

Formative Evaluation Report
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
Youth and Young Adult Ministries

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Iconic Evaluations

Executive Summary

This formative evaluation of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America's youth and young adult ministries yielded a number of helpful insights as to current challenges and opportunities in ministry for these young people.

On the basis of survey and interview data, the evaluation found that the a number of components of parish youth and young adult ministry work relatively well on an episodic basis; however, there is a strong sense that more investment in infrastructure is needed to provide a coherent path of education and formation across the various activities. This represents both a challenge and a clear area for future discernment.

Specifically, key findings of the evaluation were as follows:

- 1). Features of impactful experiences included thoughtful counterculturalism, struggle/shared purpose beyond entertainment, intergenerational connection, cohorts of similar age youth, connected coherently across purposes, striking balance between confident and didactic.*
- 2). Features of non-impactful events: insufficient cohorts, overly competitive or didactic activities, too social without content.*
- 3). The pandemic was identified both as a significant source of challenge but also as an impetus to creativity in church life together and as a motivation to seek the things of the faith. There are discrepancies between clergy and laity as to the impact of the pandemic upon attendance.*
- 4). "Hot topics" such as political divisions around vaccines, abortion, LGBTQ/sexuality issues, etc. played a large role in how youth and young adult ministry were described.*
- 5). Older adults, teachers, and clergy were more likely than young adults/teens to identify social media as a problem.*
- 6). Older adults and clergy tended towards identifying parent education as a key part of youth/young adult formation; meanwhile, teens and young adults are seeking collaborative/dialogical discussion of how to live as Orthodox in the world.*
- 7). Camps rank as highly impactful experiences for those who participate; teen SOYA also was rated relatively well. Sunday school ratings were decidedly mixed.*

Recommendations from the evaluation include the following:

- 1). Craft "personas" of young adults who are well-formed in the faith and envision a chain of related formation events that got them there, with a special focus on the integration points.*
- 2). Identify, or develop, modules for dialogue-based instruction in/application of church teaching, perhaps with an intergenerational focus.*

Report on Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America: Formative Evaluation 2021

Iconic Evaluations is pleased to submit the following discussion of findings related to a recent formative evaluation of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America's efforts around youth and young adult ministries. The report will proceed along the following outline:

- I. Introduction/Goals/Methods of the Evaluation
- II. Scope of Evaluation
- III. Methodology of the Evaluation and Analysis
- IV. Key Findings
- V. Recommendations

I). Introduction/Goals/Methods of the Evaluation

The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America describes its work and mission as follows: "The Church of Antioch was established by the Apostles Paul and Barnabas in 42 A.D., with St. Peter serving for the next eight years as its first prelate. The Church of Antioch is one of the five ancient Patriarchates of the Christian Church, along with Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Rome. We are in full communion with our brothers and sisters in various other Orthodox Christian jurisdictions, such as the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and the Orthodox Church in America. Together we work to nurture the Orthodox Christians of this land—whether immigrants or native-born, cradle Orthodox, or converts—and to bring America to the ancient Orthodox Christian Faith. Our Archdiocese currently includes nine dioceses spanning the continent and is led by His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH and eight diocesan bishops. Much work of our Archdiocese is accomplished by dedicated ministry staff and volunteers laboring in a wide range of departments and organizations seeing to the needs of our communities. From sacred music to Christian education, from care for aging priests to missionary work, and beyond, our Archdiocese benefits from the work of those who choose to serve."

The current evaluation was designed both to establish some baseline metrics for the effectiveness of youth and young adult ministry initiatives within the Archdiocese and to provide some insight into how the Archdiocese can support these efforts at the parish and diocesan levels most effectively. Specifically, the agreed-upon purpose of the evaluation is as follows: "The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America would like to establish baseline data as to perceptions around the effectiveness of a variety of programs pertaining to youth and young adults. This survey and interview-based project is designed to capture this data in order to draw provisional conclusions as to actual and perceived impact of these programs, with an eye towards facilitating data-driven conversations around next steps among stakeholders."

