was quickly and poorly communicated and replace it with what they should have said or meant to say? We even have a cute phrase that describes it. We call it “walking back” a statement. According to Websters dictionary, walking back something means to retreat from or distance oneself from a previously stated opinion or position.

In an interesting rabbit hole aside, Senator Chuck Hagel traced the “walk back” expression to “State Department parlance.” LexisNexis shows that it started appearing in the mid-1980’s, usually in the context of international

relations and a statement made by a governmental official which required clarification by some lower diplomat.

Regrettably in this latest pandemic episode, we have seen numerous examples of some news outlet or other official, having to “walk back” and modify or clarify something they, or their superior, reported. That rarely instills confidence in the communicator. It’s OK to change the story if something external occurs to change it, or if you get new reliable data. It is not good for you to get the story wrong in the first place if it could have been avoided.

The lesson is to take however much time you need to get it right, and in the best tone, the first time you publish it. Usually, it helps to have a second and even third pair of trusted eyes to look it over. They might catch inconsistencies or wording that implies something unintended. Equally valuable, they might help you decide to NOT say something you’d be better off omitting. Even for tonight’s show, I asked my wife, Audrey, to review my program script to make sure my message was clear and as effective as it could be.

I am always reminded of the sage advice of my next-door neighbor’s father who was from Burgaw, North Carolina. Don’t worry, you probably can’t find Burgaw on the map. But the advice is noteworthy. He said: “You should always tell the truth. But you don’t always need to be a tell’in it.” Sometimes, the full details can create more anxiety than a helpful summary.

Perhaps no modern politician has provided greater examples of being thoughtful of what to say than Sir Winston Churchill, the most famous Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945, when he led Britain to victory in the Second World War, and again from 1951 to 1955.

The humorous story everyone thinks about and is attributed to Churchill to make the point of not needing to say everything that is true was told by Sir Winston’s body guard, the late Ronald Golding. The Prime Minister was speaking with one of his fellow members of parliament, Bessie Braddock, who truthfully challenged him by declaring: “Winston, you are drunk, and what’s more you are disgustingly drunk.” Never at a loss for words, Winston Churchill immediately replied, “Bessie, my dear, you are ugly, and

what's more, you are disgustingly ugly. But tomorrow I shall be sober and you will still be disgustingly ugly."

Perhaps they were both telling the truth, but what each had to say did not pass Socrates' three-part test that should govern our church communications. #1 is it true? #2 It is a good thing to say? And #3 Do I really need to say it and is it useful?

Before I leave, our friend, Winston Churchill on the topic of speaking the truth, my favorite Sir Winston pronouncement decrying fake news was when he once said: "I should think it was hardly possible to state the opposite of the truth with more precision."

I must confess, I find myself thinking that often when I hear certain things from some media outlets or politicians. Let's please all agree to NOT say, or post anything on social media or anyplace else, that doesn't meet the Socrates 3-part test. But perhaps I have "gone to meddling" and digressed into an area I promised I would not discuss.

My brothers and sisters, this is the power that Orthodox Christians can exhibit, and are exhibiting. And by using all of the technology and other resources available to us, we can better serve all of our faithful and those who need our help. Which brings me to strategic area number 4.

4) TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

The bottom line is that each church needs to make sure it has live video streaming capacity for its services, even if it is just through one of the free services. The cost of video camera technology has dropped, and with its ease of implementation it is now easy and convenient to offer online options for all of your church services. I do understand the concern expressed by some in our communities that if the services are on line some parishioners won't attend the live services.

I am sure that will happen for some whose connection to their faith and its practice were already somewhat tenuous. But for many who travel, or for seniors less able to attend all services, and in every instance of crisis, whether pandemic or hurricane or ice and snow, online streaming is critical.

There is no reason why every bible study or adult education program can't be streamed or video-taped and then loaded to a parish website or a free You Tube channel or Facebook page. The democratization of the internet has taken the biggest expense away.

A parish can now set up a You Tube page or Facebook page and load its contents for FREE. These platforms host your content and ensure it is backed up for the church at no cost to you. Of course, I still strongly suggest that you also backup all of your posts and host all such video content on your own website.

Recently, a bible study that I really wanted to attend went totally digital via ZOOM, and it was almost as good as being there. Moreover, it eliminated the 35-minute commute each way to the church, giving me more personal time. And of course, the dress code was much laxer.

As an aside, (and I am sure others have experienced this as well).I have multiple ZOOM meetings almost every day as I work with churches all over the US and abroad. I can always tell ZOOM or video conferencing rookies when they stand up and show that their professional looking tops do not match their usually far more, shall we say, "casual" bottoms. And please be careful when eating your big cheeseburger on screen in front of someone who may be fasting. And don't think you can sneak a bite off screen and then reappear. We know what you're up to. 😊

Many of our communities have effectively used automated phone calling systems where someone from the church could record a message and a call was placed delivering the message to all the faithful. Robo-calling by political campaigns have made this once valuable resource an annoyance, however, many churches still find this an invaluable tool to ensure that timely information is shared on a fairly real-time basis.

Hopefully, this pandemic has confirmed the importance of such calling systems to reach the faithful. When the calming voice of the message is from the parish priest, church leader or Hierarch, parishioners can establish psychological and interpersonal connectedness.

Of course, of equal importance is that the faithful have technology availability. By now, everyone has become dependent on the internet and WiFi for access to all types of media and devices, but is there anything your church can do to make sure that your parishioners are better connected to you?

The current situation affords a church the critical opportunity to send out easy to understand instructions to their faithful as to how they can use the many different technologies to access everything the church is offering. These instructions need to be very simple and cover most of the more popular technology platforms.

Indeed, just this weekend I got a great email from an Orthodox parish in the Midwest that provided an extremely helpful and detailed email with simple instructions on how each person can access and load every technology platform through which that parish is offering their services and ministries. Included were instructions for those with Apple phones and those on the Android platform. And these instructions explained how to use the technology on Apple computers as well as those on the Microsoft platform, etc.

These simple instructions and materials must easily explain how to access your church's services, prayer groups, bible studies and other ministry activities. This is a critical responsibility of the church at times like this. So, the question is, "Who in your church is responsible for ensuring that you have the right technology and that its accessibility is explained easily?" And who will be available with whatever support is necessary?"

Please also consider having volunteers available to provide some technical support to those parishioners who need it. Recently for fun, I hosted a ZOOM video conference for a large number of our family who live literally all over the globe. Most of the family connected easily from the instructions I provided; however, two members needed to call me for more tech support to get connected. This just underscores that as churches utilize new and ever-changing technologies, it is helpful to ensure that the church helps maximize accessibility of these technologies for their faithful.

