

WEAKNESSES

50 - UNWELCOMING - CLIQUISH SILOS - CRADLES VS CONVERTS - TOO ETHNIC-

Our parish is not attentive to visitors or newcomers: Difficulty coming in as an outsider when it feels there are clear and established but unspoken behaviors, actions, social groups, and expectations not present in other churches or similar gatherings; Our church should be welcoming and open; we should not have to jump through hoops to belong; People should be welcomed even at last hour as Jesus says; People socialize with their personal group which can be unwelcoming to others; Do we do our best to make newcomers welcome?; People gravitate to those they know and understand which leads to perceived cliques; Cliquishness can be tough for new members to get past; The feeling that certain families or well established members “run” things and make the decisions (Not bad necessarily, but it can be a little intimidating); We don’t approach & introduce ourselves to new people right away; Strong opinions are not always expressed with respect, making newer members reluctant to speak; Smaller groups not well seen by new comers, welcoming yes, doing things yes, but individual invitation to participate is not there; In general, the parish has a lot of “clicks”; Lack of deep relationship building; Emphasis on ethnicity; Perception that we are a parish only for those of Middle Eastern descent; We are a somewhat ethnic church – hard to “blend in”; Confusion on identity: ethnic v; faith; Stigma of classes within Church i.e.; coverts, Arabs; Years ago when we were totally of Syrian decent, It was a clannish thing; then it got to be between the have and have nots also. I am not sure what the solution is; Treating culture and faith as equals; Can be too close knit to welcome outsiders; Good at being friendly to each other/newcomers at church, not as good at developing deeper relationships outside of it. Some people have gone to church together for years, decades, and don’t know each other’s names. We don’t know what’s going on in each other’s lives; Getting better, but a long ways to go; Cliques; We can do better integrating new members into our church community; There are some gaps in info being passed on to newcomers to the parish. Though a newcomer’s packet is given, which is very helpful, there are certain details missing that are important to know when worshipping here. The following are some of those details/questions I ran into when starting to attend here: What is the price of candles, both kinds? Who do you get a hold of when you have an urgent prayer request? The envelopes for holy oblation and memorial services need to be presented and explained how to use and submit them so new people are aware how things are done at St. Nicholas in this regard? Can you contact Fr. Michael directly about something or do you have to go through the office to reach him? If you have an emergency (i.e. getting admitted to the hospital), who do you contact?; Slow to get to know new people; ~ Bishop or dignitary visits become exclusive to a few people; Why not meet with ministry teams when in town?; We do not practice inclusiveness; Segregated fellowship, lack of sense of community; Exclusionary methods used in forming committees/workgroups; Not an inclusive church, cliques remain; Cliques; We tend to be clicky (within our groups and families); We need to be better listeners and more respectful of one another; I think many times, people are reluctant to participate because when they voice their opinion or ideas, often they are not listened to respectfully. We can certainly have differing opinions, but we must be considerate. Most importantly, if we are to truly live a Christ centered life, then we need to make sure each one of us feels valued, part of, included; Perception of Insularity; New converts taking on worst habits of longer term members; Siloing of social groups (by age, by cradle/convert, etc.); We’re so insulated from our culture, that it catches us off guard when we’re confronted with it; (“Well we don’t know what to say, that question doesn’t really come up here;”); Integration between “cradle” or founding members and converts or new members; For the sake of unity, converts and cradles could benefit one another with more time spent together outside our comfort zones, getting to know one another better; The lifelong / cradle members seem to have the major voice in the parish, new members tend not to be heard; Cradle Orthodox vs; Converts (instead of &); Limited relationship between cradle Orthodox and Converts; Poor relationship between “groupings” of parishioners: Old v; young, Convert v; cradle, Ethnic v; “white Culture of Wealth; Perception that there are a lot of unwritten rules that we don’t know if we didn’t grow up in the church; Relationships between diverse groups - ethnic/non-ethnic, convert/cradle; “Market appeal” to high level of Christian commitment vis a vis relatively lower level of current membership; Disconnected/Identity-based Ministry Groups.

