



Resource Handbook
for
Lay Ministries

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Ten Simple Ways to Encourage Missions Written by Fr. Eric George Tosi

At the 14 All-American Council in Toronto, this quote from Fr. Alexander Schmemmann was presented: "To recover the missionary dimension of the Church is today's greatest imperative. We have to recover a very basic truth: that the Church is essentially Mission, that the very roots of her life are in the commandment of Christ: 'Go Ye therefore and teach all nations.'" (Matthew 28:19)

It is our essential task to be a missionary Church. The Church was missionary from its earliest times and continues to be missionary to the present. Our own very roots in North America are missionary from the time when the first group of Russian Orthodox monks stepped onto the Alaskan soil. It has continued to the present time . . . though we seem to forget this. We forget the struggles of so many established parishes that started out as missions. We forget the struggles of the parishes that came over to The Orthodox Church in America as missions.

But as Fr. Alexander states, we must recover this. No matter the size, age, or even the location, mission needs to be our priority. For many parishes, the largest group of potential converts and Orthodox are right at our own doorsteps. Yet they are ignored. For some parishes, a mission is just down the road, but it is never visited or assisted. For other parishes, the sinking numbers can be turned around by opening the doors and recovering a missionary identity.

This has always been and should always be part of the vision of The Orthodox Church in America. We are who we are because of missions. The wonderful news is that the missionary imperative is growing. In the last four years, we have started 40 missions, which matches all of the missions created in the last decade (or the previous decades prior to that). And there are more on the horizon. All of this takes hard work on an individual, parish, diocesan and even Church-wide level. We need to be bold and step forward. We should not fear that missions will grow at the expense of established parishes because precisely the opposite has been shown to be true. Any parish that supports missions, encourages offshoots from the parish and is involved in mission life, grows and replaces the numbers faster than they are broken off. That is a fact and one that we need to embrace.

With that being said, let us look at ten simple ways to encourage missions.

1. Pray for Missions. Simply pray for them so that we can be united in one spirit. St. Innocent in his "Instructions to Missionaries" wrote, "The first and most efficient preparation is prayer, which alone can open the spring of highest teaching and bring down a blessing upon every good beginning and work." Pray for missions and missionaries so that they are never far from your or your parish's thoughts.

As such, pray that God will bring people to your own front door. Mission begins as soon as you step outside the Church but is found in fullness in the Church. The wonderful prayer for the Catechumens is, simply put, a prayer for mission. So earnestly pray that prayer at the Liturgy. As one OCA bishop put it, "If you don't have any Catechumens, go out and get some!"

2. Know Your Community. Mission begins at home. We need to know the people who are around us and pray with us at each service so that "with one heart and one mind we may confess." So often in parishes we see the same people all the time but don't even know their names, their jobs, their joys and their struggles. A community of God rallies around each other and prays for each other. And each of our communities is unique with its own dynamics and demographics. As the Gospel of John states, "I know my sheep and am known by My own." And if we know our flock, then we can minister to them most effectively. In this way, we are evangelizing our own people, thereby strengthening our parish to receive whomever God brings to us.

3. Be a Part of Your Neighborhood Community. How few of us actually know our neighbors. We are often that "Russian" (Greek, Romanian, Serbian . . . etc) church on the corner. Yet we are not that. We are the Church of Christ. That is how the Church should be seen in this world. God put that parish there for a reason and as such, it needs to fulfill its mission of preaching the Gospel precisely where God put it. Some communities change, but the need for Christ in their midst does not. If the parish needs to change its membership to meet that change, then it is an opportunity, a call from God to minister. Open the doors and let the people come in. People are searching for

precisely what we have to offer. Yet we too often “hide our light under a bushel.”

Meet the people living around the Church, talk to them, invite them. Now, more often, our parishes are becoming agents of change in the community, not by withdrawing, but rather by staying and ministering. This tells those in the area that they are worthwhile. Allow community groups to use the wonderful facilities that have been built up over the years, knowing that the Scouts and other such groups are extremely grateful for the help and support. Show your love for the neighborhood by being “the shining light on the hill.”

4. Be a parish (mission) of The Orthodox Church in America. This is absolutely critical to the life of a parish and to our mission in America. We are THE Orthodox Church in America, the indigenous Orthodox Church in North America, made up of native Americans, different ethnic groups, and converts. As such, it is our responsibility to preach the Gospel here, to establish the firm foundations that the great Saints and leaders before us envisioned. We should not pretend to be anything else, nor should we try to be anything else. As a parish of The Orthodox Church in America, let us embrace the rich traditions and diversity that we have in our midst.

This does not mean that we do not minister to the many new immigrant groups that are coming here. We need to embrace them as well. But we must emphasize that we are the local church for all people from all backgrounds. The Tradition and history that we have, we must embrace and promote.

5. Participate in the Annual Missions Appeal. This is so important to the life of missions in North America. The Annual Missions Appeal in February is the primary way of funding missions on a national level. The money collected goes directly into the hands of mission parishes to fund a full-time resident priest. In the three years that these select missions are on the Grant, they often average 30% annual growth and become self-sufficient by the time the grant is completed.

