

Church Growth and Health: A Challenge to our Diocese

LET'S TALK DOLLARS!

Consider two figures: **\$63.46** and **\$13.57**.

What's special about these numbers?

The first -- **\$63.46** -- represents an average weekly tithe (10%) based on the median annual income for Pennsylvania residents: \$33,000 according to census figures.

The second -- **\$13.57** -- represents the average weekly offering of parishioners to our diocesan parishes, based on responses to our 2008 parish life survey.

The difference between these two figures -- the average weekly tithe less the average weekly offering -- is **\$49.89**. This represents the last difference between the ideal of Christian financial stewardship that assumes tithing, and the current reality of our diocesan parishes.

Now imagine if you and every other parishioner in your parish increased your offering by \$49.89 a week! In a parish of 70 adults, this could potentially generate **nearly \$182,000 in added income** to your parish!

If this would happen, would your parish be lacking for anything? Wouldn't it be able not only to pay the bills but also be equipped to extend its mission and ministry beyond the walls of the church? Would your parish leadership and volunteers have to spend countless hours in endless meetings and fund-raising activities just to make ends meet?

Granted, averages don't tell the whole story. Our diocese includes parishes located in economically-depressed areas facing unusually difficult circumstances, and parishes whose membership includes a largely elderly population on fixed incomes. There are a number of variables and factors, economic and otherwise, that will tend to skew averages.

But consider this one fact. The healthiest, most active and vibrant parishes in our diocese (in any diocese!) are those with the highest average weekly offering of their parishioners.

It's that simple. YOU have the ability to empower your parish to thrive by striving toward the ideal of Christian stewardship through your regular, weekly financial offerings.

On the other hand, if you and your fellow parishioners are content to maintain your current level of financial support -- the diocesan average of \$13.57 a week -- not only will the health of your parish not change, it will continue to spiral downward, unable to keep pace with ever-increasing operating costs.

Further, the important work, witness, mission and ministry of our diocese and national church will correspondingly suffer at current levels of support. Just as your parish can only be as healthy as her members empower it to be, our diocese can only be as healthy as its parishes empower it to be.

NOW FOR SOME TEACHING

Most Orthodox publications on financial stewardship begin with sermons, pithy stories, illustrations, and biblical quotations to lay a foundation upon which to build their case. We've intentionally put the dollar figures up front here to emphasize the urgency of the desperate financial condition of an unfortunate majority of our diocesan parishes.

Chances are if these figures don't sound an alarm to you, you'll stop reading now. The averages, amounts and realities initially presented here would be sufficient to incite a lackluster response - "that's interesting" - but little more.

If, however you boldly desire to keep reading, prepare to be challenged!

"COME TO OUR SERVICES!!"

Many parish bulletins often include some variation on this innocuous phrase: "Please come to our services" Let's think about this.

The hallmark of our Orthodox faith is our "services." Everything we need to learn, know and do as Orthodox Christians, is revealed, announced, manifested, taught, applied and "lived" in our divine worship.

Therefore, attending "the services" should be for us, not **optional** but **essential** actions of faith! It indicates our personal desire and commitment to learn, know and do what, as Orthodox Christians, we're supposed to learn, know and do.

Frankly, the invitation for parishioners to "come to our services" should be an *unnecessary* one! Though parishes vary in their particular schedules of worship, every "service" to be offered assumes the gathering of the parish community. There are no "secret" or "private" services in the church. Even the occasional memorial services (panahida) requested by and at the convenience of parishioners for departed family members are in fact "services" of *corporate* worship; where, amidst the "great cloud of witnesses" of angels and saints, God is blessed and glorified in the fellowship of His Church. In the Creed we profess our belief in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." Our church buildings exist for the purpose of manifesting this faith in corporate worship, ministry and fellowship.

Did you ever ask what 'services" such invitations refer to, who is in fact offering them and/or benefitting from them? The American economy these days is based primarily on the "service" industry. Every company, merchant, store and internet website promotes products and services to supply a demand: to help meet needs. So what does "service" mean in the Church?

Service means ministry. In the Bible, the word for service is "*diakonia*," usually translated "ministry." It means meeting needs and serving others. It's where we get the word "deacon." In the New Testament, deacons were ordained to perform a particular service; to meet the needs of widows on behalf of the apostles (cf Acts 6).

Lest we forget, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ taught us clearly (in one of the Sunday Gospel lessons we hear during Lent): "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also

came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45). This is the model and example of service, of ministry, that each of us in the church are given to follow.

So, "come to our services" doesn't just mean "come to receive and partake of the services the priest and a handful of faithful are offering you." It also suggests that we who attend those services are, ourselves, prepared to offer OUR service: to meet needs and serve others as Christ inspires and teaches us to do in the New Commandment.

Now, if you rarely or just occasionally "come to services," even if you come every Sunday, you miss the many other "services" of the Church during the week; each of which is, again, an opportunity for the parish community to gather in corporate worship; "to learn and do."

