The Spirit of Welcoming

2018/2019 St. Stephen’s Course Project – Adam Lindahl

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# Project Description

## Premise

This project is designed to measure an aspect of parish life which is difficult for the parish to accurately assess on its own: how welcoming it is to visitors. As an individual who feels drawn to Missions and Evangelism, I wanted to design a project that worked to strengthen this ministry in America. How welcoming our parishes are to outsiders is one aspect that, historically, Orthodox parishes have struggled with. Orthodoxy has never been “mainstream” in this land and is even still viewed as a foreign religion by most. That has caused the ethnically Orthodox to huddle together for strength, often at the exclusion of outsiders. However, Orthodoxy has tremendous potential to convert many in this land to the fullness of Christianity. We must grasp the divine command of Christ and bring this land into His fold. One way we can work towards this end is by evaluating the “Spirit of Welcoming” at our parishes.

In the past few decades, we have seen Orthodoxy growing in America. We must admit to ourselves that the pace has been slow and tends to be concentrated within one demographic: dissatisfied Christians who “read their way into the Church.” That is, people who are seeking something more. However, if we are to be successful, we need to reach out and welcome in those who are perhaps not seeking, but through the warmth of our parishes are drawn to Christ. From experience, the majority of visitors are in the latter group: not seeking, not considering converting, but circumstances have brought them to an Orthodox Church service. I was one such person, invited by a roommate while I had almost zero desire to make religion a significant part of my life. Yet my first experience in an Orthodox Church was so loving and profound that I was instantly enraptured. The care and love of the parish I first went to was a big part of that.

If we are to expect progress in the area of evangelism, we must make sure the ground work is laid at the local level. Our people need to be prepared to welcome visitors, our buildings and materials need to be inviting, visitors need to be able to find us, and our online presence must speak to this same welcoming presence.

## Implementation

Given that it is difficult for a parish to judge its own welcoming aspects due to home parish bias, the best way that such a factor could be evaluated is through a third party.

The third party, referred to as “observer” in the remainder of this report, would perform two actions for the parish. First, from their home computer they would provide comments on the parish’s website and overall online presence. Second, the observer would travel to the parish for a service and note various directly welcoming aspects of the parish. Is it visually welcoming? Do parishioners vocally welcome visitors and smile? Etc.

After these two actions, the observer fills out a Spirit of Welcoming checklist form with the observations and gives it to the priest for review. After the priest reviews the form, it is intended that the observer would set up a call with the priest to answer any questions or provide additional feedback as needed.

It should be noted that the observations are meant to be strictly confidential, between the priest and the observer. That is, observations are not given to another priest, the dean, the bishop, or anyone other than the parish priest. It is not an “evaluation” but an “observation”. It is up to the priest to decide how to use the information and what it means for his particular parish.

For this project, the student contacted the dean of the diocese and received recommendations on priests who may be open to having this project tested in their parish. Those priests were then contacted and the program explained and agreed to. Dates were set up for the parish visits, the online presences were examined, the forms filled out, and those forms emailed to the priests. For those priests that desired it, calls were placed and further discussion was had. Details on the results of the project are in the “results” section.

## Intention

Before moving on to the discoveries made during this project, findings of the visit, or notes for observers, a short mention of the intention of this project is required.

It is intended that this project lead to the formation of a new tool to be used by the overall Church in order to assist in the area of parish welcoming and evangelism.

At the beginning of this project, the Antiochian Archdiocese Department of Missions and Evangelism (DOME) was contacted to see if they would be interested in the results of this project for the potential formation of a future program. This was desirable to the DOME. Advice and guidance was given by a DOME representative and used to form the Spirit of Welcoming form as well as to shape the contact with the parish priests.

Furthermore, after the St. Stephen’s course has concluded, the student will continue to work with the DOME as needed (and as desired by the DOME) to get the program off the ground and other observers trained.

# Implementation Discussion

This section discusses findings on the program itself, as discovered during this test run. These findings can be used in future iterations to enhance the program.

