

Joint Standing Committee of the UOCC and USRL

Report on Youth Focus Groups: A National Perspective

Background

Adults in the age range of ~18-40 or “young adults” in the Ukrainian Orthodox community are an under-represented group both in terms of church attendance as well as involvement within the Ukrainian Self-Reliance League of Canada (USRL). Many of these young people were formerly active within our Sunday Schools or in CYMK (Ukrainian Orthodox youth group), however this activity diminishes greatly or ceases altogether during this phase in their lives. Some may return to greater activity with the arrival of their children, due to a desire to “pass on” their traditions and faith, but poor retention of this group remains a problem in our community. Indeed, reflecting upon the aging community within the Ukrainian Orthodox community, one could argue that continued loss of this demographic will threaten the survival of this community in the near future. As such, there is a need to engage this group, assess its needs and determine what, if anything can be done to increase their involvement within our community.

The Joint Standing Committee (JSC) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada (UOCC) and USRL evolved from one of the 8 recommendations of the CYC Futures Project in 2005. It is comprised of members from both the UOCC and USRL with a core mandate to identify mutual goals of UOCC and USRL and develop an implementation strategy to achieve such goals. Ultimately, it is hoped this collaboration will lead to renewal of both organizations and by proxy the Ukrainian Orthodox community. Since 2005, this committee has met bi-annually to distill the issues facing our community into 6 workable recommendations and projects. These recommendations are youth focused and encompass camps, institutes, chaplains, a paid youth worker, leadership development and engaging our young adults.

In order to reasonably address the issue of non-involvement of young adults, it was felt necessary to conduct a series of focus groups with this demographic to ask them directly what we need to do to retain them within our community. These focus groups occurred in 6 major centres within each Diocese/Eparchy (Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg and Toronto). Participants were invited by open invitation (email, phone, in-person) to a 2-hour session where JSC members administered a standard questionnaire and recorded the proceedings. The questionnaire included questions in the domains of assessing and defining activity or personal fulfillment, assessing barriers and priorities, defining impressions of and links to our community, and finally looking forward towards potential solutions. Meeting notes were analyzed by a single reviewer and categorized into broad themes. A preliminary report on the Western Eparchy was presented in Edmonton in October, 2008. The final collated results from all 6 centers are reported here.

Methods and Analysis

Six sessions were conducted in Vancouver (6 participants), Edmonton (18), Calgary (11), Saskatoon (8), Winnipeg (12) and Toronto (5). Twenty-seven participants self-identified their level activity as “active”, while 17 defined themselves as “moderately active” and 15 as “minimally active” or “inactive”. Only three persons identified themselves as currently active with USRL, all within CYMK, however almost all of the participants noted activity within CYMK when they were younger.

Six general themes (with subthemes) emerged: spirituality, community, motivation, language/culture, organizations and looking forward. These are each discussed in turn below.

Results

1) Spirituality

Worship

Overall, participants provided positive comments on the outward traditions of worship in terms of our architecture and music. At the same time, they expressed a desire for meaning within that tradition.

“It seems many parishioners are just going through the motions”

In addition to active participation, young adults wanted to better understand the Divine Liturgy, and this need was not expressed just in terms of language. There were a few comments on length of service.

“ Why does the choir have to treat it like a concert?”

Needs and Knowledge

Many participants rated their knowledge of the Orthodox faith as poor.

“I feel my parents/church failed me in instruction in the Faith”

As such, they expressed a desire for Bible study or workshops on the Orthodox faith. Comments were made that this generation is actively engaged in life long learning already, and our faith should be no different. There was a split between those who felt fulfilled in our church and those who were looking elsewhere. In addition, some participants felt that some of our parishes are spiritually weak in terms of the knowledge of the faithful and their actions. Others felt the UOCC has too long focused on retaining our language and culture to the detriment of our understanding of our faith.

“Our faithful are ‘Church Illiterate’”

Participants also noted a lack of resources in terms of priests or other laity to do the work that was required to be done. Finally, there were several comments reflecting

a poor understanding of our existing UOCC Sunday School curriculum potentially as it was not utilized or promoted within their parish.