On the other hand, I recently received instructions from a church describing how to watch their streamed services. I am extremely technologically literate (my niece calls me our family's Tech Support) and even I could not figure out what they were saying. It was clear to me they were written by an engineer and not a technology lay person. This led them to have to send out subsequent revisions attempting to clarify that which should have been simple instructions.

We would all agree that the capability of communication through technology is amazing, but please be mindful of not overwhelming your less technologically literate parishioners with language they cannot follow. Please keep them in mind as you perform the great service of helping your faithful understand how to connect with you and your many continuing technological offerings.

Most churches have email distribution lists. They are useful, and there are great platforms that make them easier to disseminate. But the empirical data tells us that 61% of email is already treated as spam and another approximately 20% of emails are never read. This doesn't mean that you should not continue to communicate via email. Of course, you must continue to do so. But in doing so, please consider using more efficient email tools like Mail Chimp which allow you to better organize and track your messages and follow up as needed.

Empirical research also tells us that most Americans have moved on to a more virulent and accessible communications medium. The data shows that 97% of American adults use text messaging, and that over 98% of text messages are opened rather than only 21% of emails. And the data tells us that approximately 95% of text messages are opened in under 3 minutes. Three minutes!!!

Let that soak in for a moment if you want to effectively reach your faithful. This data makes clear that while a church must maintain an email distribution list, and should have a calling tree or an automated calling system, a more effective technology platform is setting up a text messaging service for your faithful.

I can't leave the topic of technology without mentioning my show host platform Ancient Faith Radio. Anyone with an internet connection or cell phone can access the free (or I should say listener supported) 24 hours a day, 7 day a week, 52 weeks of the year resources of music, podcasts, live shows, church services, interviews with hierarchs, bible studies and the most impressive and comprehensive array of services that Ancient Faith Radio provides to help bring people closer to Christ and to each other as we continue on their journey to theosis.

However, the foregoing discussion of availability and use of technology is only as good as the content being presented. This is why the 5th strategic area churches need to focus on is:

5) RESOURCES FOR PARISHIONERS AND THEIR COMMUNITY

What any disruptive crisis teaches us is that it is critical to have a plan to continue ministry and services for the faithful. At the same time, providing continuing resources to parishioners at all times is a critical part of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian church today. The key is to immediately understand what resources you can offer to your faithful from your parish, and what other outside resources you can assemble and make be available to them, even if not directly offered by your parish.

Thus, a critical step is to establish a process where parishioners in need can reach out to the church for help. This includes something resembling a Service Ministry team that is constantly monitoring this parishioner point of access and which has the ability and authority to try and connect the needs of people with the resources they need.

First and foremost, it is helpful for a church to provide as much clarity as is possible about what church services will be offered, when they will occur and how the faithful can participate. This is constantly changing as circumstances change, and are always subject to the varying restrictions of state and local governments.

In addition, it is important for this Service Ministry to provide as much clarity as is possible as to what special services are available (e.g., food deliveries, rides to church or doctors' appointments or shopping, hospital visits, the administering of Holy Unction and/or The Eucharist for the sick

or dying, memorial services, baptisms, churchings, weddings, etc.). These will constantly change over time, but it is critical to have a place and way to keep everyone informed. Also let your parishioners know that you will communicate with them as soon as you know the plan for any services, including Holy Week and Pascha.

Through your Service Ministry, you can coordinate the parish and Philoptochos resources and ministries to provide a seamless single point of contact if possible, and hopefully break down as many turfs, walls and fiefdoms as possible so as to more effectively and efficiently serve the needs of people.

This Service Ministry should have a handle on all available resources the parish and its many ministries (including Philoptochos) already have, as well as other community resources available to handle needs. Do what you can to provide food and supplies to any parishioner who needs them, including organizing food preparation and delivery options (or UberEATS or Door Dash deliveries) to help those who have needs.

In disruptive crises, moral support and psychological resources are also critical in times of increasing isolation. This is so critical that I will talk about that in a little while as its own strategic topic.

All of this will take organization and coordination. While the implementation can be difficult, the goal is simple as our Lord taught us in Matthew Chapter 25, verses 35-40: ***“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”***

Perhaps one of the most uplifting things I have seen recently, and which is cause for celebration, is the significant number of resources that churches have begun to offer and have expanded upon in order to help people who have been affected by this current crisis. We must celebrate and share the availability of all of these resources.

Long after this horrible COVID-19 crisis is a bad memory, among the critical lessons we will have learned that must not be forgotten is the need for much

more readily available and accessible ministry resources and materials. If we resolve to do nothing else, it must be to continue the incredible momentum we have recently begun in order to create best-in-class, pan-Orthodox ministry service and materials.

If you check out some of the resources I will share with you and the countless numbers of others I do not have time to mention, I am confident that you, too, will feel the presence of the Holy Spirit working through our faithful ministry leaders.

In times of tragedy pandemic or other disruptive crises, it is easy to watch our faith falter a little. In despair, do we ask why our God has forsaken us? Or do we instead focus on the incredible and endless gifts he has given us not only to survive and thrive, but also to overcome this horrific pandemic?

The amazing researchers who are at this very moment in time one step closer to COVID-19 treatments and cures are being guided by our blessed Holy Spirit. And of course, the Holy Spirit is leading and guiding the brave and selfless first responders, medical personnel, military, law enforcement and countless others who are daily putting themselves in harm's way so that we can safely live in the comfort of our own homes and hopefully remain far away from the disease. The Holy Spirit is also guiding our clergy, monastics and Hierarchs to pray for us as they lead us in these times when we are most in need of guidance and help

Regardless of how understandably isolated or lonely you may feel from time to time, please know that the Holy Spirit is with you. Your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is with you. Your Creator is with you. Now is the time to figure out how you can use the blessings you have received to help others better understand what it means to be the church.

This is our time. The time when we use all of the gifts our Lord has given us to serve others and in so doing, more fully live our stewardship callings. To be sure, bringing people closer to Christ and each other is perhaps the most critical thing on which we should focus. And yet, the greatest number of questions I have received and numbers of discussions I have had with churches during the last several weeks have been regrettably focused on financial survival. So, let's go to the 6th strategic area of focus.

6) PARISH FINANCIAL PLANNING

If it has not already done so, perhaps the most critical and immediate thing every church needs to undertake is a complete re-examination of their financial budget for this calendar year. The only thing I can say with 100% certainty is that your church budget will be blown up to some degree or another, even if it is only a timing issue.