* One of the most important things that was noted initially is that observers will almost certainly be Orthodox Christians themselves. It is not viewed as acceptable for observers to “pretend” they are not Orthodox and do not know what they are doing. When visiting a parish, the observers must remember that they are entering a sanctified space and are still present in the worship of God. Not only would feigning ignorance be highly disrespectful towards God, but would likely be obvious to parishioners, sowing unneeded confusion. Therefore, observers and administrators of the program need to accept that the observation is technically imperfect because the parish’s reaction to Non-Orthodox would be extremely difficult, if not practically impossible to measure.
* This test run was performed in the student’s home diocese: Eagle River and the Northwest. This diocese is particularly spread out which lead to fairly high operating costs of the program. This is likely to be expected as the program moves forward as several diocese share this same issue. It was suggested by the DOME that voluntary donations be requested by the observers when performing this service. For this test run this was not done as it was not deemed appropriate by the student until the program became an official DOME tool. However, this should be considered as the program moves forward as the costs of transportation and lodging can be prohibitive.
* The observer should plan on being totally present for the visit and not attach other priorities and tasks to the trip. During the test run, the long driving distances and hotel stays were justified by not just the project, but also secondary objectives. Example: visiting parents, site seeing, etc. This added to the pace of the trips and detracted from the main purpose of being there: to observe the parish. Additionally, Sunday afternoons were often used for travel purposes which resulted in the student not being able to stay long after Liturgy was over. This detracted from the observations somewhat as parishioner behavior during coffee hour could not be thoroughly noted to the priest.
* Confidentiality is key for this program. It will be difficult for a parish priest to sign on to it if they are not assured that the information from the observer is not going to be shared with anyone else. In particular, if it was to be shared with the dean or bishop or archdiocese it could be viewed more as an “evaluation” or an “inspection” rather than what it is, an observation. It may also have detrimental effects on the observers’ work if they are starting to compare each parish to other parishes. Overall, a lack of confidentiality would detract greatly from the mission of the program which is to provide real life observations to a parish priest on how well the parish welcomes outsiders.

# Results Discussion

This section provides conglomerated discussion about the parishes in general and the major “welcoming” findings that this test run uncovered for the parishes that were a part of the project.