Herein lies part of the *financial* problem faced by many parishes. The more involved you become with something, the more you are exposed to the needs that must be met. For example, if you only see the priest "working" on Sundays, you don't see a need to pay him a full-time salary (and benefits!). But when you come to all or most of the services, you begin to realize the priest invests a lot of time in preparing for each one; whether ten or two hundred people attend. And others are involved as well: singers, readers, candle desk, maintenance people, etc. (Note : if the priest happens to spend hours with you and/or a family member on a hospital visit, in facing death, in a counseling session or crisis intervention, he suddenly "' doesn't get paid enough!").

Again, the more involved you are, the more the needs become apparent and obvious. You'll understand the costs associated with "doing business" as a church: why the bills for lights, heat, power, air conditioning, water, telephone, snowplowing, maintenance, equipment, improvements, insurance, taxes and repairs are what they are. Just like your household, these ever-increasing expenses must be satisfied in your "household of faith" - your local parish - to help meet its needs and fulfill the purpose for which it exists. (Notice, we have yet to even mention extending the mission and ministry of the parish beyond its *immediate* needs!)

Realistically, measure the diocesan parish weekly offering average of \$13.57 against these needs and consider the level of "service" you provide in satisfying these needs. This amount barely covers the cost of a snow shovel (let alone someone actually using it!). Nor does it cover the cost of paper for Sunday bulletins, a replacement light bulb for the iconostas, or one Sunday school textbook. Should a repairman be called to fix the church boiler? ("The church might be a little cold but come to our services anyway!") Our Orthodox worship - the hallmark of our faith - is what we do, and what we do best. And it informs and inspires everything we do outside the church doors as well.

Any challenge to our Christian financial stewardship, therefore, must begin with assuring that our "services" are executed well, "decently and in order," with a competent, duly-trained and adequately compensated priest presiding, a fully-involved and engaged community of faithful parishioners eager to gather for corporate worship, in a building - a Temple of the living God! - that is beautiful, uplifting, appropriately adorned and adequately maintained, with all the resources necessary to fulfill these needs.

At each Saturday Vesper service, we joyfully sing **"The Lord is king; He is robed in majesty (Psalm 93:1).** As the weekly collection basket comes, do we contradict our words of praise and say, essentially, "Let the Lord wear rags!"

IDEAL CHRISTIAN FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

As parish churches, many have a confession to make. We have foolishly, for years, permitted (even fostered!) a mistaken idea of "dues" that is completely opposed to the teaching of the church. Let's correct this mistaken idea.

"Dues" has traditionally been understood as a specific dollar amount, set by a parish community at a parish meeting as a financial obligation for membership. If you're in a parish with a "dues" system, chances are this is the single most important discussion held and decision made at a parish meeting.

Why is this wrong? How is it mistaken? Because "dues," in this sense, represents a *minimum* financial obligation. It may be important to establish such a minimum obligation of membership for the secular (ie "worldly" aspect of membership - for compliance with by-laws and civil governance - but in fact is a *betrayal* of the teaching of our Lord, the bible and the Church.

How is this so? Well if you've "come to the services" throughout the years, one thing you haven't heard taught concerning the Christian life is minimum anything! The Church, as does her Lord and Savior, teaches in terms of ideals; "maximums" if you will. Did Jesus teach about minimums when He instructed us, **"be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect"** (Matthew 5:48), **"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36)** and **"love one another; even as I have loved you"** (John 13:34)? We do disservice to Our Lord, the Gospel and the Church by setting minimum requirements. It is, to say the least, a compromise of Christ's commandment: **"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength"** (Mark 12:30).

By analogy, do we often ask ourselves: "What is the minimum amount of food we need to eat in order to live?" or "what is the minimum number of the ten commandments I need to keep to be a faithful servant of God?" ANY reference in the Church that begins with the words "the minimum is" is a compromise: an unneeded loophole that basically excuses one from striving toward the ideal.

How often, in our fallen and frail humanity, we try to take advantage of such "exceptions to the rule" to the point where the exceptions BECOME the rule! In Lent, rather than try to achieve the idea of fasting from eat and dairy products, we hear "at least from meat" or "at minimum on Fridays." In Confession - the healing power of Christ's forgiveness through our repentance! -- we hear "at least come a few times a year!" When we speak of our "services" some are quick to boldly say "at least I go on Sundays." With such an approach to Church life, is it surprising that, in terms of finances, some "good-standing" parishioners can be heard to say: "at least I pay my dues."

Are YOU among the “minimalists?” Are you ready to adjust your thinking on Church “dues?”

Here’s the truth, in the briefest form possible. YOU OWE GOD EVERYTHING!

“Why, that’s ludicrous! If I give God everything, I’ll have nothing left for myself and my family.”

Well, glory to God, He knows this and has made sufficient provision for you and your family. In the Bible, it’s called “the tithe.” In a nutshell, the teaching of the tithe means that God allows you to keep a whopping 90% of your income for personal use and return a meager 10% as His “due.” So the correct understanding of “dues” means that you voluntarily give to God at least 10% of your income. (Surprise: “offerings” are considered beyond the 10 %!)