How badly it will be impacted depends on your specific circumstances. But make no mistake about it, your previously prepared budget is no longer reliable. Each church must have their designated finance committee systematically review absolutely every line item of their budget and run different “what-if” scenarios.

I suggest the Finance Ministry’s first job is to immediately prepare 3 new 2020 income alternative budgets, one assuming things return to relative normalcy by the end of May, another assuming normalcy is not achieved until the end of August, and the third assuming lack of normalcy until the end of November.

These are progressively worse cases and can allow you to analyze the income impact of the loss of things like Pascha revenues, festival revenues, rental revenues, candle and tray revenues, summer camp revenues, etc. One can assume that eventually stewardship collections will return to at least approximately 50% to 75% of normal (or possibly less depending on the economic situations and demographics of your parishioners) based on their existing pledges by the end of each of those respective three scenario periods. Regardless, the budgets need to assume significant stewardship disruption until each of those three end points. This is a form of stress testing of your budget.

For a parish, these revenue models will indicate how dramatic the process might be if the period of disruption blocks their ability to host their ethnic festival or other external fundraiser on which most parishes depend. Indeed, regrettably in my detailed financial stewardship analysis of over 275 Orthodox parishes all over the U.S., on average our parishes depend on these external fundraising sources for over 28% of their income. Thus, in

addition to an inevitable disruption in your stewardship revenue streams, imagine the impact of a loss of 28% of your revenues.

Once the three revenue models are created, you can then juxtapose expenses one at a time, starting with the most essential--the ones you cannot avoid--, and eventually you can find the expense pain point that causes your model to go cash flow negative.

Once the three budgets are quickly (but methodically) developed, the finance committee can begin to note where expense cuts must be considered or revenue raising undertaken, and in what relative amounts. This will involve Parish Council input as priorities will need to be debated and decided by consensus.

Once the order of magnitude of financial disruption is determined for each of these three cases, gap filling options must be explored. For example, it might be wise to immediately reach out to any bank with whom your church has a relationship to see about the availability of a line of credit, either unsecured or secured by your church property.

Unless you have been wise enough to be totally unplugged and not watching wall to wall media coverage, you have no doubt heard that the U.S. Government has approved the \$2.2 Trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. For those of you listening in different countries, your own government is pursuing similar financial support legislation. While this U.S. law is still brand new and is yet to be fully analyzed and understood, this can be a critical source of financial relief for our churches. One thing is clear, each church must carefully review this new legislation and see what opportunities are available that they might need to explore.

The CARES Act is a \$2.2 trillion direct funding plan with an additional \$4 trillion of backup financial support. Now to be clear, I am not offering you either legal or tax advice, and it is important to get your own proper legal and tax analysis of this legislation and understand that rules and regulations can change conclusions.

However, an analysis from the extremely talented and dedicated Treasurer of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese reported that the CARES Act will allow

individuals who claim the standard deduction to also deduct up to \$300 of cash charitable contributions "above the line" on their 2020 federal income tax returns. And potentially more important, the CARES Act also reportedly removes the deduction limitations on 2020 cash charitable contributions by corporations and by individuals who itemize their deductions.

But the really big thing I want to stress is the availability of the Paycheck Protection Program. If you are in a leadership position in any church, nonprofit or even small business, please pay close attention to what I share next.

The Paycheck Protection Program is a critical part of the CARES Act funded by a \$348 billion set aside and managed by the Small Business Administration (SBA).

According to the SBA website (<https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/loans/paycheck-protection-program#section-header-0>):

“The Paycheck Protection Program is designed to provide a direct incentive for small businesses to keep their workers on payroll by providing each small business a loan up to \$10 million for payroll and certain other expenses. If all employees are kept on payroll for eight weeks, SBA will forgive the portion of the loans used for payroll, rent, mortgage interest, or utilities. Up to 100 percent of the loan is forgivable.”

If you review the materials about the Paycheck Protection Program I have loaded on my website, you will learn that churches and nonprofits should be eligible to participate in this novel and unique forgivable loan program. These loans are intended to cover expenses like payroll, interest on mortgages, rent, utilities and benefits.

The loan amounts are equal to 250% of average total monthly payroll during the 1-year period before the loan is made. For example, if the Parish's average monthly payroll is \$30,000, it can receive a \$75,000 loan. Essentially, think of this as providing you a loan of about 2.5 months of funding of your payroll expenses.

The Paycheck Protection Program loans are nonrecourse and no personal property guaranty or collateral is required. Because there are no guarantees of collateral for the loans, at least in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Metropolis approval is not required. Parishes in other jurisdictions should explore what approvals might be required from their Hierarchs or Diocese. There are other details that you should examine; however, what I want to make sure you understand is that according to the current rules, the loan is totally forgivable as an incentive to retain employees.

Let me repeat this key point. If your Parish or nonprofit retains its employees for 8 weeks after the loan, and spends more than the loan amount on its payroll, benefits, interest on a mortgage, rent or utilities, the ENTIRE LOAN CAN BE FORGIVEN. It does not need to be paid back.

I do not want to overstate its importance, or understate the requirements, but as currently announced, this Paycheck Protection Program could have the effect of providing a government subsidy to cover the costs to pay your employees for two and a half months.

I will not use the phrase “free money” because I understand that nothing is free and someone paid for it. However, please think of this as a unique opportunity for your church or nonprofit to get a return on the tax dollars your members have been paying all these years by having a government subsidy covering essentially 2.5 months of payroll. This can substantially reduce the pressure on your budget.

This Payroll Protection Program starts FRIDAY APRIL 3RD, but this program is available to all small businesses. That latest SBA estimate is that there are approximately 30 million small businesses in the United States at this time. If a significant number of these small businesses apply for the Payroll Protection Program, you can imagine how much competition there will be for the approximately \$350 Billion set aside for this program.

If your church or nonprofit doesn't apply for Paycheck Protection Program quickly, I fear you could be left out. Time is of the essence. So, please call your bank ASAP and see if they administer SBA 7a loans and if they are authorized to issue the Paycheck Protection Program loans. Please do this

tomorrow, and start to get the paperwork ready to go for your church or nonprofit.

I think that GOA Treasurer Elaine Allen's quick summary of key elements of the CARES Act is very helpful, and she graciously granted me permission to share it with all of you. You can download a copy of the current version of this great summary resource from my stewardshipcalling.com website under the internet radio tab by scrolling down to the April 1, 2020 program listing, where you can also find a copy of the full text of this program.

