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The Realities of Orthodox Parish Life in the Western United States:

Ten “Simple” Answers to Ten “Not Too Easy” Questions.

Introduction

This paper presents selected results of the “Parish Needs Survey” that was administered by the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute (Berkeley, CA) in the summer of 2005. The survey examined various aspects of the religious and social lives of Eastern Orthodox Christian parishes situated in the western US.

**Tab. 1 Parishes involved in “Parish Needs Survey” by geography
(% of questionnaires returned)**

California	52
WA+OR+AZ+NV	20
Other states: AK, CO, ID, HI, MT, SD, ND, TX, WY, UT, OK, NM, NE	28

The “Parish Needs Survey” had four major goals:

- to examine major characteristics and distinct features of the parishes of four major American Orthodox jurisdictions (denominations): Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (GOA), Orthodox Church in America (OCA), Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese and Serbian Orthodox Church of the USA;
- to investigate differences in perceptions and approaches to parish life by clergy and by the parish lay leaders and by persons in various age categories;
- to explore challenges which are perceived by the Orthodox parishes as major obstacles to their continuing growth and further strengthening and to determine the areas in which parishes need “outside” assistance;
- to study the difficult issue of “financial health” in American Orthodox parishes.

The questionnaires were mailed to 247 parishes of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (116 parishes received questionnaires), Orthodox Church in America (45), Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese (44), and Serbian Orthodox Church (32). In each parish, four key parish

leaders were asked to complete questionnaires: the senior clergy, parish council president, Sunday school coordinator and choir director.

Ten selected general findings of this survey are presented on following pages. **A detailed and comprehensive report and study analysis will be available on the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute web-site (www.orthodoxinstitute.org) in the near future.** The major goals of this paper are: to highlight what appears to be “most special” about the inner realities of Orthodox parish life in the US, and to challenge some stereotypes about American Eastern Orthodox Churches.

1) Do American Orthodox Churches remain “ethnically-based” communities or did they become “All-American” churches? This is probably the most frequently debated issue in American Eastern Christianity. The results of our survey show that various American Orthodox jurisdictions maintain their ethnic heritage to very different degrees.

One of the questions in the survey asked, “How well does the statement ‘Our parish has strong ethnic heritage (Greek, Slavic, Middle Eastern, Serbian) that we are trying to preserve’ describe your parish?” As much as 50% of Serbian and 32% of GOA, but only 19% of Antiochian and 6% of OCA parishes reported that this statement describes their parishes “quite well.”

The results of the “Parish Needs Survey” combined with the data from our earlier surveys allow us compare the strength of ethnic identity in eight American Eastern Orthodox Churches. Tab.2 and Fig.1 show that the proportion of parishes with strong ethnic identity vary from 3% in the OCA to 79% in the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch.

Tab.2 How well does the statement “Our parish has a strong ethnic heritage (Greek, Slavic, Middle Eastern, Serbian.) that we are trying to preserve” describe your parish? (% of respondents)

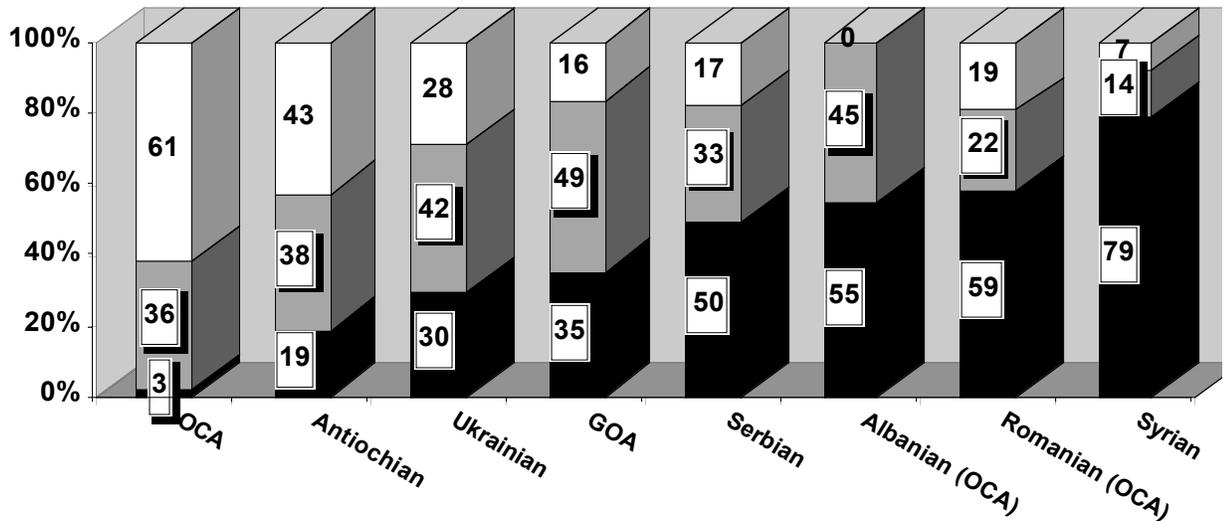
	OCA	Antioch. Archdioc.	Ukrainian Orthodox Church	GOA	Serbian Orthod. Church	Albanian Archdioc. (OCA)	Romanian Episcopate (OCA)	Syrian Orthodox Church
Quite well	3	19	30	35	50	55	59	79
Somewhat	36	38	42	49	33	45	22	14
Not at all	61	43	28	16	17	0	19	7

Data: 1) Orthodox Church in America: aggregate data for the dioceses of West, Eastern Pennsylvania and Washington. 2) Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese: aggregate data for dioceses of Los Angeles and Eagle River. 3) Greek Orthodox Archdiocese: aggregate data for Metropolises of San Francisco, Denver, Pittsburgh. 4) Serbian Orthodox Church of the USA: data for parishes situated in AK, AZ, CA, CO, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA. 5) Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Romanian Episcopate (OCA), Albanian Archdiocese (OCA), Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch – national data for all parishes in the US.