41 - STEWARDSHIP & ENGAGEMENT (TIME TALENTS AND TREASURES)- Resources financially will be limited in the future; Low dollar givings; Decreasing but persistent overdependence on a relative few for both stewardship and volunteer effort; Still developing effective stewardship; Aging financial base of support; New / young members who might not understand how giving monetarily to

WEAKNESSES

the Church is expected; Low regular tithing; Are there enough younger parishioners that give?; A few people end up carrying the weight of most volunteering and group attendance; The church (parishioners) seem to have different levels of involvement and dedication; Lack of Commitment from many; Need adults to see importance/value of being a part of the community-worship- work -social charity; May seem at times the parish "is always asking for money"; There is a lack of willingness to volunteer for service activities, at least among the men; There seems to be a lot of interest for events (book studies, work days, etc.) but following through on inviting or bringing interested people along sometimes falls short; Attempts to organize service days where we help the poor, the elderly, etc., have not panned out due to lack of response; Getting participation in more than one organization/activity; Too much emphasis on money, we continue to nickel and dime; Difficulty getting people involved (or consistently involved) in projects/events outside of the same core group of people/families; Church members who don't consistently make donations; Major wealth probably will diminish as older wealthy members pass away; Aid for helping out. It's usually the same folks doing the same things; Volunteer Burnout; Difficulty in expanding participation in events other than on Sunday, beyond the core group; We are a small parish and people are being pulled in all directions, which could lead to burn out; Same small groups doing most of the work and participating; Parishioners' not being aware of the challenges in the parish or how they can contribute; Attendance at charitable functions; Fund raising activity; Difficulty with devoting time to a ministry team; Lack of volunteers; Small % give major \$s to our church; Seems to be two camps of giving – one believes in tithing as an expression of gratitude to God, the other feels we give to pay for the temporal maintenance of the church; Need more outreach to parishioners who are 'on the fence' or have not committed to the church or to a ministry; (Is this due to needing a personal phone call, transportation, feeling uncomfortable?); Tendency to give money to Works of Mercy projects rather than participate; While there are opportunities to become involved, it's not always easy to do; Would help to create those bonds outside of church when it's not always easy to do on ones' own. Having someone reach out especially if there's an absence; Emphasis on money; We are a small group trying to do too many things; We are stretched thin; Works of Mercy is not treated as one of the top goals of our church; The purpose of the Ministry Fair is to connect with those in our congregation who want to get involved but is it effective? For example: For two of the areas I work in it is difficult to find people who want to volunteer to work in the bookstore and many of the same individuals decorate the icons each Feast Day; Some of the same people do several things at Church; It would be better if more people were encouraged to get involved and the ones doing too much could focus on doing one thing very well so they do not get "burned out". Everyone is gifted by God to use the talents He has given them; Many of our ministries only attract a few or a small percentage of the whole; Not enough parishioners taking active project roles, same people always tapped to take leadership roles; Fundraising; Not having a consistent message about giving-conditional vs; it's all God's.

- 34 - LEADERSHIP / PARISH COUNCIL /LACK OF VISION** - Will the next board agree to & use this information?; Disconnection between Parish Council and active ministry team leadership; Small pool of motivated lay leaders. There is only a relatively small base group of the people who have the talent, motivation, and time to dedicate to church life and do it consistently; Young people in key leadership roles; Not enough rotation in lay leadership; i.e. same people always called on to volunteer time, talents, treasures; The council does not represent the parish demographics; Lack of diversity in Parish Council Church's day to day operations; Lack of participation by Parish Council members in church services and church events; We lack a cohesive parish council; Should have a chairperson(s) for all events and should NOT be PC Chairman; Need to "let go" and let chairperson chair the event; Strong participation of converts, but not in Parish Council (also, lack of women in the PC role); Sometimes we throw events together without thinking through the results; Suspicion/discomfort of clergy/hierarchy leadership; Use Mentorship to help keep young people in Church; Sometimes things get done without going through the "proper channels". While often the right action is taken, the process is lacking input from some key players and causing bad feelings d/t lack of communication; Too, Many CHIEFS!; - Unclear vision for the future; Long term plan/strategy is not clear; No general true consensus on purpose; Correlation of attending age groups by number of people is concerning; Are we looking far enough into the future?; We do not always follow through with our plan of action for

WEAKNESSES

major projects (ex; 2020 Plan); Predominant focus: past v; future; Lots of different opinions on what areas we should focus on as a Church; PC training; Creating all the details of a plan or event that are needed for it to run smooth; Group attendees are usually limited to friends of the leader. At least this is my experience leading groups with the young adults. The people we know best attend and very occasionally a new person; Relatively old upper leadership (Parish Council, Men's and Women's fellowship); Sometimes events are not planned to their potential and with not enough lead time; Fragmented efforts including overlapping planning activities and blurred lines of authority; Some decisions that are made create exclusivity. Options not always explored with others; Too often decisions are made from finances first, faith second. Much like a business not like a mission / faith-based organization.