AS TIME GOES BY, NEW REGULATIONS AND PROCESSES ARE BEING CONSTANTLY ISSUED, AND THINGS ARE CHANGING RAPIDLY THAT ARE NOT CAPTURED IN THIS OUTLINE CREATED ON APRIL 1, 2020. PLEASE LOOK AT THE LATEST INFORMATION.

Here are some of the various SBA website locations where you can find more information about this unique and potentially very valuable program.

You can find a lot of details at the SBA website at:

<https://www.sba.gov/page/coronavirus-covid-19-small-business-guidance-loan-resources>

More information on the CARES Act and the implementing regulations issued on March 31 can be found at:

<https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/PPP%20Borrower%20Information%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

The application can be found at:

<https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Paycheck-Protection-Program-Application-3-30-2020-v3.pdf>

There are a wide variety of other critical elements in the CARES Act that will provide assistance both to individuals and to our churches. I cannot recommend strongly enough that all of our Orthodox churches and nonprofit entities carefully review the CARES Act and see what financial resources and opportunities will be available to you individually or your church.

I again urge you to seek proper legal and tax advice to ensure that any action you take does not cause you unanticipated future legal or tax consequences, for example, subjecting some of your operations in the future to UBI (unrelated business income) tax.

Also, in times of financial crises, churches sometimes look at their other endowments or similar restricted funds as a potential source of funds. This is often totally inappropriate and a slippery slope. Of course, one can research if there is any ability to borrow from them LEGALLY, and only after all appropriate permissions and assurances of repayment are obtained.

However, I cannot stress enough how critical it is to maintain appropriate safeguards and integrity as to your accounts and funds. While an unprecedented disruptive crisis creates huge financial challenges, this is no reason to improperly invade or use restricted funds unless they are properly available in such circumstances. Integrity cannot take a holiday during times of crisis, and arguably it is even more critical in critical times.

At the same time as the finance committee is analyzing the order of magnitude of possible negative scenarios, I recommend parish leadership very quietly and personally reach out to a few of the most generous stewards of the parish to see if they might be able or willing to offer greater stewardship contributions or loans to help address immediate financial needs.

It is important to coordinate with your stewardship ministry to begin the RIGHT types of communications with the faithful to encourage their continued support of the church. Encourage them to keep their financial support current and even consider adding to their regular financial stewardship the amounts they would have contributed for candles, trays, Epitaphio flowers, coffee, lunch, etc., as well as donating something more to cover the growing economic pain of the pandemic which has created financial difficulties for so many and our churches.

As an aside, I was recently on a conference call with some of the experts from one of the best in class non-profit fundraising research organizations. We discussed what they were seeing churches do to address the most dire of circumstances as a result of a disruptive crisis. I have long advocated

that if your church stewardship foundation is not sound, the slightest disruption could be tragic or even fatal. They agreed.

This best-in-class, non-profit, fundraising, research organization also agreed that their experience was the same as mine. They too saw that significant unplanned financial shortfalls in a church's finances are almost never fully covered by direct pleas to the stewards. They almost always require a limited "special campaign" addressed to selected blessed stewards to ask them to step up and help keep the parish functioning. Your Parish Council should also provide leadership in this financial support.

It is critical to remember that all stewardship communications and messaging must NOT emphasize crisis or uninspiring things such as meeting financial budgets. Budgets are not motivational to the faithful. More successful messages are tied to the vision of the church and the support of life changing ministries and services it offers. People give to vision and to people they trust!

If you want to learn what is the most effective messaging you can use for your stewardship communications, I highly recommend you listen to the Stewardship Calling Ancient Faith Radio program on August 7, 2019 called: "Overcoming the Challenge of Donor Fatigue in our Orthodox Christian Parishes." In this program I featured an extensive interview with Fr. Aaron Warwick of St. Mary Orthodox Church in Wichita who completed a master's degree in philanthropy and nonprofit development.

We discussed exactly how church stewardship and fundraising messaging could be more effective. You can hear this August 7, 2019 program either by going to Ancient Faith Radio Stewardship Calling pages or going the Stewardship Calling.com website internet radio tab and scroll to the August 7, 2019 program notes.

https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/stewardshipcalling/donor_fatigue

Perhaps this is the time to remember what Holy Scripture teaches us in Matthew 5:42 ***"Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."***

I would also recommend that each church pull out their insurance policies and have their insurance advisor (and lawyer) review it to see what

coverages might be in place. Many churches have what is called business interruption policies (even though churches are not businesses). While many of the carriers have publicly stated pandemics are not covered under business interruption policies, you need to actually look at your specific insurance policy, and if applicable, queue up a call or notice of claim with your carrier.

I am aware that some lawyers are filing cases asking a court to declare whether or not certain Lloyd's of London policies can cover a church's interruption. We will see how this evolves.

Without getting political at all, I noted that at the March 21, 2020 Press Conference at the White House from the Coronavirus Task Force, Vice President Mike Pence talked about the calls he and the President had with religious leaders of all faiths, and the Vice President of the United States actually made the specific ask on their behalf that if people could afford it, that they continue to send their donations in support of the ministries provided by these places of worship. Of significance to me also was the strong statement made by the Vice President celebrating the power of prayer.

Regardless of your political perspectives, it is a testament to the critical importance of our faith tradition to hear the recognition of the importance of prayer and the need to continue to financially and otherwise support places of worship from the highest levels of our government. Our churches play a vital role in our communities and must perform the necessary and disciplined financial analysis to ensure their survival. At the same time, we are called to focus on the next of the 10 strategic areas, namely:

7) PERSONAL FINANCIAL PLANNING

In times of disruptive crisis, it becomes immediately personal when the impact involves people's personal health or their financial survival and livelihood. The COVID-19 pandemic impacts both.

As to health and survival issues, the amazing and selfless front-line medical professionals and first responders to whom we owe the greatest debt of gratitude and for whom we should all be praying are working diligently on healthcare solutions.

As to financial survival, to be sure, we all have a personal responsibility for our family's financial situation. Nevertheless, there are many things the church can do to help in this critical area. As with all other areas, some actions are immediate and some are long term. Let's explore a few suggestions in both categories.

Throughout history, it was Christ's church that stepped in and stepped up to help people in financial distress. Whether it was direct financial support or the equally helpful providing of food or accommodations or other needed resources. I cannot encourage strongly enough each church to find creative ways to provide these resources to those who need them in these times of social distancing or self quarantining.

For example, some churches have brought people safely together to prepare food that is delivered to homeless shelters or to people in need. Some churches already have food pantries that are now open to those who could benefit from that stored bounty. These and many more examples can be truly impactful and should be encouraged to the extent they comply with local legal and medical restrictions.