Fig.1

How well does the statement "Our parish has strong ethnic heritage that we are trying to preserve" describe your parish?

■ Quite well ■ Somewhat □ Not at all

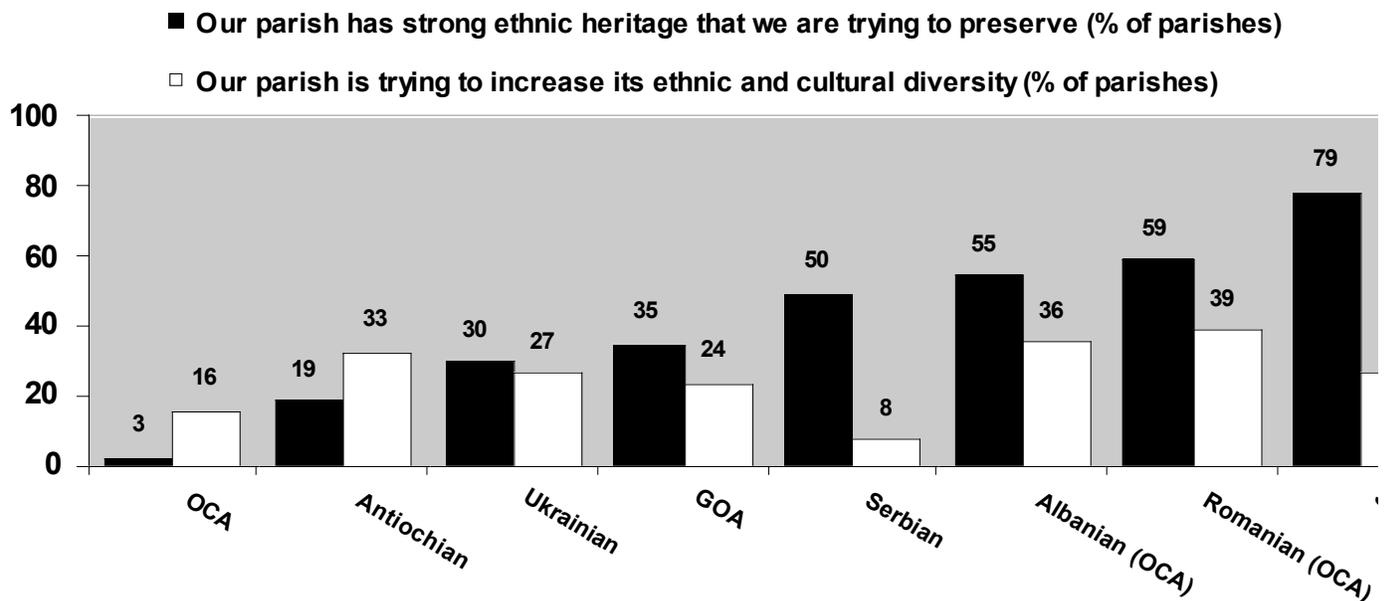


Are American Orthodox jurisdictions – especially those which remain largely “ethnically based”

– concerned with the goal to become more ethnically and culturally diverse? In order to respond to this question, one can compare two figures: the proportion of parishes which report “Our parish has a strong ethnic heritage that we are trying to preserve” and the proportion of parishes which say that the statement “Our parish is trying to increase its ethnic and cultural diversity” describes them “quite well.”

Fig.2 shows that only in two cases – the OCA and the Antiochian Archdiocese – there are more parishes that are trying to increase their ethnic and cultural diversity than those which have a strong ethnic identity. In the other American Orthodox jurisdictions, the parishes which cherish their ethnic traditions outnumber the parishes which are trying to become “All American” churches. Comparing the gaps between these two categories, one can conclude that the strength of ethnic sentiments is especially strong in the parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch.

Fig.2



2) Is it true that women in the Orthodox Churches are confined to “secondary roles” in parish life?”