II). Scope of Review

The data for the evaluation proceeded in two stages. A series of six surveys (targeting Clergy, Sunday School Teachers, Parents, Teens, Young Adults, and Youth Workers), designed by Robert Saler in collaboration with Fr. Nicholas Belcher and other stakeholders was fielded, via SurveyMonkey, via snowball sample. The response rate for the surveys was as follows:

Clergy: 251

Sunday School Teachers: 209

Parents: 825

Teens: 197

Young Adults: 407

Youth Workers: 93

Respondents self-selected into these categories; while it is possible that there may be some overlap (e.g. someone might have taken the survey more than once in multiple categories), even with this caveat the response rate is robust given the relatively modest size of the Archdiocese (~500 clergy and 85,000 active communicants). We can therefore regard the sample size as statistically significant.

This report, a discussion based on presentation of its findings, and potential future presentations of the findings are the deliverables for this evaluation.

III). Methodology of the Review

The following methods were used for this evaluation:

1). Quantitative data analysis: examination of trends based on SurveyMonkey analytics (provided in raw data; see appendices).

2). Qualitative data: The survey featured a variety of open-ended questions for qualitative data capture; moreover, in the survey, respondents had the opportunity to identify themselves if they were willing to have Dr. Saler contact them for a follow-up interview. Dr. Saler then conducted email interviews with approximately 20 participants using the following protocol:

1). How would you describe the youth and young adult outreach efforts at your parish?

2). What has worked well? What has worked less well or not at all?

3). If things have been working pretty well, what would you say are the main factors that have allowed things to be so successful? If things have been working less well, are there particular resources or help that would improve the situation?

4). What impact, if any, has the pandemic had?

5). *What would you want to say to the hierarchy about youth and young adult outreach where you are?*

6). *How would you describe your role(s) in the parish?*

These transcripts were then coded for themes as well as summative quotations, which were used to supplement the qualitative data from the surveys.

IV). Key findings

The following are some broad synthetic observations based on the survey and interview data.

1). ***Features of impactful experiences for youth and young adults included thoughtful counterculturalism, struggle/shared purpose beyond entertainment, intergenerational connection, cohorts of similar age youth, connected coherently across purposes, striking balance between confident and didactic.*** A relatively low number of respondents reported “struggling with church teaching” as being a difficult issue among youth (both observationally and in self-reporting); however, a high number of both older adult and youth respondents identified a desire for the church to do more in helping youth to know how to navigate contemporary culture (and Orthodox counter-culture) in robust, relevant, and loving fashion. Youth and their observers also noted that some of the most impactful events included a large enough age cohort to be encouraging, an emphasis on service and shared struggle and not just entertainment, and teaching that was clear about the church’s stance on contested issues but presented in ways that are loving and dialogical rather than didactic.

At a more abstract level, the survey results gave the impression that given experiences (e.g. camp, SOYA, etc.) had their impact magnified exponentially when they were not isolated from other opportunities in the parish/Archdiocese but rather connected in a sort of “chain” of formation experiences.

Sample quotes: *“The strongest relational bonds are built between people who struggle beside one another, who work, who suffer, who sweat, beside one another. Youth ministries seem to focus on helping them to have fun, with some charitable activities mixed in. What they need, just like what all of us need to do, if we really want them to bond, is to struggle alongside one another. There activities need to be more work and struggle related than entertainment related. They should be struggling and sweating beside one another (mowing lawns, fixing roofs, painting fences, etc.)”*

“I think often our youth of this day and age need to be approached with more compassion. Youth aren't "little adults" they are developing minds that are forming opinions about a world us adults haven't yet figured out. Topics like sexuality, premarital sex, bullying, suicide, depression, anxiety, etc. that plague our youth are too often approached from an authoritarian "this is what the church teaches so this is what you should believe" point of view. Youth respond to adults that attempt to understand them and their struggles. These topics need to be approached with great humility rather than a "let me teach you how it should be" attitude.”