I want to encourage us all to be more creative in directly providing much needed financial and other resources to those who need them. In that regard, please let me introduce my "Corona Contribution Challenge".

Shortly, most Americans will be receiving 4 figure checks from the Federal government that are the return of everyone's hard earned tax dollars. Let me be absolutely clear. If you need to use this money for your family, by all means please definitely keep the money and provide for your family without any hesitation or concern.

At the same time, by the grace of God, and perhaps due to your own hard work and frugal lifestyle, you may not have critical need of these financial payments at this time. For any of us who are so blessed, I would like to encourage you to join me in making what I am calling the Corona Contribution.

This Corona Contribution Challenge involves taking whatever check you receive, or whatever portion you can afford to part with, and contributing it to God's kingdom. Of course, I would start by suggesting that you take this windfall and directly contribute it to your local church to help stabilize the tragic decline in financial resources our local parishes may well experience as a result of those who are suffering financially. Or perhaps, there is another very worthy charity that could really use that Corona Contribution to make a difference in Christ's kingdom.

Wherever your heart and the Holy Spirit direct you, if you are not in need of the money, I would encourage you to accept the Corona Contribution Challenge and take this unanticipated blessing you will receive and put it back into God's Kingdom to see how we can cause it to multiply as we learned in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30).

As an example, on the upcoming May 6th Stewardship Calling First Wednesday program, I will be featuring an interview with my good friend Fr Luke Veronis, the inspirational Proistamenos of Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Webster Mass. We will discuss some of the early results from the Good and Faithful Steward challenge.

For over 8 years as I have been traveling the country delivering my "Igniting the Flame of Stewardship" Program, I have been challenging parishes to undertake this project where the church gives money to its parishioners and encourages them to use the lesson of the Parable of the Talents to put it out into the world and cause it to multiply. Fr Luke and his progressive parish accepted that challenge and will share the amazing results of generosity that this lesson has inspired in his parish and community.

My Corona Contribution Challenge is a continuation of that lesson from our Lord. For those of us who can afford to do so, I hope you can accept my Corona Contribution Challenge and donate the money you receive as a return of your tax dollars previously paid, to your church, your favorite ministries or other charitable causes in which you believe it can make the most impact in God's kingdom. Through the generosity of your Corona Contribution, you can make a real difference and help spread the message of Christ.

Returning to the personal financial lessons we should learn from the COVID-19 , I recommend that parishes consider offering the resources and classes that their parishioners need in some personal financial planning. This can include online resources that help teach financial planning or actually bringing such programs and classes directly to their parish.

If you are a regular listener to my programs you know that while I receive no compensation of any kind for anything I do or recommend, I do pass along resources, tools, books and professional suggestions that I have vetted and found to be helpful. So please consider providing immediate focus on the personal financial health and well-being of your faithful by creating or offering processes, systems and resources they could use. You may have financial planning professionals in your parish who would no doubt be willing to offer such programs. In addition, programs like Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University, or some other similar proven approaches to personal financial planning, have been very valuable resources and classes that many churches have offered to their parishioners.

8) BRINGING PEOPLE CLOSER TO CHRIST AND EACH OTHER (while standing 6 feet apart)

In times of serious crises, new strategies and terms are frequently created. Until January, 2020, probably none of us had ever heard or used the term "social distancing," or "antisocial distancing" as I prefer to call it. Nor were we as familiar with the phrase "flattening the curve" which I now believe can be used in a wide variety of other circumstances.

Yet social distancing has become the staple of every discussion, an active practice all responsible people embrace, and fodder for countless memes and social media humor opportunities. But it runs contrary to our very human core tendencies and values which is why it is so difficult for us.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) here in Atlanta has defined social distancing as a public health practice that aims to prevent sick people from coming in close contact with healthy people in order to reduce opportunities for disease transmission. With pandemics like COVID-19, the goal of social distancing is to slow down the outbreak in order to reduce

the chance of infection among high-risk populations and to reduce the burden on health care systems and workers.

Experts describe this as "flattening the curve," which generally refers to the potential success of social distancing measures to prevent surges in illness that could overwhelm health care systems.

In a thoughtful analysis document called, *The Social Distancing Law Assessment Template* which you can download from CDC.gov (https://www.cdc.gov/phlp/publications/social_distancing.html), the CDC concluded, and I quote: "History teaches that the recurrence of a widespread influenza pandemic is not a question of if, but of when." and "Historical studies and modeling projects suggest that social distancing measures can help mitigate the severity of an influenza pandemic or other infectious disease epidemic."

Social distancing is certainly a proven and critical medical tool and an essential practice which we must all embrace, even though it seems to run contrary to our very human nature, and certainly runs contrary to many of our Orthodox Christian and ethnic practices. As humans, we are hard-wired to crave and provide human interaction.

From the very creation of life partners Adam and Eve, to the recruitment of the Apostles and the Disciples that gathered the seekers together to expand Christ's church, we appear to be genetically built for connectedness. That is a good thing. But at times it can exacerbate certain consequences.

And, of course, for any of you accustomed to our rich and wonderful tradition of ethnic interpersonal greetings, handshakes are to some extent already considered social distancing. Instead, we prefer to hug each other and kiss each other's cheeks. And some more than others.

In my own Greek upbringing, I was taught from an early age to kiss everyone once on each cheek when I first greeted them. But when I was blessed to start working with our OCA and UOC of USA brothers and sisters, and other Orthodox ethnic jurisdictions, I was introduced to the three-cheek kiss. A wonderfully interpersonal practice I continued, until just recently.

Even the very respectful act of kissing the hands of our clergy and hierarchs is an important part of our connectedness which has been temporarily set aside out of concern for their health.

And yet all of that is antithetical to current pandemic best medical practices. This inevitable conflict between social distancing and our traditional social connectedness practices creates cause for concern in many, and leads us to explore many strategies which we must consider in order to address it.

In keeping with my promise to not engage in the 4 forbidden topics for tonight, I will not discuss the sharing of the body and blood of Christ through the Eucharist, nor will I venture into any discussion about the good faith strategies our respective Hierarchs and clergy are implementing regarding social distancing and church services.

There is absolutely NO doubt, that each and every Hierarch and clergyman is doing what they absolutely believe to be in the best interests of their faithful as a whole. This is not for anyone to second guess. You are entitled to your opinion about what action can be taken. However, that awesome responsibility falls on our church leaders.

And they are not only considering our incredibly robust Orthodox Christian theological teachings and traditions, but also all scientific and medical information available before establishing the procedures that they, in good faith, believe to be in the best interests of all, even if you find it personally inconvenient.

