

Church Growth: Auditing the Public Persona of the Parish

Introduction

In the story of the “Magnificent Banquet” (Luke 14: 16-24) the host begins by inviting his friends and relatives. Since they do not positively respond, he then instructs his servant to invite the poor, crippled, blind and lame. Since there is still room for more, he then has the servant search far and wide to bring in anyone he can find.

Is yours a parish that wants to grow? Truth is, it’s usually not a high priority for most Orthodox priests or parishes. Contemporary Orthodoxy in the west is strongly internally oriented. The banquet is prepared but few if any invitations are issued, to say nothing about an aggressive effort to fill the nave. Oh, there is usually friendship, help and attention available to those who seek to enter into the church, but rarely do we seek them.

One very important point in the story is that the host of the banquet and his servant don’t impersonally advertise the banquet by hiring a town crier, to announce it publicly, as it were. Rather, the servant, on the instructions of the host, *personally* invites people one by one to enjoy his hospitality. And who do they finally go to? The ones who would most appreciate it – the needy of society.

In the context of a parish, these are most likely the *spiritually* needy – those *spiritually* poor, *spiritually* crippled, *spiritually* blind and *spiritually* lame, though the physically needy very much do qualify as well. In the third canvas of invitees, we see it is basically everyone who is invited, both the needy and the self-satisfied or complacent of society whether they know the need a banquet or not!

Auditing the public persona of the parish is an exercise that enables a priest, together with a small group of interested and concerned parishioners, to step back and look at the public face of the parish and to try and see it through the eyes of the curious, the spiritually needy, the seeker, the new Orthodox family who has moved into your community, or those who fashionably describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”.

Step One – Gaining parish council support

It is doubtful that parish council approval needs to be received to undertake this work. It is at the heart of the gospel and clearly within the parameters of clergy pastoral work. Yet the group doing the work will surely benefit from parish council support in terms of public relations, funding and possible future staffing.

Step Two – Recruiting the team

The priest invites 6-8 members of the parish who already have shown an interest in helping others to become Orthodox or who potentially might have this interest to participate. The time commitment would be meetings once or twice a month over a year or two.

Step Three – Getting into character

The exercise begins with those who comprise the research group, undertaking what professional actors call “method acting”. In the dramatic arts, method acting is when actors create in themselves the thoughts and feelings of their characters.

The priest invites team members to enter into the mentality of a curious first-time visitor to the parish. The visitor might be a member of another expression of Christianity, a non-believer, a seeker, an Orthodox Christian who has just moved to town, someone emotionally wounded, a partner of an Orthodox Christian now engaged to be married in the church, or even just a passing motorist or festival participant.

Step Four – Undertaking the research

Take a long step backward to gain perspective. You are now the curiosity seeker.

1. National public perceptions: What assumptions does the general public make about Orthodox Christians or Orthodoxy in general, if at all? Where and how does the public receive these assumptions? List these.
2. Local geographic public perceptions: What is the “reputation” or public perception of the parish in the nearby community? In the city in which you live? Even in the state or county? What conscious or unconscious messages has the parish broadcast through the years to the general public, if at all? List these.
3. Now, possibly as a homework assignment, ask the team to research the documented public persona of the parish. Remember that you are a visitor or curiosity seeker.
 - a. What does an Internet search reveal?
 - b. What does the telephone book reveal?
 - c. What recent newspaper or television coverage has the parish received? What was the message?
 - d. Drive the most commonly used routes to the parish. What, if anything, does the signage tell us?
 - e. Stand at a distance or walk by. What do these views of the parish tell us?

4. As a group exercise examine the public information that the parish provides about itself. Write down the findings.

a. Examine the website, if there is one. What messages does it send? Remember that it must fulfill two functions – provide public information and also parish member information about activities, events, etc.

b. Is there a Sunday hand-out? If possible look at a few recent ones. What messages do they send?

c. Are materials freely available when entering the church? What do they say? Are no materials available? What does that say?