2). Features of non-impactful events: insufficient cohorts, overly competitive or didactic activities, too social without content. If the number of similar-age participants in a given activity is too low, then there is evidence from the findings that the impact of that activity can be neutral or even detrimental. Meanwhile, by way of contrast to the previous finding, activities were more likely to be rated as ineffective if the perception was that they were too competitive (e.g. a number of respondents claimed that Bible competitions had become more about rote memorization for the purpose of competition rather than learning)

Sample quotes: *“I often notice that many churches say that their youth is the most important part, but allocate the least resources to it.”*

“The hardest thing about being a young person in the church is wanting to serve God so badly, yet not being sure how to do so since many roles are traditionally filled by adults. Adults assume that because we are young we don't have the skills, ideas, or attitude to serve, but that's simply not true. It can also be difficult when adults in the church do not want to hear new ideas about doing things (ie. activities after Church and throughout the week) differently.”

3). The pandemic was identified both as a significant source of challenge but also as an impetus to creativity in church life together and as a motivation to seek the things of the faith. There are discrepancies between clergy and laity as to the impact of the pandemic upon attendance.

Clergy ranked the pandemic as more detrimental to church attendance than any of the laity did for themselves, which is understandable. Comments about the pandemic were relatively evenly split between noting the negative impact it had upon ability to gather while also noting that its existential and social impact drove a longing for connection and some creativity around means of gathering.

Sample quotes: *“The attendance restrictions were the hardest for us. Almost everyone kept coming to church, but they couldn't all be there at the same time, and so our community life suffered for a while. Starting in about January 2021, though, we started getting a huge influx of single men - mostly young, a few older. Most of them came to us with no Christian or religious background at all, out of sheer desperation for some kind of human contact when everything else was shut down. Some came to us because they had dreams where someone told them they should find an Orthodox church; others came via people like Jordan Peterson, Jonathan Pageau, Rod Dreher or others.”*

4). “Hot topics” such as political divisions around vaccines, abortion, LGBTQ/sexuality issues, etc. played a large role in how youth and young adult ministry were described.

It is not surprising that, in a highly polarized time, “hot button” issues such as human sexuality, COVID-19 response, gender, racism, etc. were very present in the responses; nor is it surprising that those responding were all over the map in terms of how they feel (and how they think the church should respond) about such issues. However the church imagines forming young people to live out Orthodoxy in the world, it is clear that any formation that does not address these matters honestly and with a clear eye towards how they divide the faithful in our time might fail to be fully relevant. Put positively, however, the responses clearly indicated that there is a hunger among young people

to have their churches be places where these matters can be discussed honestly from a faith-based perspective.

Interestingly, concerns about too much ethno-centrism were present but relatively muted in the responses overall.

Sample quotes: *“Evangelism in the world. Basically, I believe that Orthodoxy needs to make in-roads into the culture anywhere and everywhere it can while also maintaining its theology and lifestyle. I'm not convinced that being "American" is incompatible with being Orthodox. It might present conflicts, but so, too, does being Greek or Russian or Syrian. But the richness of the Orthodox experience is that it provides precisely what no nation or identity can provide: a personal relationship with the Creator of the world. It is a mistake to believe that what youth want is only political belonging and justice and fun. They also want deep connection and beauty and salvation and God. I did, when I was a teenager. Evangelism will help them find these things, and it will also mean that teenagers are coming to the church as seekers.”*

5). Older adults, teachers, and clergy were more likely than young adults/teens to identify social media as a problem.

Many responses from adults suggested that social media has a detrimental effect on youth and young adults' ability to connect to the community or to the faith; however, for the most part the responses from the youth presupposed social media as a platform for engagement.

Sample quotes: *“We should tell them to not get Social Media/Facebook/Twitter/Snap Chat, or any other things that clearly teach worldly views. We should prepare them for martyrdom, and not teach them to be afraid of viruses, and tell them to stay away from church because they might get sick. Telling children to stay away from church is terrible. "But Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of Heaven.' ” ~Matthew 19:14.”*

6). Older adults and clergy tended towards identifying parent education as a key part of youth/young adult formation; meanwhile, teens and young adults are seeking collaborative/dialogical discussion of how to live as Orthodox in the world.