Indeed, this is a key point to understand. Social distancing practices in this critical time are generous acts of humility and service to others. It is actually all about putting the interests of others before your own desires or interests. I understand that people treasure the spiritual and emotional benefits which they find when they attend church services, and I understand why they would want to continue our many traditions that include after service fellowship hours and the coming together for the sharing of common meals. That's who we are. But all of this is what we want for us.

Now is the time to think of others first. When we come into contact with others, we risk spreading what we have, or catching what they are carrying.

So, for all of those who complained about the perceived huge personal sacrifice of not being able to physically go to church services, I ask you to think about the others whose lives and health was protected by this sacrifice.

Again, in times of disruptive crisis and pandemics, it is the selfless service of Christians to help others that differentiated them, caused people to take notice, and began a journey that inevitably brought them closer to Christ. This is why I say that as potentially tragic as this COVID-19 pandemic will be for so many, it is our time as Orthodox Christians to step up and serve others in whatever way we can while being consistent with best medical advice and governmental restrictions. This is our chance to show those in our time and in this generation, that to be an Orthodox Christian requires self-sacrifice in service to others.

So, while social distancing, why not make a little extra food and leave it at the doorstep of an elderly or infirm person who lives down the street or downstairs from you? If you have to venture out to the store, why not call a neighbor in need and see what you can get for them and deliver it. Why not consider using your Uber Eats, or Door Dash or Grub Hub account and ordering some food for someone who needs it and have it delivered to them at your expense, or just send them an electronic gift card which they can use to order their favorites?

Maybe the next time you order something from Amazon, you might order something you know someone else can use and have it delivered to them. All of these simple ideas, and many others that people are actually doing, can be achieved while maintaining social distancing. And the term “social distancing” is actually a misnomer. We are physically distancing. To quote a local Christian radio show host, “Communication are not cancelled. Relationships are not cancelled. Faith is not cancelled. Love is not cancelled.”

And every one of these core values is in keeping with what our Lord taught us as described in Matthew 25:35-40 “*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*”

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

We are blessed to live in a time when technology allows us to keep the medically required social distancing and yet stay somewhat connected. Whether it is through now relatively old technologies like telephones, emails and text messages, to the more modern and interactive technologies of video conferencing like ZOOM, WebEx, Google Hangouts, etc.

There are fortunately many different technology platforms that our churches can use to conduct parish council meetings, ministry meetings, bible studies, religious education or Sunday school courses. I am totally agnostic on which platform anyone wants to use. I do not sell or promote any alternative platform so a church should acquire whichever one works best in its experience.

Even if you do not yet have video capabilities, use the old school telephone and email resources. Some churches are organizing phone call trees where everyone in the Outreach or Service Ministry regularly calls 5 to 10 to 20 other people. Even if it is to just check in and let them know you are thinking about them and love them. A church that continues to connect with its faithful, and connects them together, becomes a more fulfilled and impactful body of Christ. So “nonphysical” high touch is the high calling. Find a way to stay connected as personally as you can with as many as you can.

The thing to keep in mind, particularly as we practice social distancing, self-isolation, or shelter in place is that people will seek support from whoever is offering it. Wouldn’t it be better if your house of God was a key source of support rather than your faithful finding support elsewhere?

A final, but critical, thought in this area is that many of our Hierarchs and clergy live alone. Many senior citizens, or young people live alone. Many recently divorced or recent widows or widowers live alone. In a time of crisis, this is one of the most critical times for them not to be left alone. Don’t wait for someone else to organize a plan. PICK UP YOUR PHONE.

Our church and church community should be the family on whom everyone can rely when they do not have a biological family to check in with them and make sure they are well or don't need anything. For whatever reason you are now at home, consider it a gift of time. Reach out to those who are alone to let them know they are not alone. Each church can manage this whole process remotely and electronically.

Even if your church does not yet have a process in place, this is something you and I can do right now. Again, just pick up the phone and call 5 singles, seniors or shut-ins and let them know you are thinking about them and praying for them and see if they need anything. Please remember that you are the front-line foot soldier in the army of love fighting the battle of separation and isolation.

And speaking of love, let's focus on the 9th strategic area of:

9) STAYING TRUE TO MISSION AND VISION

I mention this critical thought to remind us all that as we learned from proverbs 28:19 “*Where there is no vision, the people will perish.*” It is for this (and many other) reasons that it is critical that each church have a clear vision statement and mission statement.

A mission is what you do and a vision is where you are going. For the jurisdictions, Metropolises, Dioceses and Parishes that cover over 25% of Orthodox Christians in America for which I was blessed to complete strategic plans, they have clarity of their mission and vision.

In times of crisis, perhaps one of the most important things to remember is to stay focused on your vision. While what you need to do on a daily basis during a disruptive crisis will inevitably change somewhat, the overall mission of what your church does, or the vision of where your church is planning to be in the future, does not materially change during this crisis. Even when the path has detours, the ultimate goal and destination remain the same.

The moral of the story is for every church to have clarity of mission and vision and to stay focused on them. By so doing, these will remain the

guiding lights through the darkness. For every church which does not yet have clarity of mission or vision, please use this opportunity to begin a strategic planning or similar process to help develop a consensus on both of these.

Indeed, while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to expand and uncertainty continues to rise, I have initiated strategic planning processes (via the use of technology) with two new parishes to make sure that no matter what crisis comes next, they will be focused on where they are going and how they will get there.

Anyone with clarity of ultimate destination is far less intimidated or frightened along the path as long as they have a plan. Your church mission does not change during a period of crisis. Regardless of the specific words of your mission statement, it will inevitably focus on how we bring people closer to Christ. That element of your mission cannot change during a crisis, and if anything, it becomes more critical during these times of confusion and doubt. Helplessness has no place in the Orthodox faith.

The bottom line of staying true to your mission and vision is that **MINISTRY CANNOT END. Indeed, it has never been more important. Church leaders should immediately convene all ministry leaders electronically and ask them to implement their ministry emergency preparedness plan.**

And if they do not have such a plan, they should be asked to develop one as soon as possible which would hopefully be 14 to 30 days. This plan should be structured to ensure their ministry work continues, as best it can, as it was originally conceived, and in such additional ways as the current crisis demands.

One thing leaders do in times of crises, is to call their teams to work together to solve the problems before them. NASA saw that in the Apollo 13 crisis. This is our time. Fortunately, many of us now have the additional time to do so. Last, but not least, the 10th strategic area of focus is on:

10) PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS TO CONSIDER

I will confess that it was somewhat less than a million years ago that I got my psychology degree. And in the intervening decades, I have continued to

study this discipline and have become acutely aware of the critical importance of the psychological impact of most interactions. Few things can have as significant a psychological impact as a disruptive crisis.