Relevance

While there were many positive comments that the Orthodox Church has a “backbone”, participants also expressed a desire for priests to be more “in touch” with modern times and young people. Several comments about poor sermons that were not reflective of current events and challenges were made.

“The same thing is repeated year after year”

Criticism was also directed at the Ukrainian Orthodox community at large in that we are too inward focused, and do not adequately work for the community in which we live.

2) Community

Belonging

Having others within their peer group and socialization is important to this age group. The peer group can provide motivation to participate within the community activities. When one tries to “break into” a peer group (e.g. when relocating to a new city), it can be difficult, and contribute to young adults reducing their involvement in the Ukrainian Orthodox community. Finally, in larger centres, simple geography can be a barrier to linking frequently to the peer group and fostering a sense of belonging.

Family & Continuity

For many within this age group, the Ukrainian Orthodox church is a “comfort zone”.

“Same place it has always been”

“We attend this church out of habit”

The UOCC is the church in which many of these young adults were raised, and many linked their attendance to the rearing of their own children. Those with children stated they attend regularly as they want to provide their children with similar upbringing to what they had. Some stated that they would attend more regularly once their children were older. Finally, those without children stated they do not attend regularly as they have no children, but might once that occurs.

Age Gap

Among this age group the older majority within our community is noticeable. Many felt there was “no energy” and that the community was “disengaging”.

“We are preserving the church for the older people”

This observation is coupled with concern about what will remain in 10-20 years once the older generation is no more. Similarly, this group feels that there is little focus on youth or young adults within the Ukrainian Orthodox community.

Mixed Marriages

Young adults raised within the community stated a definite pressure to marry “within” community. Those who had married outside of the Ukrainian Orthodox community now faced issues such as “what church will we attend?” Participants who had married into the community often stated they were not made to feel welcome and that the language barrier made it difficult to participate or feel as though they belonged.

3) Motivation

Negative Experiences

Unfortunately, most participants stated that they had had a negative experience within the Ukrainian Orthodox community. Some were made to feel unwelcome or had a difficult time “breaking in” while others were “pounced on” to do something or join a group or take a leadership position. Other negative experiences were expressed in terms of concern about “anti-Christian” behaviour, longstanding grudges or political agendas demonstrated by both members and leaders with our church and community.

Priorities

Within this age group either school/career or family were identified as the top priority for them. As well, there was a stated need to achieve balance between these priorities with church life. A point that was stressed was that the perceived relevance of any activity or association to the participant’s every day life determined its priority. Ultimately, most participants want to keep the Ukrainian Orthodox community a priority within their lives due to its historical importance to them (e.g. emotional connection, where they were raised), however competing priorities often make that difficult. When asked to prioritize between faith, culture and community, those who preferred a single option 40% placed faith as their top priority, while culture and community each ranked first among the remaining participants. Other participants felt the three components were interconnected and could not prioritize one over the other.

Barriers

The young people who participated identified several barriers to Ukrainian Orthodox community involvement. Many of these have been discussed previously and include geography, time, a previous negative experience, mixed marriages, and being new to a community.

4) Language and Culture

When discussing the Ukrainian language and culture, it appeared that a different upbringing gave a different perspective. While some placed their culture before their faith, others had no ties to our culture. However, most felt that retention of some degree of the Ukrainian culture was important. Not surprisingly, language was identified as an important issue, however there was no real push for “all English” within our worship services, with the desired amount ranging between 20-50%.

“We conduct all of our meetings and discussions in English, and people are only Ukrainian when they are in church.”

Participants who had spent time in both Eastern and Western Canada were specifically asked about the importance of language, and generally responded that their impression was that preservation of the Ukrainian language was more of a priority in the East.

5) Organizations

The Ukrainian Self Reliance League and its component organizations (such as the Ukrainian Women’s Association of Canada – UWAC or the Ukrainian Self-Reliance Association - TYC) were not “on the radar” for this demographic in the present state of their lives. While many saw value in the Ukrainian Orthodox Youth organization (CYMK), many were unclear on the relevance of TYC or UWAC to their lives. Some felt these organizations were “pushy to join”, that the separation of the men and women was undesirable, or that these organizations were not welcoming or accommodating for young people.