Many quotes from clergy and adults identified parental faithfulness and practice of the faith as a key element in sustaining the impact of programs and formation initiatives upon youth. While adult/family faith was by no means absent from the youth comments, it was more common to hear from youth about desire for leadership opportunities and honest, non-didactic discussion and teaching about how to be Orthodox in the world.

Sample quotes: *“Our programs are often run in a happenstance way where neither teacher nor parents see the importance. Our curricula need to make parents stakeholders in their children's spiritual formation. If children spend 1-2 hours per week with God and the rest without any fostering of their relationship with Christ - they will not know Christ and whether we want to believe it or not, many parents are not necessarily following up and maintaining an Orthodox Christian home and a viable Domestic Church ie. prayer icons fasting etc. Any efforts MUST minister to parents as much as we do so to children.”*

“After 30 years in youth ministry I have consistently seen that it's not about programming and materials. I do believe that we are asking the wrong questions and going about the wrong way. I believe and I have seen that the young people who do well later in life were given an authentic Orthodox home life. I believe true youth ministry must focus on timeless Orthodox worship, Church and family life and young people will naturally grow spiritually and enjoy fellowship as part of community.”

“Teaching them what the Church actually teaches. Don't be afraid to answer the hard questions. But, more important than anything, getting the parents involved and knowledgeable. As the person in the family most knowledgeable about the Church, I was asked to teach my nieces and nephews about fasting. I knew how their parents were in regards to fasting, so I told them "I don't care what you do at home. That's between you, the priest, and God, but...if you're not going to actually fast at home and follow the Church's teachings on it, then there is no reason for me to teach them. What you do at home is a far greater teacher than anything else." Metropolitan Joseph addressed that. Until we get parents to care, nothing else is going to work as children grow up. I grew up in a house that went to Church on Sunday, but my parents never prayed with me at home. I didn't pray outside of Church until I was older and learned it from a monastic. This is an example of how important it is to get parents involved.”

“Our church school curricula are poor. Because our jurisdictions do not pool resources and work together, none of us have the financial ability to create new, dynamic creative compelling immersive programs that foster lasting relationships with God, His mother and saints. Bible bowl is fun however, it is rote memorization... without advanced cognitive use and development of scripture, the message will not stick.”

7). Camps rank as highly impactful experiences for those who participate; Teen SOYO also was rated relatively well. Sunday school ratings were decidedly mixed.

Sample quotes: “Camp and retreats, but especially the former, allow you step out of your life and comfort. These are ways that God is able to work through you now, since you do not have distractions and you are focused on where you are and adjusting. Miracles happen at camp and friends I know who are not even religious have had spiritual encounters at camp.”

“Camp was the most helpful. It showed, not taught, the orthodox faith. Seeing how kind and nice each person is made me see what it means to be a true Christian. Besides that, they taught us important stuff after and before the fun stuff. We learned about the fruits of faith, and the armor of God. I should mention that I didn't learn about these anywhere else.”

“While I enjoy Sunday school, I have sometimes found it to be superficial. We'll cover feasts/things in the Bible but we don't usually discuss how these topics are relevant in our lives today. I know that Bible stories and feasts are still relevant, but it would be helpful to talk about what we're learning from reading the Bible and how we can apply that information to better understand what obeying God looks like in our day to day lives.”

“Camp and Teen SOYO presents a reality that's often overlooked in our parishes... every Orthodox Christian, regardless of their age is fully a member of the body of Christ. They are full participants

and members of His Church. They are the Church! Sadly, this is not acknowledged in most parishes. At camp, while there are defined roles (staff and campers), there's a seamless bridge among those present. It's one of the only times many kids recognize the reality of their importance in the Church."