* The website proved to be the most consistently lacking category in the group of parishes that was studied. Indeed, no parish received positive feedback in all the observation categories related to the website.
	+ The issues related to the website varied. The primary issues are listed below:
		- **Broken links:** 66% of parish websites observed had multiple broken links throughout the entire website.
		- **No or lacking visitor page:** 100% of parish websites either did not have a dedicated visitor page or had one that was not particularly welcoming or thorough.
		- **No or lacking “About Orthodoxy” page:** 83% of parish websites had either no or a very light page explaining what Orthodox Christianity is.
	+ Some secondary, but noteworthy website issues:
		- Most parishes had websites that were upgraded to a modern attractive design, but 33% were lacking in this department. In one of the two cases had what can only be described as a placeholder website which had very little information contained in it.
		- 50% the parishes had outdated information still displayed on the website. That is, service schedules from previous years or “News” items that were no longer relevant.
		- One parish had a website that was potentially affected by a virus or hacking of some kind. Clicking on the Google maps or Google search links for the parish led to illicit websites that were potentially malicious. This was noted in the parish’s observation form and the priest was notified during the phone call.
* The actual welcoming by parishioners in the parishes was fair.
	+ In 50% of the parishes, the observers were greeted by multiple parishioners, engaged in conversation outside of the service, and generally acknowledged.
	+ 33% parishes had some acknowledgement, but it was lacking in some way. Either very few parishioners acknowledged the observers or acknowledgement was left until after the entire service had concluded.
	+ Only one parish gave the observers no acknowledgement whatsoever.
* In all the parishes where at least some acknowledgement was given, the observers were invited to coffee hour either by parishioners or by the priest at the end of Liturgy. This excludes the parish where only Vespers was attended.
* In none of the parishes visited were the observers greeted by a designated welcoming committee or greeter. In fact, it was noted that none appeared to be present in any parish. However, in two of the six parishes (33%) the parish priest later revealed that a welcoming committee or greeter was supposed to be greeting visitors.
* In only two of the six parishes (33%) parishioners offered service books, bulletins, or pamphlets to the observers. This particular factor is likely highly affected by the fact that the observers were overtly Orthodox.
* In five out of six parishes visited (83%) parishioners seemed comfortable answering questions posed by visitors. In only one parish (17%) was a parishioner overtly uncomfortable being asked a question by a visitor and did not answer the question.
* In all parishes visited (100%) there were at least some pamphlets or other informational materials available for visitors to take. In one parish (17%) there was a full “visitor packet” which had a lot of great intro information for visitors about Orthodoxy and visiting a parish in general. Very high quality visitor materials in the opinion of the observers.
	+ In half of the parishes visited (50%) it was not clear that informational pamphlets cost money or were free for visitors to take.
* All parishes (100%) had signs and some form of contact information on the outside of the parish.
	+ Four out of six parishes (66%) had service times posted in some way outside of the church building, either on the sign or posted at the entrance.
* None of the parishes had any materials available for passersby or “stop-bys” to grab outside the parish. It is worth noting that multiple priests thought this was an excellent idea and expressed intentions of enacting this in the future.
* Five out of six parishes had no issues with amount of parking or clarity of the parking area. Only one parish had notable parking lot challenges.
* Only two out of six parishes (33%) had what would be considered an “active” social media presence. While several others had Facebook pages, they were not maintained.
	+ Interesting to note that Facebook was the only noted social media platform utilized by the parishes examined.
* Five out of six (83%) parishes had a distinctly narrow appearance in search engines. That is, they only showed up when someone searches for “Orthodox Church in area X”. Only a single parish appeared when searching “churches” in a particular area or “Christian” in a particular area.
* Two out of six parishes (33%) had listing on Google Maps or Bing Maps, but the address was incorrect.
* One out of six parishes (17%) had the wrong address listed in the Archdiocese directory.
* Two out of six parishes (33%) had the wrong address listed in the Assembly of Bishops directory.

# Feedback

This section contains conglomerated data on the feedback received from parish priests on the program.

## Preliminary Notes:

* It is worth noting that only a single priest did not accept the invitation to discuss the observation over the phone. No reason was given.
* Five priests were asked to provide feedback on the program by filling out the Feedback Form created during this project (the priest which did not accept the invitation for a phone conversation was not sent a feedback form). However, only a single priest returned the feedback form filled out. It is attached in Appendix D.
* A great deal of feedback was given by the parish priests during the phone conversations and that will be discussed below.

## Conglomerated Feedback

* Feedback was considered very positive from four out of six (66%) of priests. One priest gave what is considered neutral feedback. The remaining parish gave no feedback as a call was not able to be placed.
	+ The priest who’s feedback was considered neutral felt the project provided good information, but disagreed with the large number of lines in the website and online awareness sections of the observation form. The thought was that these were less important sections as in his particular parish he was not aware of anybody who found the parish through these mediums.
* Overall, the project met the goal of being able to express a third party opinion to priests on the welcoming aspects of their parish. This was iterated by the priests who participated.
* Three out of six (50%) of priests stated that they brought (or were going to bring) the observations to their parish council.
* In all the phone discussions the priests stated that they were going to address gaps or implement suggestions that appeared in the observation form.
* Three out of six (50%) of priests suggested that having a line item for “parishioner behavior during coffee hour” would be helpful.
* The phone conversations seemed to be especially helpful as every priest that was called had clarification questions about the observations and several asked for suggestions on how to address certain issues.

# Appendix A: The Observation Form

Note that this is the final version of the observation form as developed by the project. Most of the completed observation forms were done using the original format.



# Appendix B: Completed Observation Forms

Note that these completed forms have had all possibly identifying information removed to protect the privacy of the parish and the pastor.













# Appendix C: The Feedback Form



# Appendix D: Completed Feedback Forms

Note that only a single priest returned the completed feedback form for the project.