32 - LITURGUICAL ENGAGEMENT & MUSIC & CHOIR - Attendance at services besides the Sunday Liturgy; Live-streaming, while convenient for those who are ill, can be detrimental to Church attendance especially when they can attend online from the comfort of their own homes Sunday school during orthros; ; Low turnout for Feast day services; Member's relationships lack depth, often limited to Sunday coffee hour; "Orthodox Time"/Being late; Tendency to be late for services etc.; Attendance at non-Sunday services; Poor attendance at many additional services; Parishioner participation in services, events, educational opportunities; Readers and speakers should enunciate clearly; Lack of attendance at services outside of Divine Liturgy; Church is not always a priority; Low church/service attendance; Online attendance during Covid (and ease of streaming services) may replace onsite attendance for some; Flexibility to offer different times of services to reach some different parishioners; Not always active participants in liturgical cycle; Also raising babies that have been baptized in the orthodox faith to attend church; Encouraging newly married couples to attend church after they married in the church; Some people only come to church on Sunday and Holy days, others are at almost all the services and are very active in the (extra-curricular) activities. Why?; We can be pretty casual as soon as liturgy is done, and unfortunately even during the services, such that "reverence," "profundity" or "mystery" aren't common experiences; Confusing music; Music is difficult for congregational singing; Inconsistent words and tones; Lack of congregational singing; There are some times when responsibilities aren't clear or compromises don't work (ex; The byzantine and four-part choirs splitting up the Lamentations service felt like liturgical tug-of-war); Sometimes feels like our church is being "used" for marriage/baptism/funerals without needing to be an Orthodox Christian, or attending church after/before these Holy sacraments; Choir should be leading not performing!; Choir tensions; Allow children to sing in the adult Choir, if THEY have an interest; Poor Congregational Singing; the fact that the words in handouts or in the liturgy materials available on Antiochian.org often don't match the words that are being chanted.

17 - RELIGIOUS EDUCATION - Uneven catechesis/experience leads to lack of common fundamental understanding of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian in the Antiochian spirit in 21st Century America; Ongoing catechesis and adult education could be done more programmatically. it seems adult opportunities seem to popcorn up randomly rather than being part of a more holistic plan for deepening people's faith at all ages; Poorly attended adult education (Sunday school); Low Biblical literacy; More Bible Studies, Orthodox Education: Church doctrine & Saints; I know Orthodoxy is not easy at all - but once someone discovers the mysteries, there is no way of turning back. I've always asked myself why Protestant and Baptist church has 2,000 parishioners and Orthodox church has 500? It would be interesting to explore this aspect. Also, why Protestants are better disciples and know by heart so many Bible excerpts?; Level of spiritual conviction/faith of regular attenders; Poor foundation of Orthodox education; Members view the Church as a Sunday morning only endeavor; The process for becoming an Orthodox Christian and becoming a new member of our church should be more consistent; Shallow Understanding of Faith; Similarly, it often feels that spirituality and spiritual growth is cast in behavioral terms, more right or wrong, rather than in mystical, internal, or relational communion with God; There is a focus on legalism that in my understanding doesn't fit the mystery of Orthodoxy. It can be discouraging and contribute to our feeling disconnected from the Church. I hear from others who share this experience, but may not say so. Even when nothing is said, this can cause a loss because they may continue to attend services but lose some of the sense of connection to the Parish and their faith. The Parish increasingly seems like a social organization with a growing

WEAKNESSES

emphasis on participation in activities. It can start to feel like so many other organizations and in the way, be in conflict with the mystery and beauty that is in Orthodoxy; Lack of trainings, teachings, events or opportunities to engage spirituality that are not taught in a verbal or academic sense such as in a classroom; Many/most members comfortable living their faith “the way they always have” - not desiring to do anything different to draw closer to God. Unwilling to be challenged to change, or don't see the real value in it; We could use more opportunities for people to discover Orthodoxy, maybe hosting a festival or some other opportunities to get outside people to visit the church; Are we teaching Church Dogma and traditions to Adults and to children on Sundays?