5. The Sunday experience.

a. Discreetly stand in the narthex and watch as people enter for Sunday services. Go to the coffee hour. Observe carefully.

b. How are people received, if at all?

c. Look around the narthex. What is it saying to visitors or curiosity seekers?

d. What conveniences or inconveniences are there?

e. What emotional, psychological or physical obstacles must visitors deal with?

f. What about the services themselves? Perhaps they are just the way they need to be. But what if the perceptions of visitors or prospective non-Orthodox partners are factored into the analysis? Studies reveal that 80-90% of Orthodox marriages today are to non-Orthodox.

6. The church office.

a. How are visitors, seekers or Orthodox from another city who just moved to town received?

b. What messages does the space, the arrangement, the visible items in the office send? What is the disposition of those working there?

c. What information is gathered from those who wander in?

d. What information is distributed? Are there new member packets? Or inquirer packets? Any free literature for distribution about Orthodoxy?

e. What is the follow up step with these people who self-identify?

7. Ask the priest to help identify new converts or new members to the parish. Interview them regarding their experiences entering the parish – both positive and not so positive. Write down key findings.

8. Finally, since the priest is participating in this exercise, what questions should he ask himself regarding how visitors, seekers, inquirers are responded to? How does he view his role? What challenges and opportunities exist for him?

Step Five – recording and qualifying the observations in one of the four categories

1. Utilize the document below, or if the research is exhaustive, then use four separate sheets of paper

2. In each category list activities, behaviors, events, signage, communications, messages, décor, appearance, facilities, communications, “messages”, etc. – virtually anything that qualifies regarding the parish’s deportment or presentation towards visitors, seekers, spouses who marry into the church, Orthodox who have moved into your area, or people different from the general parish demographic.

3. Discuss as a group. List the items in each of the four quadrants. Assign a number to each one.

#1 = Highest priority: easily changed, non-controversial, not expensive - remove, delete, improve, enhance or fix this item as soon as is feasibly possible

#2 = High priority: not so easily changed, non-controversial, some funding required - get it on the list of things to improve and change as funding, human resources, time and energy allow but get it done

#3 = Medium priority: more difficult to change, potentially controversial, greater funding might be required - or will require long term attention but ultimately needs to be addressed if we want to be a five-star welcoming parish

#4 = Low priority: very difficult to change, highly controversial, possibly very expensive to address - doesn’t offer much benefit and the cost in political capital will be high and potentially divisive

#5 = Special case – may take generations to change if we want to embrace evangelization as a community value – there is solid community consensus not to change this; evangelization may need to go undercover and remain the work of a faithful few

Step Six – Taking Action

1. Transition from research and analysis into action.
2. The priest, who has likely been leading the project to this point, though he must remain closely involved, may now delegate actions steps to the ministry group. A task-master may be appointed who accepts responsibility for ensuring group members are following through on assignments in a timely way. No changes should be formally implemented without the priest's consent.
3. Prioritize the tasks.
4. Seek funding or human resources and talents as need. It's possible the group will now be expanded.
5. Meet monthly to monitor progress.

Future steps

This exercise is only the first step in ramping up to evangelization as a community held value in an Orthodox parish. Other steps include:

- Identifying “portals of entry” into the community if a person desires to affiliate or enter into the Orthodox faith; examining each portal and qualifying the relative ease or difficulty in entering and integrating into the community via the portal.
- Learning the basics about how people move from where they are into a new system of belief and practice, otherwise known as conversion.
- Acquiring skills assisting people who wish to move from one system of belief and practice into another.
- Exercising the power of asking.
- Involving the community in the process and not limiting it to just the work of a few.
- Addressing possible blowback from the community when the culture of the parish begins to change in a significant way.
- Securing the funding and the staffing that creates and sustains a serious enterprise of evangelization.
- Organizing and systematizing for results, not in terms of collecting scalps, but in terms of gently and lovingly inviting, welcoming, seating and celebrating each person's free choice to participate in the Lord's Magnificent Banquet.

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