



Resource Handbook
for
Lay Ministries

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A Multicultural Parish Written by Fr. Thomas Mueller

Urban Outreach

Over the past 20 years, SS. Cyril & Methodius, with a core membership of 75 to 80 adults and some 40 children, has revived, grown, and become a parish that uses its urban location to serve an increasingly diverse community. Our parish has a wide variety of urban outreach initiatives: nursing home ministries, food bank work, a campus ministry, a neighborhood after-school program and children's recreation program on church property, and participation in an ecumenically based social/economic justice advocacy organization (part of the national Gamaliel Network that seeks to promote justice in God's name.) The key to our ability to reach new immigrants is our commitment to remain in the city and be accessible to all.

The nursing home ministry is overseen by one of our deacons and myself, with the help of about 5 lay persons. Our work with the food bank is at a food warehouse. There we help sort and categorize the donated foods that are then taken out to the various food banks in town. We also make calls to encourage eligible people to register for food stamps. The campus ministry is run by the pastor and chanters and at the moment consists mainly of weekly Vespers on campus. Fr. Golitzin, who teaches at Marquette, has attracted a number of international Orthodox theological students who come to the services.

Because the inhabitants of our neighborhood do not tend to mix together, and because there are no recreational facilities in the immediate area, we started a neighborhood after-school program one day a week. It runs from 3:30 pm until a little after 6pm and focuses especially on arts and crafts. The program has attracted about a dozen neighborhood children and has been running for a year and a half now. In the summer, field trips are also planned for the kids. One of our parishioners lives in the neighborhood and she runs the program, for which we pay her a small stipend of \$10 an hour. Even more popular is the playground that we put in on a small 20 x 20 ft piece of land on our property. The other day I counted 25 kids enjoying themselves on the various equipment. They're there from early March until late December. Since we live next door, we can keep an eye on the activity. The kids are of many races; however, no one in the parish is encouraged to speak of this as a tragedy: "there goes the neighborhood." Indeed, many of the people in our church would more likely be on the receiving end of such comments. You cannot reach out to the city if you only welcome a small subset of its inhabitants.

The ministries described above are accomplished by our three deacons, myself and a core group of about 10 people, although more participate when the call goes out for extra help. The parish has accepted its urban identity and committed itself to presenting an evangelical face of Christian care, compassion, and active service to the city's people.

Intolerance of Racism

This parish was in the early 80s still one of the very "monoethnic" parishes of the OCA; its membership had dwindled and its youth gone. A deliberate choice was made not to abandon the city. At that time, this church rejected the idea of leaving behind the poor and the elderly to move to the suburbs, explicitly rejecting openly racist reasoning. This decision made all the difference. We are not merely an "open" parish, but a parish that has vigorously rejected the idea of the dominance of one ethnicity; this has resulted in short-term set-backs, but long-term gains.

If we had not given a strong, consistent and early message of not tolerating subtle or open racism, we would not have been able to reach out to the immigrants of any race or ethnicity. Nor would certain ethnic groups have come if they felt they were outsiders and subject to the same sort of racism or ethnic intolerance that they sometimes experience in broader society. Because we stayed in the city, we were conveniently located for people of all walks of life.

Welcoming Immigrants

The parish has sought out immigrants, offered them hospitality and acceptance, and given them a stake in the life of the parish. The parish's dynamic growth in immigrant members must be seen within the context of an openness to people of all backgrounds, races, and cultures, and a willingness to serve them without any strings attached (like expectation of church membership or participation). Fully half of SS. Cyril & Methodius' members (adults & children) are people who have immigrated to the United States within the last 15 years.

Their joining the parish was not a strategy in a church growth scheme. Rather, it has been an aspect of our commitment to being a church in the image of Pentecost, where all ethnic and racial groups find a home in the Spirit and where the Gospel is preached and practiced in outreach to the poor, the alien, the disenfranchised -- not just to the economically comfortable and church-supporting middle-class American. Without this broader context, we would not have attracted or integrated immigrant members into our church in such numbers and such diversity.

Empathy

What did we do to bring immigrants into our parish? There is no easy or pat formula for this. It is more a matter of attitude -- a willingness to respond openly, positively, appreciatively, tolerantly, inclusively and patiently over a long period of time. For example, since coming to Milwaukee in 1984, my family and I have gone out of our way to meet people from Milwaukee's Ethiopian and Eritrean communities, who are Orthodox by upbringing but have no ethnic church of their own here. This meant going to picnics and birthday parties, just presenting a friendly Orthodox Christian presence. It meant our being ready to be of service to this community in times of need: births, baptisms, weddings, illness, family or personal crises -- whatever might arise.

It meant that we sought them out and took a genuine interest in their culture and their lives. And it meant being of service in a way that was not judgmental or condescending -- a way that recognized and accepted whatever we could of their culture and particular traditions. We eat their food with their own etiquette, dance their dances (if we can), and even wear their ethnic garments on occasion. Gradually, we have become the Milwaukee home for those Ethiopians and Eritreans who want to retain their Orthodox identity --presently some 30 people of all ages. Personal connections multiply: if you gain one family, you may eventually gain their broader family and friends. The more that you engage people, the more they will spread a good word about the church to others, bringing more members, maybe even settling family members from abroad in the community because they perceive the church as making the city a good place in which to live.