How close is your current weekly offering to this ideal? Based on the average diocesan parish weekly offering, the average annual income upon which it is based would be just \$13,570. If that’s close to your income, you’re given an average amount. But if the median income for Pennsylvania residents in 2007 was \$33,000 our diocesan average, with tithing, SHOULD be around \$3,300 annually or \$63.46 per week (previously cited). Our diocesan weekly average is \$49.89 LESS THAN it should be!

A GENEROUS PEOPLE

Though our diocesan parish life survey should sound an alarm for many in terms of regular financial stewardship to our parishes, it also indicates that the vast majority of our parishes offer generous financial support to literally scores of worthy causes.

Many parishes contribute in many ways to St. Tikhon’s Seminary. Some provide full scholarships through the adopt-a-seminarian program (currently \$6,000 annually per student). This is cause for rejoicing as our diocese is blessed to be the home of the seminary.

But diocesan parishes appear to be rising to meet many challenges and support many causes in their collective stewardship. A number of parishes regularly support International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) and the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC). Our diocese was instrumental in providing significant funding for OCMC missionary to Romania, Christina Semon, a member of our All Saints Church, Olyphant. But there’s much, much more!

Realizing that our parishes indeed impact the life of their local communities in positive ways, our parishes support numerous soup kitchens, hunger programs and food banks, literacy programs, homeless shelters, pregnancy centers, counseling services, housing projects, volunteer fire companies, crisis centers, humanitarian agencies like the Red Cross; and the list goes on. And in many cases, these efforts are supported not only with dollars but with volunteer involvement; parishioners offering their time and talents as well as their financial gifts.

All these initiatives, especially from a financial perspective, are clear indications that whenever faced with a genuine need, our diocesan faithful overwhelmingly respond! This is, of course, as it should be for people of faith.

Yet this further indicates the ABILITY of our diocesan parishes to generate significant funds when they're convinced to the "need." Especially whenever some crisis or disaster occurs, faithful people rush to help.

WE HAVE NEED!

Have you watched the evening news lately? The world is in chaos! At the heart of such turmoil is the spiritual condition of man that has lost his way from the Godly path of salvation. We're surrounded by lonely, hopeless, helpless, lost, despairing people who are diligently searching for meaning and purpose to their lives. Increasingly, they're looking in all the wrong places!

Jesus Christ and His Holy Church provide the only solutions – eternally-relevant solutions! -- to this desperate situation. But unfortunately, few realize that the abundant life of Christ is available and accessible to them through local Orthodox parishes. When tossed by the storms of life, Orthodoxy is not even on the radar for these troubled, lost and precious souls.

How can we correct this? What can you do, what can your parish do, what can your diocese do, that would make the Orthodox Church and faith recognizable, available and accessible to all?

There's much that we CAN do and, hopefully, in the days and months ahead, we will explore more fully the myriad options available to us.

But for our purposes here, it's not just important, it is crucial, that our diocesan parishes function fully and properly to bear witness to the Truth of Christ. And this effort must begin with each of us recognizing the needs that surround us within our own parishes, and, fulfilling our responsibilities in Christian stewardship, to assure our parishes are not lacking any resources. It begins with each of us aspiring, spiritually and financially, to the ideals of Christian giving. The stronger we make our local parishes, the stronger our diocese will become in helping us to extend the mission and ministry of the Church beyond the local parish and accessible to all.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Begin now! Get a calculator.

Determine your gross income of the past year and multiply it by **10%**: the tithe. This is the portion the Lord requires. (But don't foolishly spend the other 90% He allows you to keep, either!)

Now, divide that figure by **52** and you have your anticipated weekly offering.

You may (sarcastically) say, "Oh, I get it. You're telling me money will fix everything in the Church!"

Well, not quite.

But Our Divine Lord and Savior, realizing our anxiety about money put it this way:
“Where your treasure is, there will our heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).

Try it and see!

A LESSON

One day a Church School teacher brought a large poster into her classroom. But the picture on the poster was covered with paper so the children couldn't see it.

She then took scissors and cut the poster into 20 pieces (one for each child), distributed them in sealed envelopes, and instructed the students not to open the envelopes but to bring them back to class the following Sunday.

The next week, the children gathered around a table, opened their envelopes, and began to assemble the pieces into a puzzle, excitedly twisting and organizing the pieces in anticipation of discovering the complete picture.

When all the children present had used their respective pieces, they began to see a colorful icon of Our Lord develop. But there were six gaping holes in the puzzle because three students forgot to bring their pieces back to class and three other students were absent.

The teacher seized the opportunity for a valuable lesson. “When we are baptized, we each become a part of the church to help do Jesus' work. When any piece is missing, someone's not doing their job. But when all the pieces fit together, what a beautiful icon of Our Lord it is!”

Without the mutual faith, commitment, presence, active involvement, prayers and contributions of each and every Church member, there remain gaping holes in the work of Christ and His Church; the picture is incomplete.

How many pieces of the puzzle are missing in your parish?
Is YOURS among them?