V). Recommendations

1). Craft "personas" of young adults who are well-formed in the faith and envision a chain of related formation events that got them there, with a special focus on the integration points.

On the whole, the data suggests that given initiatives are most impactful when they cohere in the life of a faithful young person in such a way that the intensities/goods of one experience carry over and inform future formation. Thus, it may be helpful for the Archdiocese, as well as congregations, to envision the ideal "end-goal" of formation – that is, people that they would identify as well-formed in the faith through youth initiatives – and reconstruct, in as much detail as possible, what components went into their formation and how these components were sequenced and leveraged for greatest impact. In particular, where does integration come in, and how is it supported? These individuals can be real, if known, or fictional – the point is to envision what excellent formation looks like in young people and to "work backwards" or "reverse engineer" both the components and the interaction of components that goes into forming that person.

Some good examples of "integration" that come from the survey are as follows:

Sunday school: learning how to read and study Scripture for myself in an atmosphere where questions and honest discussion were encouraged; Bible Bowl: careful study of Scripture, developing teamwork skills and interdependence with fellow Christians (of course this depends on how Bible Bowl is structured; solo competitions would not encourage teamwork); Camp: opportunity to "make faith my own" and get to know kind, devout peers and role models who inspired and encouraged me in my spiritual life; retreats: bonding experiences with Christian peers, serious spiritual focus, time for serious study, worship, soul-searching, and building one another up in Christ; VBS: early playful positive experiences with church, growing familiarity with Bible stories (and later, for teens and youth adults, opportunity to serve younger children). – Youth Worker

Making the faith real. I feel modern society controls all the culture. There needs to be more community and bonding to build the desire to be there when they are flooded with 101 reasons not to be there. There can be a lot of talking and teaching about the faith but need more faith in action.

Having more real conversations with the youth about what they are going through. - Parent

Persona thinking is end-user oriented and integrative; that is, it asks about how a given component or program is effective by imagining how a person might be who is formed well by it, and in the context of other formative influences within that person's life.

Note: examples of "persona" design can be found here: <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/personas-why-and-how-you-should-use-them>

2). Identify, or develop, modules for dialogue-based instruction in/application of church teaching, perhaps with an intergenerational focus.

A further investigative project would be to identify examples within the Archdiocese, or elsewhere, where effectively dialogical and faithful inculcation of the church's teaching are taking place, and to envision what might be replicable in other settings. This could take the form of concrete modules that are provided to various parishes, or it could take another form that is suited to context. Where is there teaching happening that is experienced by young people as faithful to church teaching, loving towards neighbor, firm in conviction, and comfortable with hard topics? Finding "success stories" on this front and thinking about replicability could be key.

3). Focus resource allocation strategically upon opportunities for connections among different initiatives. One clear takeaway from the data is that, while it is important that a given initiative (e.g. camp, Sunday School, Bible Bowl, etc.) be resourced well, they are most impactful when contextualized within a total arc of formation that is pursued both within specific age cohorts (that is, in community with other young people) and intergenerationally with mentors. As the Archdiocese is considering resource allocation, it would do well to think about what is needed to nurture and sustain these points of connection as well as the specific initiatives themselves. This may mean more resources for specifically intergenerational efforts, for instance, or it could mean more intentionality in design around each event with an eye towards how it fits into an integrated whole in the life of an envisioned participant (going back to the aforementioned personas).

VI). Conclusion

It is clear from the data gathered that there are many faithful teachers, clergy, parents, and youth workers who are shepherding the spiritual lives of youth and young adults, and that these young people are also active and inquisitive agents in their own faith formation. This report has suggested that the opportunity ahead is to think about how these various initiatives might be coordinated strategically, with resource allocation directed especially to the places where the different ministries build on each other in the life of a young believer. We have suggested too that the next steps involve considering real or hypothetical examples of a vibrantly formed young person and thinking about the interactions among different ministries and initiatives that might have brought him or her to that place. God has blessed His church with abundant resources, and data-driven wisdom and discernment will help the harvest be even more bountiful.