15 - YOUTH - Losing young people when they go to college and also sometimes in high school; Cultivation of strong Orthodox Christian character in children; This means having a strong foundation not only in being aware of who they are but also being able to defend and explain their beliefs to others; Young people and parents struggling with being Orthodox Christians in the current environment; Not a great percentage of youth involvement; Still developing ministry to children, pre-teens; Need to share the feeling of being a part of the church community with the youth, need the younglings to know, see, feel important and valuable to the church now and at every stage; Lack of regular attendance (especially the youth); lack of involvement from younger generation; The gap ages from high school to young adulthood and taking their spiritual and social lives on their own; I'm young, I only know what I know. I am still in college, so my schedule is rather busy, and my school life is a priority to me; Low attendance from our children and young; Lack of parental commitment to Church School attendance (i.e., sports over church); Parent involvement in getting kids to activities; Getting the next generation to help with the dinner; Lack of parental involvement with SOYO.

15 - FACILITIES ISSUES (especially sound system) - High Building Maintenance Costs; Significant physical site overhead for size of body; Some parts of the Church building need to be updated/ refreshed (I think we need a robust budget/ savings account for building maintenance and updates); Poor sound quality in the nave of the church, making it difficult to understand the chanting and homily in particular; Limited accessibility for physically impaired; Visibility of the church building; No physical visibility to our location and service times limits visitor drop ins; Poor acoustics – very difficult to hear; If icons are to tell a story, then the lovely icon of St. Elias, on the iconostasis, must have work done on it. From the 2nd row of pews and back, this Icon appears to be a bright orange mass with half of a man reclining within it. If people cannot see the story, the story is lost; Facility maintenance; Acoustics in the church; Sound System not clear; Sound System is POOR! Slow down, stop Mumbling; Enunciate!!!; Lack of outdoor event space; There are still issues with the sound system and acoustics in Church; at times, it's hard to understand the priest or whoever is speaking.

14 - OUTREACH & EVANGELISM - TOO INTERNALLY FOCUSED -- Focused too much on the parish and not enough on helping our neighbors / community; Lack of engagement with the greater Grand Rapids community; Not very active in outreach in our communities; Lacking as a presence in the community in a leadership role; Little evangelism; Anonymity Evangelism; of the church in the community; Low presence in the community; Outbound programs are underfunded and need more focus; I am not enjoying all the formalistic rules that are being imposed; We feel the rigid emphasis on decorum is overshadowing the beauty of Orthodoxy. Putting all these rules and regulations in place is turning off and turning away many people, and even making many of the members tune out. We are still unknown to many, many Christians in our community, and I think that's because we don't try to make it little easier to belong. We are all Christians, and we follow Christ in his teachings, and I don't believe Jesus instructs us to turn people away if they don't precisely follow the Orthodox concept of Christianity. We will never grow like we should if we don't embrace all people who are willing to follow Christ's teachings and not just those who are already in the Orthodox faith; Community awareness; Inward focus; Marketing of St. Nicholas and Orthodoxy; Not great at “evangelizing” - reaching out to the community to invite them into the Orthodox Church & faith.

WEAKNESSES

- 10 - **COMMUNICATIONS & TRANSPARENCY**– Poor communication; Slow to update communication tools such as the directory; Missing some communication/networking/ coordination, it's not efficient to rely on only one person for everything or even everything in one area; The most important of these is often the lack of communication or the misunderstanding of what is being said or done; Organization and scheduling can sometimes be an issue (ex; Not having a way to notify inquirers that class will be canceled or online until they show up to a sign on the door); Communication within the Parish Council; Communication issues (too many emails, not enough personal calls-visits-etc.); Lack of transparency, poor communication between Parish Council and parishioners; Communication (Big Picture/Why); Communication is sometimes lacking.
- 8 - **"BUSYNESS" - TOO MANY ACTIVITIES** - Too many activities; Splattered and overscheduled; extend ourselves too thin; take on too much - do less and do it well; Too, many ministries that require, too, much administrative time and divides us; Some events in the past have been planned at a time that conflicts with another event; Too many events scheduled during the workday or on weeknight evenings, making it difficult for people who work or families with young children to participate; We are a large church so there is the tendency to have many activities/groups so as to include as many people as possible; And, as in many organizations, no matter how large or small, the same few volunteer and/or participate; So many leaders and activities, it is hard to get good attendance at everything.
- 7 - **CLERGY/STAFF SHORTAGES** - Not enough Church "staff" to handle things - I think have dedicated and paid people to handle the "business" of the Church is very important for accountability and clarity. I personally think that relying on Volunteers for important Church related items is one of our weaknesses and to really grow/ make an impact we need actual employees; Staffing; Very (too?) busy clergy and staff; Administrator overworked; Priest overworked; Overextended priest; Diocesan demands on parish priest; Priest's schedule could be a little more organized.
- 7 - **RESISTANCE TO CHANGE** - Resistant to change; Emphasis on the past; Aversion to risk taking, jumping in the puddles; Change Management; In a rut with the "old way" of doing things; Difficulty with change; Often stuck in the past, we've always done it that way.
- 6 - **LACK OF UNITY** - Although, there are so many wonderful activities for every age and tastes, it seems that we are not yet united and on the same page; There is a lack of cohesiveness between different sectors of the parish population; We need to have more programs or activities that do not separate us by age or group; Forming deep relationships; Too much pandering to individuals or individual families; A family, together; We are still remaining a community of communities vs being one community/family; Examples could be any of large families, ethnic communities, age groups, etc.
- 6 - **DECLINING MEMBERSHIP / LACK OF GROWTH**- Member attrition; Stagnant growth general; Effort in expanding our membership; Encouraging/bring back inactive members; Getting past members of church to come back; Need to better understand why former parishioners left St. Nicholas.
- 5 - **SIZE ISSUES** - Too many ministry teams for our size of parish?; Feels large, sometimes individuals or their needs can be lost or un-noticed; Being such a large church, when I became a member it was hard for me to remember people's names and it still is; Parish can seem too big (Dunbar's number 150 stable relationships) OR, too rich/intimidation; It can feel like we have too many committees and foci and it becomes overwhelming.
- 4 - **DISTANCE FROM CHURCH** - We draw our member from a large geographical area; It's a challenge to participate when one lives far from the church. The virtual events have helped, but for me, it's not the same as being "in person." Though I will say that efforts are being made to improve this situation; Parishioners very spread out geographically; Geographic Spread of Parishioners; Some families come from 30+ minutes to attend service/church events.