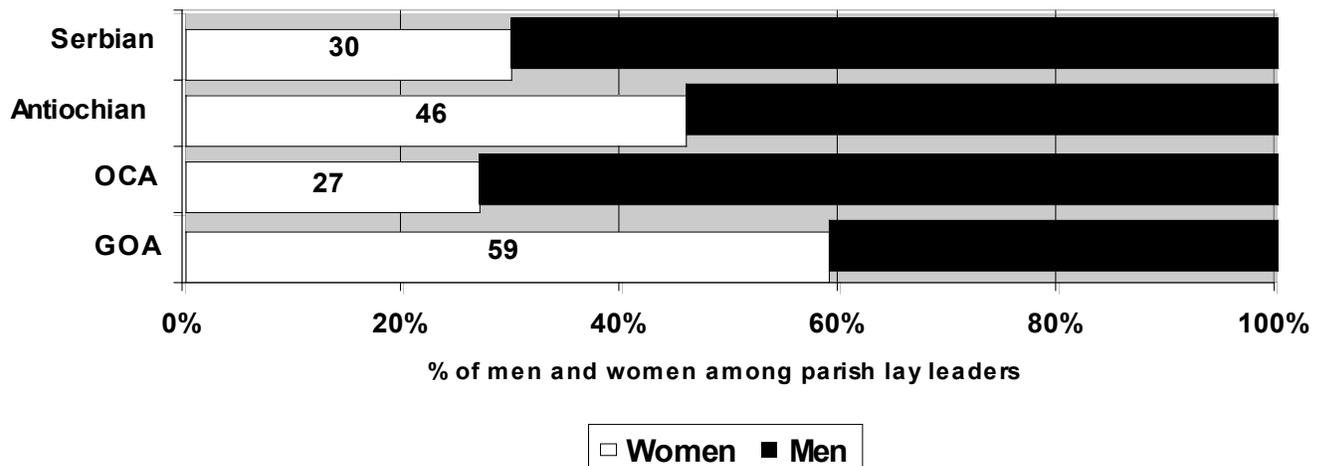
Our survey indicated that the stereotype about the “subordinate position of women” in the Orthodox Church needs to be revised, at least in the case of Orthodox parishes situated in the western United States.

The fact is that women constitute nearly half (49%) of all parish lay-leaders (including parish council presidents, Sunday school coordinators and choir directors). However, the proportion of female parish lay leaders varies significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, from 27% in the OCA to 56% in the GOA parishes.

Tab. 3a. Men and women in parish leadership positions in American Orthodox jurisdictions: % of men and women among parish council presidents, Sunday school coordinators and choir directors.

	All parish lay leaders	Greek Orthodox Archdiocese	Orthodox Church in America	Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese	Serbian Orthodox Church
Men	51	41	73	54	70
Women	49	59	27	46	30

Fig. 3a



The truth is also that the female presence is especially strong among Sunday school coordinators (74% are women) and choir directors (56%), but the office of parish council president is still mainly under “male control” (77% men and 23% women).

Tab. 3b Men and women in various parish leadership positions (%).

	Parish Council Presidents	Choir Directors	Sunday School Coordinators
Men	77	44	26
Women	23	56	74

3) Are Orthodox parishes of various Orthodox jurisdictions equally “Orthodox?”

One of the survey questions asked, “In general, how would you describe your parish’s approaches to church life in comparison with typical Greek/OCA/Antiochian/Serbian parishes?” The respondents could choose among three answers: “we are more modern and tend to allow for more differences of opinion in interpreting Church teaching,” “we are similar to typical GOA/OCA/Antiochian/Serbian Orthodox parishes,” and “we are more traditional and tend to be stricter in interpreting Church teaching, etc.”

Two findings are worth mentioning. First, there exists a general perception that Orthodox parishes situated in the west tend to be more “modern,” “liberal,” and “open to innovations” than those in the eastern US. Our survey, however, did not support this commonly-held stereotype. Thirty-six percent of respondents reported “We are more traditional, and tend to be stricter in interpreting Church teaching,” but only 12% believed that “We are more modern, and allow for more differences of opinion.”

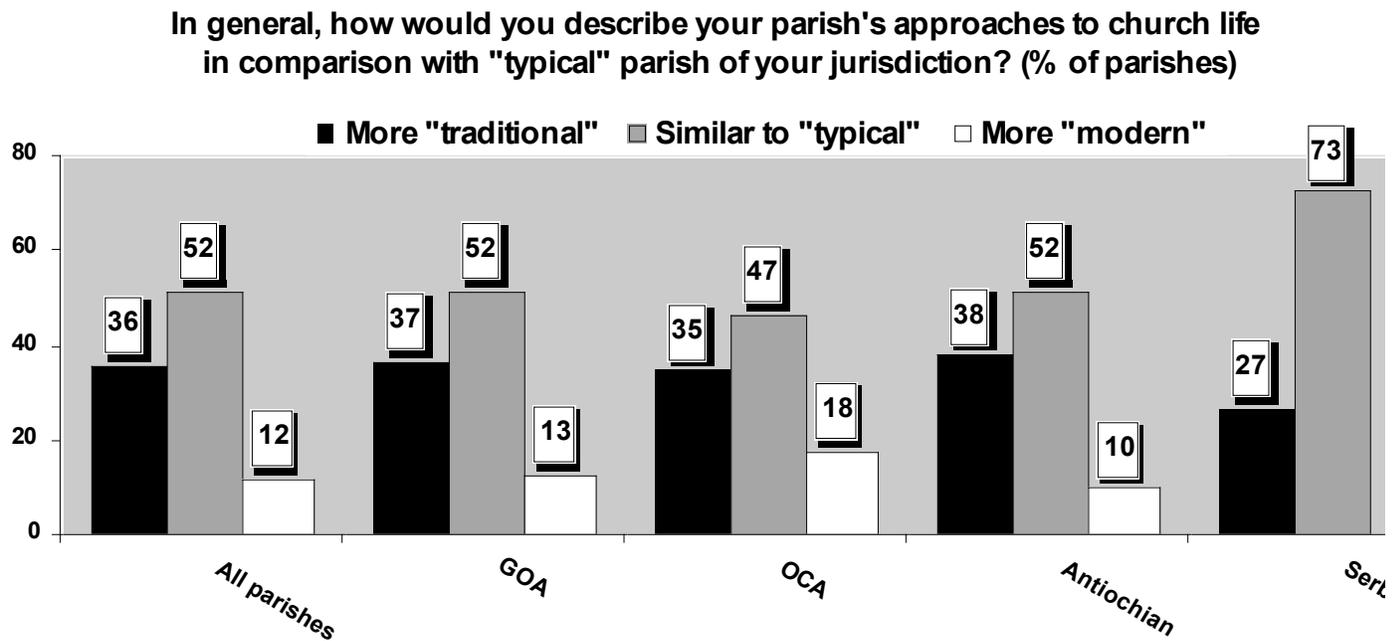
The remaining 52% said that they “are similar to ‘typical parishes’ in their jurisdictions.” There was little difference in opinions between clergy and laity on this subject, which suggests that all categories of parish leadership have similar notions about their parish approach to church life.