“They want us to join, but only on their terms”

6) Looking forward

Openness

When considering the future of the Ukrainian Orthodox community, participants felt that the stigma of language should be removed, and that there should be enough options within our community that people could feel included regardless of their knowledge of Ukrainian or English. This linked to further comments regarding mixed marriages where young adults felt that there needs to be increased acceptance of non-Ukrainians within our community.

Participants felt that gender gaps should be bridged, as in consolidating the women’s and men’s organizations. As well, generational issues should be addressed with an increased focus on youth and children’s activities. We should adopt less of an inward focus, be more open and welcoming and remove any barriers where possible.

“Why can’t we start church earlier? I’m up anyway and it would allow for more time with my family later”

Moderinization

When considering the administration and logistics of our community, there was a call for paid workers, as there was a general feeling that we can no longer rely on volunteers to do all of the work. Where possible, we should be pursuing collaboration or even consolidation and amalgamation both within the UOCC (e.g. Parish districts and mission districts, particularly in rural areas) and USRL (e.g. combining men’s and women’s groups). Fundraising needs more imagination than varenyky and bingos.

Finally, we are not utilizing technology to its full capabilities. For example, proper databases would allow us to know the location and skill set of community members, which would be helpful when fundraising or looking for specific volunteers to meet specific community needs.

Leadership

Building on the need to identify people with certain skill sets, many participants issued a call for more proactive leadership development and more investment in people to develop within them the skill sets our community will need to survive. Our leaders must be respectful and be respected. Also, leaders in our community need to have a positive and welcoming attitude and be open to change and new ideas.

Engagement

Young adults generally felt that they may eventually need to set the course or standard for our community and that time will need to be devoted to change our vision.

“If not me, who? If not now, when?”

“We go through cycles in life and at times we give a lot and at other times nothing at all”

If this community is to survive, we must not give up; we must take ownership, and try to solve problems instead of just talking about them. People want to be engaged, find value in their involvement and feel that attendance at church cannot be a chore. Indeed, there was a positive response in engagement simply from having these focus group sessions.

“I feel better talking about my church”

Participants were asked what they would contribute to the future success of our community. 63% indicated they were willing to contribute their time, 42% stated

they would contribute money, 45% their expertise and 7% said they were unwilling to contribute anything at this time.

Impressions

Finally, the facilitators who conducted these Focus Groups were asked for their impressions of the sessions. Their thoughts are as follows:

“The participants also felt that at the present time their involvement is purely emotional; they need to see some potential; their faith is important and that is why many came to the meeting, and they still need convincing that if they gave more money that it would help the UOC.”

“The organizational building blocks as currently structured in UOCC and USRL are falling apart. There is some concern for USRL but more focus and concern about the consequences for the UOCC. The heavy inference was: Are we reacting to change OR are we (could we be?) agents of change?”

“We need to make the changes in the UOC and these changes need to work for them as young adults and will last (it need to be sustainable). The young adults do not need a quick fix but a permanent solution.”

“The group made the statement that they have become complacent. We have taken, the church and organizations, for granted. Could this mean that there will have to be some extenuating factors/disaster that will cause these adults to get involved? “

“An interesting discussion arose about looking at successful communities and building upon what they do right. Ultimately, as a community we don’t support each other. In an ideal world, somebody needing help should be able to access money or expertise...we generally provide neither.”

Discussion

The focus groups conducted brought together a diverse group of young adults, and as such the opinions reflected that diversity. However, general themes emerged such as increased openness internally (in terms of our language and acceptance of non-Ukrainians) and externally (in terms of how we operate within our Canadian community at large). Overall, there was a desire for more focus on faith and being active, knowledgeable participants within our worship services. This group will only prioritize what is relevant to them and what they find value in, and they are not always finding this relevance through belonging to our community. Of particular concern to the USRL should be the general disinterest this group has towards this organization (with the notable exception of CYMK). If the USRL is to survive 20 years into the future, it will require significant change and revisioning to do so. A difficult question to ask is whether the original principles that USRL was founded on are still relevant in today’s context. When our young people are so highly integrated into Canadian society, what appeal does “Self-Reliance” have? Is there

another focus this organization can embrace that would be more relevant to this group?