Other immigrant groups that have found empathy and hospitality here include Romanians, Russians, East Indians from Kerala, Bulgarians, Egyptians, and most recently Albanians. It must be said that this is not an "us and them" enterprise, but rather a common action that all parishioners feel a part of, even if not physically participating in the action. Empathy entails our parishioners (including some from among the immigrants) reaching out, going to homes, helping with the transition to a new and difficult culture, being with people in need, providing transportation to church, learning about different cultures, sometimes helping people obtain housing, housewares and furniture, and even guaranteeing financial sponsorship for immigration purposes. Funds are provided for the various needs that arise in helping them to settle through a priest's discretionary fund, a charity line in the budget, and from private donations.

Not Second-Class Guests

Hospitality means that we have not treated the immigrants like second-class guests in the household of our OCA culture. On the contrary, we have accepted our new immigrant members into our parish council, our outreach groups, and as our liturgical readers, singers, and servers, including the youths who hold the communion cloth and the Gospel book while the deacon reads it. Right now, out of 8 lay council members, 6 are immigrants: 3 Ethiopians, 1 Indian, 1 Romanian, and 1 Russian. Another council member is an Asian-American born in the U.S.

Hospitality for us has meant integrating monophonic chants (like Byzantine & others) into our services, since this music is closer in style to the customary liturgical music of most Eastern Christian groups. We have acknowledged and used immigrants' liturgical customs where we could. Unafraid of multilingualism, we have integrated token amounts of various languages into our services. For example, on Sunday, the Lord's Prayer is sung or said in 5 languages; likewise the Paschal tropar and greeting. We do the responses for one litany in Ge'ez (Ethiopian), using the Ethiopian melody for the English responses of another litany. At the end of an Ethiopian wedding, we have allowed for some traditional paraliturgical songs, drumming, and rhythmic movement -- the expression of joy.

What has made this possible is simply that there is no dominant ethnic group at SS. Cyril & Methodius -- no "in-group" that controls or dominates the parish. The new immigrants become the peers of those who greet them. Transition to a new and different parish then becomes a positive and empowering experience for them and also for their more Americanized children. They have responded with a sense of real pride in being part of a multi-cultural, multiracial, multi-ethnic church in the image of the Trinity and in the spirit of Pentecost -- that of loving unity in diversity.

Patience in Teaching Church Stewardship and Norms

We have steadfastly avoided any sort of jealousy that says, "We worked hard and made it on our own; now let them do it!" Or the kind of small-minded stinginess that immediately starts counting whether "the immigrants" are pulling their weight financially. In fact, here we assume that many of them won't do so for some time. Often, they do not know about church stewardship, or they may work at low-paying jobs below their educational levels; they are eager to put their children through college, though on small incomes and without accumulated assets or advantages like inheritances. And, whether poor or well off here, they are invariably sending funds to support impoverished family members in the old country as well as helping each other through ethnic-based benevolent funds and economic interactions outside the church, that also engage people who might not be church members.

Learning to provide proportional support for the church is a long-term process. While there is a need for financial stewardship education for all of our members, the parish is particularly patient with the new immigrants. We thank God for the enlightened and supportive lay leaders we have had. We are glad to have the participation and talents of all of our new members, regardless of their pledge levels.

Likewise, if the clergy simply enforce standard sacramental usage, they will also be closing doors to immigrants who come from churches with divergent practices; for example, in regard to confession, its timing, whether it can be required, etc. Rigidity or evocation of OCA norms will not inspire pastoral confidence in newcomers. Long and patient teaching and preaching must come first, along with a gradual familiarization of sacramental practice through good example.

Plans for the Immediate Future

We have some new plans for immigrant outreach that are just in the developmental stage. We offer a beginning Spanish course for parishioners and neighbors (taught by a Russian immigrant member who is a Spanish professor). We want to be prepared to interact better with the many Hispanic immigrants in our neighborhood. We are also planning to begin an English-as-a-Second-Language instruction program that will be of value to new Albanian immigrants. And we are planning an Immigration Forum for parishioners and neighbors, at which an immigration attorney will answer questions and address issues. We continue to work in the area of urban social justice ministry, addressing the conditions in our city's schools, its job situation, its housing, its safety, as they will impact on the future of our immigrant members and their children. We need to witness to the city that the Church can play a vital role in improving city life, so that this can be a place where people stay, and not simply serve as a rest-stop on the way to "better places."

I would be happy to discuss immigration issues or answer questions in detail at (414) 671-5819, or by the e-mail address I will provide by phone.

Fr. Thomas Mueller is pastor of SS Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church, Milwaukee, WI.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Review the outreach ministries in which the Milwaukee Parish is involved.

Has your parish undertaken anything similar?
Are there any ministries in this article that your parish might want to explore?
2. Are there new immigrants in your neighborhood or in your general area?

If so, have any/many of them come into your church?
If not, consider in what ways you might invite them. What obstacles might there be to overcome?
If so, how does your parish's experience compare with what you've read in this article?
3. What do you see as positive in the way the Milwaukee parish receives new immigrants?
4. Where do you see that there might be problems to solve?
5. What qualities do you see as most important for a parish to have in "welcoming a stranger?"