Tab. 4 In general, how would you describe your parish’s approach to church life in comparison with “typical” Greek/OCA/Antiochian/Serbian Orthodox parishes? (% of respondents)

	All	Clergy	Laity
More “modern”	12	14	11
Similar to “typical”	52	46	55
More “traditional”	36	40	34

Second, these proportions – about half of parishes “similar to typical,” more than one third “more traditional,” and the remaining minority “more modern” – seem to be quite consistent in most of Orthodox jurisdictions participating in our survey. The exception is the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose parishes are more homogenous in their attitudes towards “modernism – traditionalism” in church life: three-quarters of Serbian parishes described themselves as “similar to typical” and one-quarter as “more traditional.”

Fig. 4



4) Are ordinary parish members happy with their church life?

From the perspective of the parish leaders, the answer is “yes.” We asked in the survey: “Thinking about the current condition of your parish, how satisfied would you say parishioners are with parish life?”

Three-quarters of respondents (slightly more clergy, slightly less lay leaders) believe that ordinary parishioners are either “very satisfied” or “basically satisfied.” Only 21% said “somewhat satisfied” and only 3% said “not satisfied.”

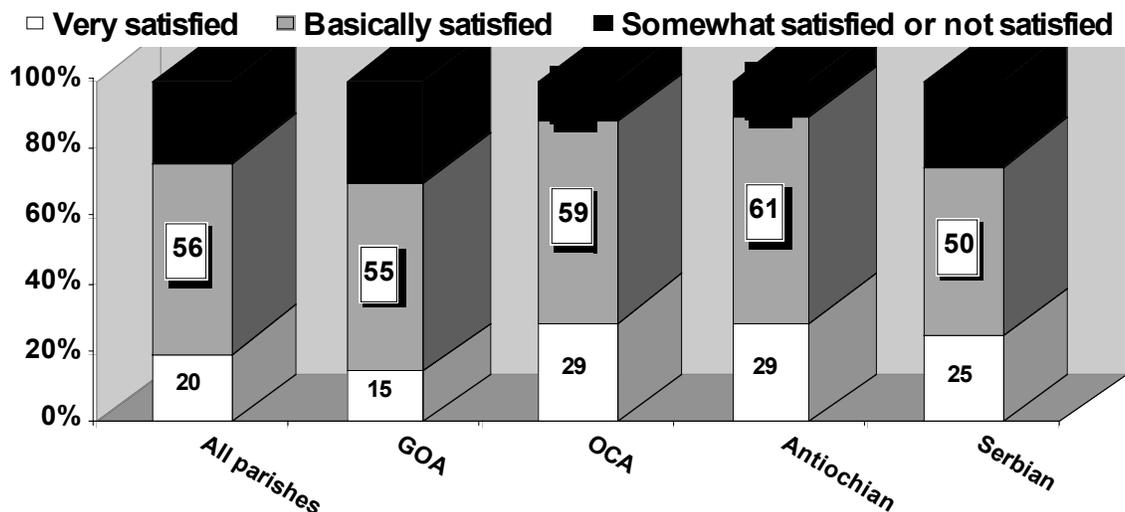
Tab. 5 How satisfied would you say parishioners are with the parish life? (% of respondents)

	All	Clergy	Laity
Very satisfied	20	26	16
Basically satisfied	56	54	57
Somewhat satisfied	21	18	22
Not satisfied	3	2	5

However, the proportion of parishes where parishioners are reportedly either only “somewhat satisfied” or “not satisfied” varies significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Only 10-12% of the OCA and Antiochian Archdiocese parishes do not meet the expectations of their flocks, but as much as 25-30% of Greek and Serbian churches do not satisfy the aspirations of their parishioners.

Fig. 5.

How satisfied would you say parishioners are with the parish life? (% of respondents)



5) Are Orthodox parishes vibrant and dynamic?

The answer is: it depends on how one would measure the vitality of a parish.

On one hand, according to our respondents, a vast majority of Orthodox parishes in the western US are growing. Answering the question “Compared to the current situation, what do you think will happen to your parish in the next five years?”, 71% of survey participants said “it will grow,” 20% said “it will stay the same” and only 9% said “it will decline.” Remarkably, these proportions are very similar in parishes of various sizes. In other words, both the smallest parishes (under 100 persons affiliated) and the largest ones (more than 500 persons) are growing equally.