WEAKNESSES

- 4 - IN-REACH TO PARISHIONERS IN NEED** - Charity begins at home- sometimes, too, much focus on charity when St Nick's needs; Outreach to parishioners in need; Limited grief support. Could widen to include infertility, miscarriage, infant loss, pet loss, divorce, relationship loss, job loss, etc. Any Loss; I have one weakness I need to mention; We need a ministry of outreach to visit the homebound, the depressed, those who have lost loved ones, and more that I cannot think of right now; Father Michael needs an assistant to help him; Another item Has been an issue forever.
- 3 - APATHY** - Member apathy; Apathy; Our unwillingness to educate ourselves out this great treasure (Orthodoxy) that we hold.
- 3 - FINANCIAL ISSUES** - No benchmarks on spending/operating expenses given size of parish; Spending budget continues to grow without an actually plan to find new resources to help fund needs; Spend \$ foolishly at times – Nothing wrong with having a savings account for when is needed; We don't always need to spend \$.
- 2 - LACK OF SMALL GROUPS** - Lack of smaller social groups that are easy for a new member to join; Small groups are lacking.
- 2 - LACK OF PROMOTION OF CULTURAL CENTER** - Little promotion of the Cultural Center; Need to promote the use of our Cultural Center.
- 2 - POLITICS** - More overt political conversation that occurs during meetings, luncheons with the Bishop and Metropolitan, etc. It can feel isolating and that there is a "right" political stance in the church to be a member; Being consistent and firm with our views in the Orthodox Faith, when it comes to political stances in terms of abortion, sexuality, etc.
- 2 - PERSONALITY ISSUES** - Interpersonal behavior doesn't reflect Orthodox teachings; strong personalities - own opinions.

ONE OFFS

- ~ As we are on different rungs of the Climacus ladder, we need to help each other to climb that ladder faster and higher. To learn how to work not only on our salvation, but on others' salvation, also. Life is too short - we don't have much time on this Earth.
- ~ Too, many Announcements after Liturgy; Please urge All to Read the Bulletin!
- ~ Take too much for granted / unappreciative of what we have – clergy, choir, church school, youth involvement programs.
- ~ Supporting and encouraging parents who will then bring and encourage their kids.
- ~ Diversity of income levels (is a strength also) which leads to hurt feelings and/or judgement by growing numbers of non-upper income parishioners.
- ~ There can be a lack of mature, humble, and honest discourse about problems facing our world when they include, race, caste, gender, finance, or are outside of the traditional sense of giving to the poor or misfortunate.
- ~ Little coordinated planning with other Orthodox parishes in town at lay leadership level.
- ~ Feel that you need to provide a lot of food if you're sponsoring a coffee hour.
- ~ Technology updates.
- ~ Affluence/privilege of majority of parishioners.
- ~ Still thinking of church as a social club.
- ~ Lack of Focus on Charity.
- ~ Team focus