We are currently funding five missions a year and have funded over 21 missions since the inception of the program. They have all succeeded and, in some cases, have spun off additional missions. If we can increase our funding, then we can increase the number of missions that participate in this valuable program. If we would like to grow the Church by 100 missions in the next ten years (a goal we are already on the way to achieving), then we need to double the amount of money going to missions. Encourage your parish to participate in this important appeal. Fund the vision for our Church.

6. Look for potential missions in the region. Each parish should identify areas around them where missions could be established. Sometimes they are “on the other side of the hill,” and other times they are in a different neighborhood. Yet they all have potential. What is needed is an effort to identify and organize.

There is an old maxim that every Orthodox should be within 45 minutes of a parish. Believe it or not, that is actually beginning to happen. Places where the faithful had to drive two hours to church are now being missionized. And they, in turn, are establishing missions at the next place in the area. In fact, many of our parishes in the older dioceses were established in this exact way. If we consistently look around us for the next mission opportunity, we will find it.

7. Connect with a local mission and assist them. There are often cases where a mission has been established right down the road from an older parish. The older parish may feel threatened or simply disconnected. Yet these are our brothers and sisters in Christ, members of our own Orthodox Church. Meet with them. See what they are doing. Help them and pray for them. We will find that when we make this contact, new life can be infused into our own parish. These missions are surviving on minimal income. Helping them will put them on a firmer footing. Many of these missions are grateful for the contact and assistance as they grow in the Orthodox Faith. Liturgical items, rental space, special collections for them, and even fellowship can make a huge difference in the life of these missions. This, in turn, connects your parish to people who are walking the same path. And their enthusiasm is infective.

8. Invite a mission priest or a member of a mission to speak to your parish. Nothing replaces a person who can tell the story. It brings the theory of missions to life. The person can speak of the triumphs and joys (as well as the struggles) of the mission. This is a powerful witness that connects one with something outside of one’s own parish.

Invite someone from the Department of Evangelization to your parish. Have him/her show the parish what is happening in the Church and demonstrate the great work that is being done. In turn, the parish will find interest and life in missions.

When listening to a personal account of life in a mission, the mission no longer remains a concept, but a person and a relationship. The speaker may have ideas that might work in your own parish. As well, your parish may have ideas that will work in their mission. This is especially important coming from your founding generation who can tell of the history and struggles of your own parish. It is valuable information that should not be lost and that can assist a mission in avoiding so many of the problems that were first encountered by your own parish. Make missions personal.

9. Open your funds to missions. This is a tough request with so many of our own parishes struggling financially. Our inclination is to take care of our own needs rather than to assist those around us. Yet, the Apostle Paul, himself, went around collecting money for the Church in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Some of our parishes have huge endowment funds that have been built up through the years by grateful parishioners. This money remains inactive. Consider this: how much money do parishes in the OCA give to banks through mortgages and interest? And how much are those churches with endowments making on interest in bank accounts and CDs? Even a simple, low-interest loan to a mission would pay more than the bank, and would have the demonstrated effect of building the Church. It is a difficult leap. Some parishes have been very bold in this regard and the rewards have been huge. As a parish, let's consider helping missions by making our own money work for us. Even small loans make a huge difference in equipping or funding a mission. Every cent we spend on ourselves comes back to us. After all, it is God's money and we must be responsible stewards of whatever gifts we are given.

10. Encourage your diocese to establish a missions director/missions board.

Many Dioceses that are growing are doing so because they have established clergy and lay people to help set the direction of that growth. They have engaged people who are involved in the process, have an interest in missions and growth, and can assist in mission life. There is a central planning and accountability process. Sometimes it is in the person of a missions director, or a missions board or a combination of both. This gets experience in the field and allows resources and experience to be shared. Every Diocese should have some sort of mission structure established so that they can identify, plan and assist the missions. The best method of growing missions is not from some national strategy but rather from local people, knowing local needs, implementing local solutions. A mission in the Pacific Northwest may be different from a mission in the Deep South. Each Diocese needs to plan and work these missions out in their own way. Only then can a national strategy and implementation make sense.

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Questions for Discussions:

- Are there enough opportunities for us to get to know one another in our parish? What about "newcomers?" In what ways can we grow closer?
- How does our parish interact with the neighboring community? Are there other ways that we might interest our neighbors in knowing us better? How do we make visitors feel welcome when they do come into our parish? What other opportunities might there be to better support the neighborhood community?
- Where is the nearest mission to our parish? How is it doing? Has there been any interchange of members at services or at social events? Do we support this mission in any way? How might we be more in contact with it?
- Are there any areas in our deanery, in our diocese, or in the country where we would recommend a mission to be established? What would be the rationale?
- Does our Diocese have a Missions Board or a Missions Director? If so, what do we know of their activities. If not, how can we help to establish one?