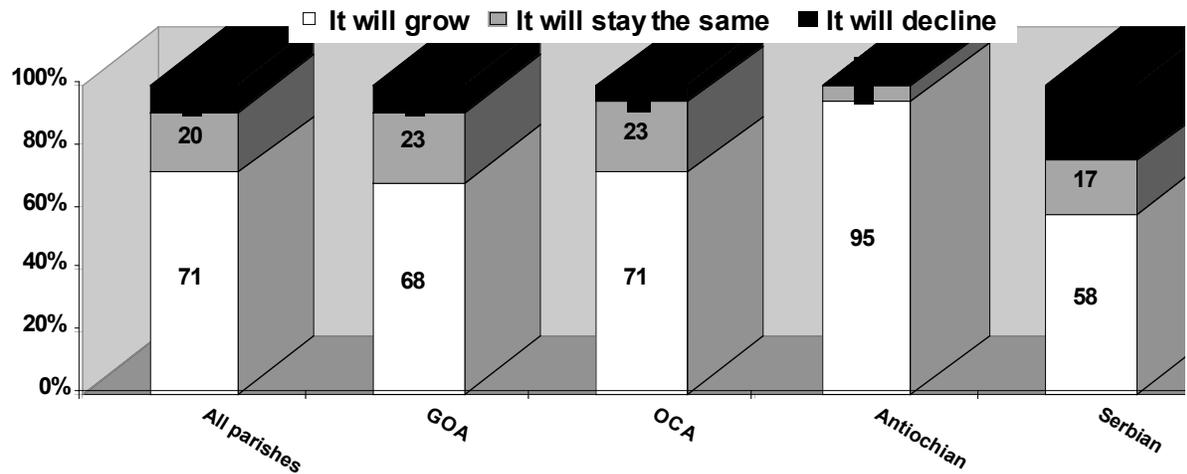
Tab. 6 Compared to the current situation, what do you think will happen to your parish in the next five years? (% of respondents in the parishes of various sizes).

Total number of people in a parish	All	Under 100	100 - 299	300 - 499	500 +
It will grow	71	76	72	67	72
It will stay the same	20	12	21	26	18
It will decline	9	12	7	7	10

Jurisdictionally, the churches in the Antiochian Archdiocese are growing most dynamically: 95% of respondents reported growth of their parishes and none believed that their parishes will decline. At the same time, in the Serbian Orthodox parishes, only 58% of respondents are optimistic about further parish growth, while 25% predict the decline of their parish.

Fig. 6

Compared to current situation, what do you think will happen to your parish in the next five years?



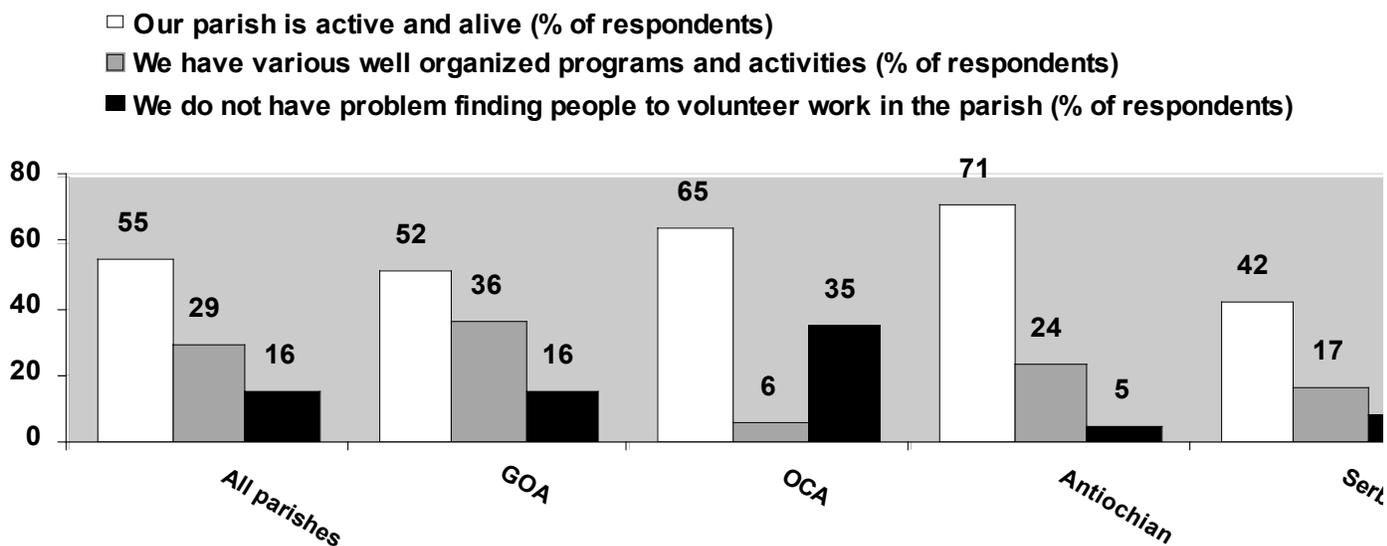
Also, an absolute majority of survey participants (56%) said that the statement “Our parish is active and alive” describes their parishes “quite well.” Thirty-nine percent believed that this statement describes their parishes “somewhat” and only a tiny minority (5%) reported that this statement describes their parishes “slightly or not at all.” Further, with the exception of the Serbian Orthodox parishes, those who have a strong feeling that “Our parish is active and alive” constitute a dominant majority in all participating Orthodox jurisdictions (Fig. 7).

On the other hand, while an absolute majority of parishes reported that they are growing (71%), alive (56%) and satisfied with their lives (76%), the proportion of respondents who said that their parishes have “various well organized programs and activities” and that they “do not have problem finding people to volunteer work in the parish” is fairly low: 29% and 16% respectively.

