
Why do people come to church?

Intentionally or unintentionally, a parish lives by a certain approach, which "speaks" to a specific group (or groups) of people. While this makes the community attractive to newcomers who fit within the paradigm, it also makes it inaccessible to those who do not. Approaches to parish life must be flexible enough to reach out to as broad a range of people as possible. Understanding the varied reasons that people attend church can help parishes in developing effective newcomer outreach initiatives.

Searching for Roots

Some people come to church to be connected with a particular community or faith tradition. For example, in churches that are have specific ethnic or national ties such as the UOCC, people often come to church to stay connected with their ethnic heritage and with the spiritual roots of their ancestors. In this category, we also find those who attend because it is the parish that their forebears founded, or the one in which they were baptised, married, etc.

For people who seek a Church to meet such needs, it is important that the community have direct and visible links to it's "heritage". This may come in many different forms: liturgical services; the accommodation in parish life of the historic language of the community with the current language of the believers; regular parish events such as dinners or festal celebrations which

cultivate the values, heritage and traditions of a particular ethnic group; and/or long-standing parish groups/committees (parish sisterhood, choir, etc.) whose role is not merely to provide resources but also a place where one can learn the customs and traditions of the community. All of these offer the seeker a sense of "connectedness," that is, a tangible means of embracing and expressing the "faith of the fathers."

A Need for Healing

Another group of seekers looks to the Church to find healing and nurture. People go through life with many wounds, some physical, some psychological, emotional, and/or interpersonal. All of these wounds have a spiritual component. In the face of guilt, isolation, regret, torment, these lost sons and daughters of the world come to the Church looking for healing from the spiritual pain with which they are afflicted. Finding deliverance, they then seek to be nurtured and nourished so that they may build up their emotional and spiritual fortitude.

It has been said that the Church is a spiritual hospital; all of the disciplines within it may be understood as a therapeutic regime for healing the soul from the ravages of sin and death. To reach out to those who seek healing and nurture, a parish must make the "therapeutic system" of the Church available to them through worship, counselling, support groups, spiritual direction, and other initiatives designed to help build up one's inner life. Such outreach must address both the need to heal the wound and to nurture the person

along the continuing "therapeutic" journey of spiritual growth.

A Hunger for Truth

A third group of seekers are those who attend church looking for learning and growth. The quest of these seekers is for the truth. Such people live by the promise of Jesus: "You will know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Bible studies and other catechetical programs are important for these individuals as are informative homilies and other learning opportunities in parish life.

For such people, however, it is important that what they achieve is not simply an academic knowledge of the faith but rather a personal experience of the truth of Christ's Gospel. Communal worship and other activities around the parish should provide the opportunities to learn and apply the teachings of Christ and His Church. In this Orthodox Christian context, learning is an act of formation. Through studies, coupled with prayer and the other spiritual disciplines, each person is formed by the grace of God, into a living icon of the Living God.

A Desire to "Do My Part"

We also find those whose motivation for attending church is founded on a desire to "do their part". For some, this is manifested in work for the inner affairs of the community such as cantoring, administration, special events planning, etc. Others want to work with the parish on outreach initiatives like pastoral visitation teams,

food banks, or missionary outreach. In each case, the person perceives that "something needs to be done" and that he or she is duty-bound to do their part in carrying out the work.

Sometimes, this sense of duty is learned from parents and other forebears. In other cases, it emerges as a response to something they feel that God has done for them, or that they need to do for God. Still others are motivated by an inability to endure a given situation as it currently exists. In all cases, the needs of such people must be met with programming that allows them to invest their time and resources thereby enabling them to feel that they are fulfilling their duty to God and community.

What must be stressed to these people, however, is that such activities should not be regarded as a way to "earn" them a place in the Kingdom. Rather, they are concrete expressions of the selfless love which God models for us in the incarnation of His only-begotten Son, and through which He calls us to share with others.

Desiring to "Fit In"

Finally, there are those who seek a Church community in a desire for affirmation. Such people have a deep need to feel that they "belong". They turn to the Church with its message of mercy and acceptance to find a place

for themselves. For people such as this, the parish must offer activities which allow them to connect with other members; activities such as fellowship/study groups, social events, or "work bees" can offer this opportunity.

In all parish initiatives, such people must find the congregation to be warm and welcoming. Often this type of person comes bearing deep personal wounds, and many times it is the psycho-social "symptoms" of these wounds that are a cause of their sense of isolation. Consequently, the community must always be compassionate with such seekers while, nevertheless, maintaining firm boundaries regarding what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in an interpersonal setting.

Realistically, not every parish will be able to address the needs of all seekers. Although a community can have multiple paradigms for its parish life, it is impossible simultaneously to give every type of need equal attention. Parishes that desire growth must be prepared to examine the scope of the outreach provided by the approach in which they function. If this approach no longer meets the needs of seekers coming to the parish, the community must be prepared to make the necessary shifts in its life either to broaden or alter this scope.

Success secrets of growing parishes

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