It is easy to see how a deadly pandemic would have massive psychological consequences. How to deal with them falls into one of the categories I said at the beginning of this program that I would not be addressing, namely medical issues. But I raise the issue of the potential psychological impact of a crisis as one of the 10 operational and key areas on which to focus because of its critical importance for your faithful.

In times such as these, it is critical that your church be able to provide a master list of the many resources that are available to the faithful to assist them with their psychological fears or issues, not only through Orthodox study, but also importantly by providing direction to information published by credible medical sources. There are crisis, addiction and suicide hotlines and other telephonic and internet resources that your church should make available to your faithful. This would include contact numbers people could call for help.

One example of a resource which was recently made available is the Tuesday, March 24, 2020 “Healthy Minds and Healthy Souls” program on Ancient Faith Radio which is hosted by my good friends, Fr. Nicholas Louh and Presvytera Dr. Roxanne Louh, a licensed professional in the field of psychology. On this program, they focused on some of the critical aspects to consider during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Honestly, it is in this last of the 10 strategic areas that I fear our churches are perhaps least prepared, and for which they have not researched the resources available to the faithful. As we social animals who are hard-wired for community living and interaction are now told to isolate ourselves as much as possible, the psychological pressures will inevitably rise from adherence to this sound medical advice.

While we hear and see anecdotal stories of families or couples doing so many fun things together that they never could do with the previous time restraints of their busy lives, individuals might easily begin to experience feelings of separation, loneliness and isolation. Regrettably for those living

in abusive situations, the experiences of more extensive contact with their abusers is devastating. Finally, for those who have lost their loved ones, or are themselves sick with the virus or other illnesses, or for those who have lost their livelihoods, the potential for despair and despondency are enormous.

For these and many other reasons, the church community must mobilize. This is the time for our churches to organize phone calls where people reach out to their fellow parishioners. Even if it is to just touch base and listen their problems or commiserate about shared challenges, that level of interpersonal connectedness cannot be over-emphasized. Our churches should take a leadership role in orchestrating these invaluable interactions.

In his seminal research studies and best-selling books, Bowling Alone and Better Together, Harvard researcher Dr. Robert Putman discovered that the most successful and healthy organizations are those with high “social capital.” And a critical part of social capital is what some of us in church-world call “one anothering” - namely caring for one another, helping one another, supporting one another, loving one another. And yes, even just listening to one another.

One of the best things that can come out of this horrible pandemic, or whatever other disruptive crisis your church faces next, is a greater sense of being a loving community that cares for one another. And this is a matter of culture and not an accident.

Either you create that church cultural imperative, and enculturate all of the ministries, services and technologies that facilitate high social capital and connectedness, or your church is not what a healthy church could be, namely a hospital for some, a recovery ward for others, and a family safety net for all.

Finally, at the beginning of the program, I promised I would share some of the many COVID-19 online resources of which I have become aware that you or your church can use. This is by no means an exhaustive list and is obviously outdated the minute it is released. Thankfully, people are constantly adding some amazing resources, many of which have been

featured in chat rooms and calls and on their websites and email distribution lists, and I hope we can keep this list growing to serve our faithful and all who are seeking answers.

I have provided the detailed url weblinks on the script for this program that you can download for free at stewardshipcalling.com under the internet radio AFR tab by scrolling down to the April 1, 2020 program description.

Of course the preeminent scientific website is the Centers for Disease Control here in Atlanta at www.cdc.gov and more specifically <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

For the latest governmental news, of course the best place is <https://www.coronavirus.gov/> or <https://www.whitehouse.gov/> where the President's Coronavirus task force provides its invaluable information.

The most sobering global data is found at the Johns Hopkins University website which can be found at: <https://systems.jhu.edu/>

And more specifically:

<https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

The World Health Organization has assembled its global Coronavirus information at: <https://www.who.int/>

And specifically: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

From the Orthodox perspective, there are amazing and insightful and useful resources readily available and proliferating daily. Let me share my current top 12 disciple-making resources.

1. A new COVID-19 resource which I suggest you consult is one that was recently released by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops. Its COVID-19 Resources center can be found at:

<http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/covid19/> and it will be attempting to assemble some of the most useful and helpful Orthodox and other resources all in one place. If you have any ministry or resource you think would be valuable for the faithful, please send it to:

communications@assemblyofbishops.org that's
communications@assemblyofbishops.org

2. An inspiring pan-Orthodox collaboration has developed among the leaders of the youth and emerging adult ministries of many of the Orthodox jurisdictions. Under the leadership of Steve Christoforou of the GOA Y2AM department, and with the great team of his colleagues, they have made available an impressive resource that you can find at www.y2am.org/AtHome. It has a growing and enormous number of very helpful online resources that are being developed across the Orthodox Church, as well as a Google calendar to which everyone can subscribe. You can find that link at: www.y2am.org/calendar.

There are a host of training resources and daily and weekly programming and content to help during these difficult times. Please check out www.y2am.org/AtHome for this most amazing truly pan-Orthodox resource that is being developed in real time.

For those who have longed for greater Orthodox unity in the United States, you are seeing the response to this pandemic serve as a catalyst to accelerate such unity and collaboration. This is one of the many areas of hope we can see developing right before our eyes as we bring people closer to Christ and each other.

Virtually all of the Orthodox jurisdictions have established COVID-19 or similar resource pages that are being constantly updated and should be consulted. For example,

3. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese site is <https://www.goarch.org> and there is a relevant subpage at: <https://www.goarch.org/-/directives-covid-19>. There are a series of wonderful informative and uplifting videos from Archbishop Elpidophoros which provide some insightful and comforting guidance through his most effective, loving and pastoral perspectives.

4. Similarly, the Orthodox Church in America has resources and information at <https://www.oca.org/>. They include the archived version of a March 21, 2020 appearance of His Beatitude OCA Metropolitan Tikhon on the Ancient Faith Radio program "Today Live" with Fr. Tom Soroka.

If you have not listened to it, please check out this archived program with His Beatitude's great insights. You will also hear the first ever live musical debut of Metropolitan Tikhon who is learning to play guitar in his time of self quarantine. And by the way, I have already applied to be his agent for his upcoming world musical tour!

5. The Antiochian Orthodox Church also has a good COVID-19 section of their website at: [www.https://www.antiochian.org/](https://www.antiochian.org/)
(<https://www.antiochian.org/dashboard?name=COVID-19>)

They have some resources that you can access by clicking on the COVID-19 banner.