In fact, in all four Orthodox jurisdictions examined, there is an obvious gap between significant number of parishes claiming to be “active and alive,” and a much smaller proportion of churches describing themselves as “having well organized programs and activities” or “having no problems with volunteers.”

Fig. 7

**% of respondents who said that the following statements describe their parishes
“quite well”**



Hence, one can wonder what it means to be “active and alive” without well organized programs, and with the lack of people willing to volunteer their time in a parish?

6) What are the major challenges to the continuing growth and further strengthening of Orthodox parishes?

Answering the question, “What is most needed for your parish to strengthen and to grow?” the respondents most frequently chose three items as their parish’s most urgent needs: “more money,” “more youth involvement,” and “more prayer and reflection.” These items have been mentioned by more than one-third of the respondents. On the contrary, with regard to these three items, only 12-17% of respondents have reported “we are basically satisfied with this aspect and this is not an issue for our parish.”

Tab. 7 What is most needed for your parish to strengthen and to grow?
(% of respondents, each row make up 100%)

Possible needs	This is especially urgent for us	This will be helpful	We are basically satisfied with this aspect and this is not an issue for our parish
More money	39	44	17
More youth involvement	36	52	12
More prayer and reflection	34	51	15
Clearer vision of parish future	25	42	33
More effective lay leadership	22	51	27
More energy and enthusiastic people	19	53	28
More time available for church work	18	72	10
More agreement and unity among parishioners	16	38	46
More effective pastoral leadership	14	36	50

With two exceptions, the needs for “more money,” “more youth involvement,” and “more prayer and reflection” have been mentioned as top-ranking needs by all Orthodox jurisdictions participating in the survey. One exception was the “Orthodox Church in America” which reports serious concern about the “clearer vision of parish future,” while worrying little about “more prayer and reflection.” The second exception was the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose parishes are struggling with the lack of effective lay leadership much more than the other jurisdictions (Tab. 8).

Tab. 8 % of respondents who said that the needs below are “Especially urgent for us”:
differences between Orthodox jurisdictions

	All	GOA	OCA	Ant	Serb
More money	39	43	41	25	33
More youth involvement	36	36	35	33	42
More prayer and reflection	34	38	12	35	33
Clearer vision of parish future	25	28	29	5	33
More effective lay leadership	22	21	23	15	42
More energy and enthusiastic people	19	20	23	10	25
More time available for church work	18	18	12	20	25
More agreement and unity among parishioners	16	19	6	5	25
More effective pastoral leadership	14	15	6	10	25
Aggregate index of exposure to various needs (*)	25	26	21	17	31

(*) – calculated as an arithmetic average of the “especially urgent for us” from the nine areas of needs for each jurisdiction.

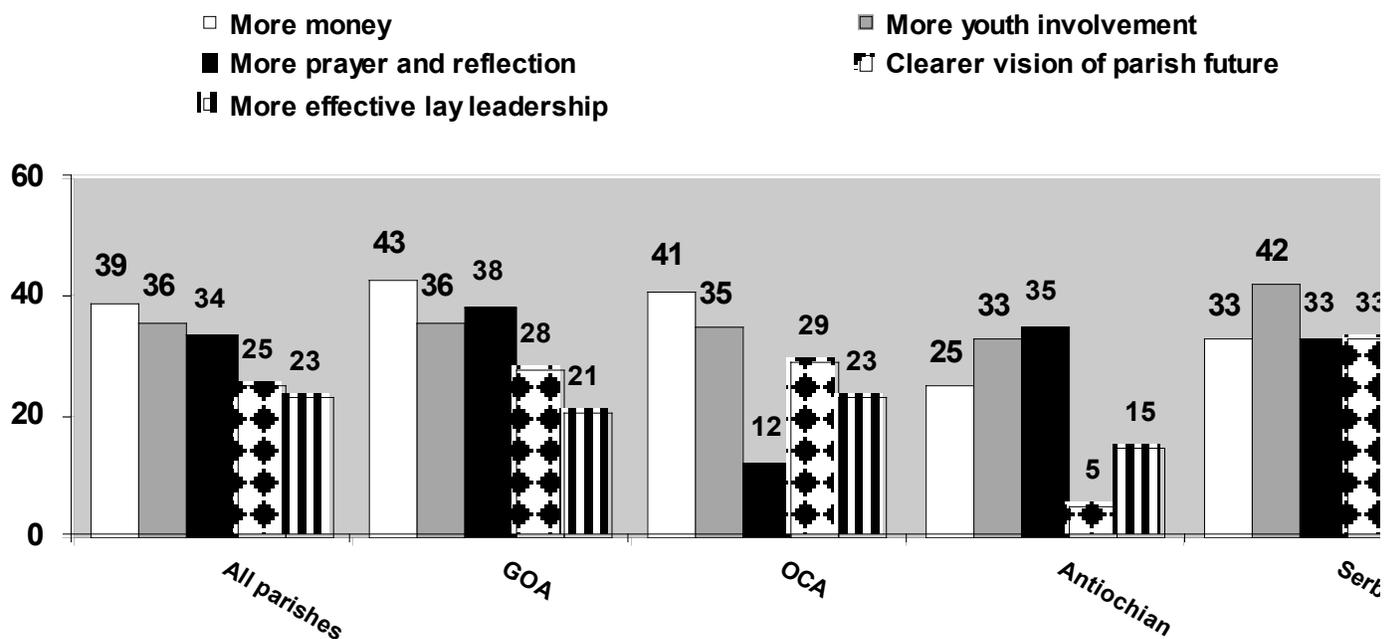
Does it mean that all Orthodox jurisdictions equally perceive the need for “more money,” “more youth involvement,” and “more prayer and reflection” as their major challenges? For at least two reasons, the answer is “no”:

First, the needs for “more money,” “more youth involvement,” and “more prayer and reflection” received different rank-orders in the parishes of the four investigated jurisdictions. In the GOA parishes, the urgent need for “more money” was mentioned most frequently (43%), followed by “more prayer and reflection” (38%), and by “more youth involvement” (36%). In the parishes of the OCA, however, the financial needs were also reported most frequently as “especially urgent” (41%), but in contrast the second major concern is the issue of “more youth involvement” (35%), closely followed by the need for a “clearer vision of parish future” (29%). The parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese are especially concerned with the need for “more prayer and reflection” (mentioned by 35% of respondents), which is followed by “more youth involvement” (33%) and by “more money” (25%). Finally, the Serbian parishes are equally struggling with the needs of “more youth involvement” and “more effective lay leadership” (reported by 42% respondents as “especially urgent”).

Second, there are obvious differences in frequencies of needs mentioned by various jurisdictions. Serbian Orthodox parishes tend to report as “especially urgent” virtually all possible needs more frequently than the other jurisdictions, while the parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese seem to have a lesser degree of concern with most of the problem areas than other jurisdictions.

Fig. 8

Five areas of primary concern in various American Orthodox jurisdictions: % of parishes reporting the following factors as “especially urgent” in order to strengthen and to grow



We have calculated an aggregate index of “exposure to various needs” (bottom line of Tab. 8). It is an arithmetic average (mean) from the proportions of the parishes reporting “this is especially urgent” in each of the nine areas of concern. The aggregate index of exposure to various needs shows how frequently – on average – the parishes of different jurisdictions tend express concern about “urgent problems” in various areas of church life. Hence, on an average there are more Serbian (aggregate index 31%) and Greek parishes (26%) saying “this or that need is especially urgent for us” in comparison with the OCA (21%) and Antiochian parishes (17%).

7) Are Orthodox parishes concerned with the goal of reaching out into mainstream American society and into the wider local community?

Based on the survey’s results, the answer is “yes,” but, at the same time, parishes need a great deal of assistance in achieving this goal. “To what extent does your parish need assistance in each of the following areas?” was one of the key questions in the “Parish Needs Survey.” The respondents were given fifteen possible areas of needed assistance, and could choose responses indicating that they needed assistance “to a great extent,” “to some extent,” and “to a very small extent.”

The single most frequently chosen area in which parishes need assistance to a “great extent” was “Evangelism and outreach into the wider local community.” Forty-three percent of respondents reported that their parishes need great assistance in dealing with “Evangelism and outreach into the wider community.”

**Tab. 9 To what extent does your parish need assistance in each of the following areas?
(% of respondents, each row makes up 100%)**

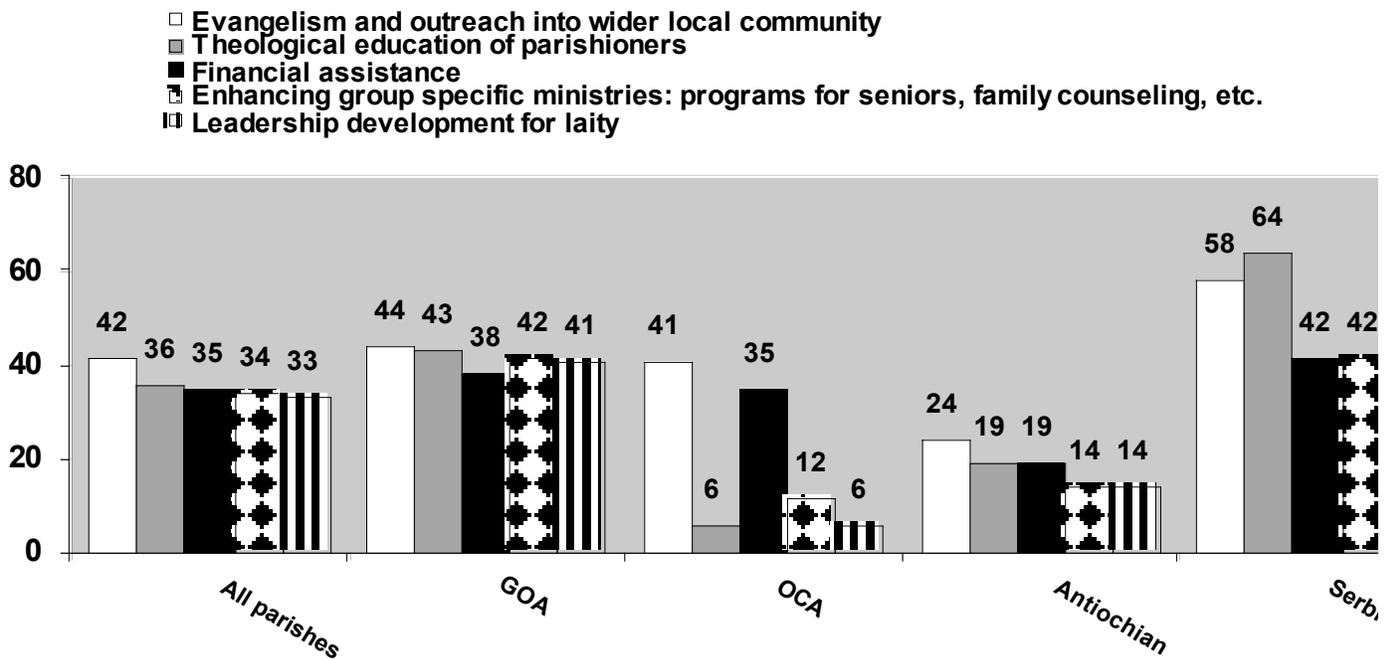
Areas of needed assistance	To a great extent	To some extent	To a very small extent
Evangelism and outreach into wider local community	43	42	15
Theological education of the adult parish members	36	46	18
Financial assistance	35	33	32
Enhancing group specific ministries: programs for senior members, family counseling, etc.	34	47	19
Leadership development for laity	33	56	11
Working with youth	29	57	14
Developing and implementing a vision/strategic plan	25	47	28
Mission and mission interpretation	24	52	24
Enhancing worship, preaching, spirituality.	23	48	29
Leadership development for clergy	20	49	31
Ecumenical involvement with other Christian churches	19	45	36
Information and communication about various issues in the other Greek/OCA/Antiochian/Serbian parishes on the national level	17	57	26
Dealing with increasing diversity in parish membership	17	38	45
Conflict resolution within the parish	16	32	52
Dealing with changes in parish life	16	51	34