This demographic is not a homogenous group and therefore there will be no single solution to address their needs. Indeed, there will be more success with a multi-faceted approach as opposed to relying on any particular program. As well, any changes must be organizational and cultural; a real lasting change of vision as opposed to any “quick fix”. To effectively engage this group, it is important to understand them. The group referred to as Generation X (born 1965-1980) have been described as resourceful and independent who dislike micromanagement or the “establishment”. They possess a great deal of technological savvy and place high value on work-life balance. The Millennials or Generation Y (born 1981-1999) are creative, thrive on innovation and are collaborative. They have a high sense of entitlement and question everything. While also technologically adept, they operate at a scatter-shot pace and have a short attention span. To successfully engage these people, we must adopt strategies and attitudes that will complement the attributes of this demographic. This may require significant changes to how we operate at local, provincial, and national levels.

The secular fields can be referred to for ways to approach this organizational change. Kotter, in his seminal paper “Leading Change” in the Harvard Business Review discusses organizational change in terms of 8 steps¹;

- 1) Create urgency; 2) Form a powerful coalition; 3) Create a vision for change; 4) Communicate the new vision; 5) Remove obstacles; 6) Create short-term wins; 7) Build on the change; 8) Anchor the changes into culture

This process could be adapted to truly changing the culture within our community, but it will take vision, leadership and commitment to do so.

It may seem very daunting, and begs the question “Where to start?”. Ultimately, we must each take personal responsibility for making it work. We must be proactive, creative and patient. There will be no success if it is “someone else’s” job to create change within our community. We must each individually commit to making our community a place where all are welcome and where people want to belong.

Implications and Opportunities

The implications of losing this generation cannot be understated. Within the Ukrainian Orthodox community, there is already discussion of the previous “lost” generations of young people in the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s and so forth. There will come a point in time in the near future when there is no longer a generation to lose.

For our sponsoring organizations, UOCC and USRL, we believe there are three key messages. For our UOCC, we believe the call to increase the quantity and, more importantly, the quality of faith-based education must be recognized. When “any church” will do, we have clearly not imparted the fullness of our faith to our faithful. This is not a simple task of offering a bible study class, then cancelling it once a

handful of people express an interest for only a few months. We need to change the culture of our church to be one of lifelong learning. Church education does not end in Sunday School, and we should not miss opportunities every Sunday and any other time our church family gathers to impart real, tangible and practical knowledge. As well, we must be creative in how we deliver that message. Sermons alone, a form of didactic lecture, are only one method of delivering learning, and when we are considering adult learning, not always the most appropriate technique.

For the USRL, the key message must be one of relevance. The vision and mission of this organization must begin to resonate with young people (particularly as they leave CYMK) otherwise there will be no future for the USRL. There must be a concerted effort to engage CYMK and determine what the needs and interests of this group are. More importantly, and perhaps the more difficult piece, will be to commit to and undertake the significant change that will be required to address those needs and interests. The USRL may find that it must overhaul its organizational structure (e.g. combine TYC and UWAC) and clarify its focus (i.e. church-based as opposed to “outside” of the church) to achieve relevance and longevity.

Underpinning both of these messages is the unifying theme of leadership. Both UOCC and USRL will require strong leadership to implement and sustain these changes. Leaders must be respected and respectful. They must have vision and energy to move forward, and have the skills to successfully see the change through. They must recognize the skills of others and build relationships and teams of people who can implement that vision. As a community, we cannot rely on having such leaders magically appear. We must spend time and effort recruiting them from within our ranks and cultivating these characteristics.

This is a time of tremendous opportunity for our Ukrainian Orthodox community. Let us rise to challenge, and create a community that will last another 100 years or more!

Tania Mysak,
Co-project Director, Youth Focus Groups,
Joint Standing Committee

References: □ Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996. Kotter, John. P. "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail." *Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review*. March–April, 1995.