6. Some of the Dioceses and Metropolises are also establishing great resources. For example you can find the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago pages at: <https://chicago.goarch.org/coronavirusresourcecenter>

7. I cannot forget the very platform that you are listening to, Ancient Faith Radio, that has taken leadership in providing a wide array of programming and resources to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and everyday life.

8. The AGES Initiatives is also particularly useful right now for people who want to do reader's services at home or access many other church services materials. You can currently access their wonderful content at: <https://www.agesinitiatives.com/dcs/public/dcs/dcs.html>

9. Another effective pan-Orthodox entity, Faithtree Resources, has made available some great resources that focus on ways to keep your teens engaged in Church life and keep the momentum of your youth ministry programs alive during these uncertain times as we try and help reduce some of their stress.

Of particular note is a new release called The Relationship Project, which is a multi-part teaching series for church youth groups. To learn more, please email info@faithtree.org or check out their website: <https://www.faithtree.org/about>. or contact my friend and their Executive Director and founder Michelle Moujaes.

And there are a couple of other resources I recently stumbled across that you might find helpful:

10. Orthodox Connected was urgently created and is rapidly developing to respond to the needs of Orthodox parishes during the COVID-19 crisis. It appears to have a wide variety of helpful resources to help parishes looking to enhance their online presence. Check it out here:

<https://orthodoxconnected.com/>

11. Another resource I just discovered is LiveLiturgy.com. It is a helpful resource that was created to better organize the information of liturgies available on the Internet so you can spend less time searching, and more time in prayer. It includes resources from Orthodox jurisdictions and other churches. It's another really valuable resource, that like many others is trying to identify online church services. Check it out here:

<http://liveliturgy.com/>

12. Finally, there are fortunately an enormous number of parishes with enhanced websites or Facebook pages devoted to streaming services, and providing information, ministry resources in response to COVID-19. It seems that every day I learn of at least 2 or 3 new parishes that are starting to stream their services or make them available on some platform.

I have been so impressed with how rapidly the parish resources are proliferating and with so many helpful resources. I know each jurisdiction and Metropolis or Diocese is struggling to keep up with adding these ever-growing numbers of online and technological resources to their respective web pages. If you are a church or ministry adding either your services or some other devotionals, ministry resources, feel good stories, or anything else a person or parish might find useful, please consider sharing it with the Assembly of Bishops web resource that is available to everyone by sending your information to: communications@assemblyofbishops.org.

This is all so wonderful and re-assuring. It will also be a lasting legacy of this COVID-19 crisis that will allow us to continue to reach more people more readily. And one reality check for those who worry that continued and enhanced live streaming of services will cause a drop off in church attendance. I am not aware of any research that confirms that concern.

But we do have some empirical evidence that suggests that on average, only 1 in 4 Orthodox Christian in America regularly attends church on Sunday. So, there are already 75% of our faithful who we are not reaching on Sundays. Perhaps some of them might increasingly participate through these live-streamed services.

Those who regularly attend church and partake of the sacred Eucharist will not change their behaviors because all of a sudden it is streamed. They already know why they are going and the benefit of what they are receiving.

But for some people who travel, or who are sick or shut in, or who, for whatever reason have dropped out, this greater accessibility might well be a tool to bring them back into regular worship. And just imagine how many millions of people who are not Orthodox will now be reached through continued presence on the internet, in social media and by using all of the tools that our Lord has allowed us the wisdom and ability to create and deploy.

My brothers and sisters hear me clearly. These growing numbers of wonderful Orthodox faith-based materials and resources that are being made available to the world in these difficult times may well be one of the most critical ways in which we will spread The Word and love and bring people closer to Christ and to each other. That is why this program was subtitled: “Spread the Word, not the virus.”

As I mentioned at the outset, this is exactly what has happened before in history. And this is our time and our opportunity to use the many technological and other resources available to us to again be the “light of the world**”, to spread love, and to help others as we “**go and do likewise**” in service to our fellow man.**

And in that spirit, please allow me one final recommendation. If you are not already doing so, please get your parish ready to run. Ready to run hard and fast and very visibly in your community. When the restrictions on assembling are lifted, it is your church that needs to be ready to hit the ground running in your community even faster to be the most visible sign of caring and love. It is this opportunity to serve those within your

communities that will help you more completely fulfill the mandate of your church to live the life our Lord commanded.

If your ministries are geared up to immediately run to help your faithful, and even more people and community groups who still need help after the crisis has dissipated, then the horror of this disruptive pandemic can bear good fruit, and Christ can be more visible in our midst through helping hands of your faithful and church.

It is reported that the phrase “*Fear not*” or “*Be not afraid*” is repeated at least 103 times in the Bible, but “*FEAR*” is spoken of in Scripture over 500 times. In addition to the constant reminder to “*fear not*” I ask you to pray on my charge that “This is our time.” This is when the light we shine has the opportunity to unmask the darkness that shrouds the world. Darkness is not a thing. It is merely the absence of light. We can be the light! We must be the light!

Throughout history it was the Christian church that stepped up to the challenge of every pandemic and other disruptive crisis. And it was in that helpful and visible service that new people were brought to Christ in record numbers and those who were already faithful were offered the opportunity to fulfill their stewardship callings and serve their fellow man.

So, I leave you with the question I asked at the beginning. When the story of COVID-19 is just the story that we tell, what will be the story you tell? The choice is yours.

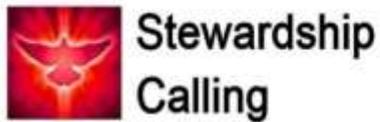
In the meantime, please check out the always-free resources at www.stewardshipcalling.com that cover a whole gamut of the programs about Effective Churches, Engaged Discipleship, Stewardship and Strategic Planning, Orthodox servant leadership and many more topics to help people and parishes discover and live their stewardship callings.

Please email me at Bill@stewardshipcalling.com and let me know what you are thinking and if you have any questions or if I can be of any assistance to your parish.

Remember that two of the most important days of your lives are first the day you were born and second, the day you figure out why. If you are not already living your stewardship calling, please begin prayerfully discerning

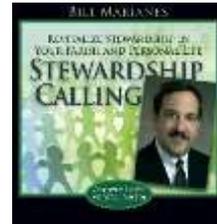
your why and stewardship calling and then start living the most extraordinary second half of your life.

As always, I pray that you SOTPAETJ, which stands for “stay on The Path (capital T capital P) and enjoy the journey. Stay safe and God speed on your journey.



Helping people and parishes discover and live their stewardship callings so that they may have a good account before the awesome judgment seat of Christ

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