The request for assistance in “evangelism and outreach into the wider local community” came as a top priority request in all Orthodox jurisdictions with the exception of the Serbian Orthodox parishes (where it is second after “theological education of the adult parish members”). At the same time, the survey tells us that various American Orthodox jurisdictions are prepared to a

very different degree to deal with reaching out into wider community at this point. A dominant majority (58%) of the Serbian Orthodox parishes expressed “great need” for assistance in this area, in comparison with less than one-quarter (24%) in the case of the parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese (Fig. 9).

Fig.9

Five most requested areas of needed assistance in various American Orthodox jurisdictions: % of parishes reporting that they need assistance “to a great extent”



Do Orthodox parishes consider more proactive work in the American mission field among their top priorities? Do they feel a lack of social connection with mainstream American society and American religious life? More research is needed to answer these questions accurately.

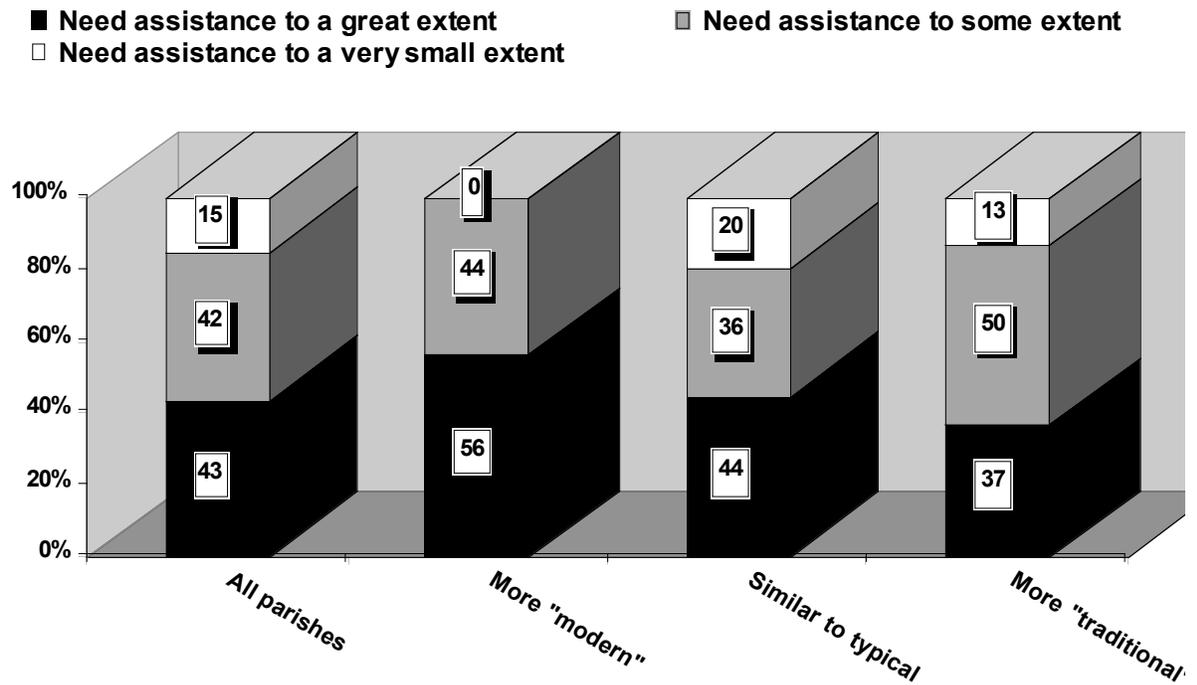
At this point, data from other questions in the survey allowed us to ascertain the typical characteristics of the parishes that look for help in particular with evangelization and outreach. A finding worth mentioning is that these are more likely the churches which describe themselves as

“more modern, allowing for more differences in interpreting Church teaching” than the typical parishes in their respective jurisdictions.

Fifty-six percent of respondents who defined their parishes as “more modern” indicated that “Evangelism and outreach into wider local community” is an area in which their parish needs assistance “to a great extent.” Only 43% of respondents from the parishes which are “typical, similar to other” and only 37% of persons from more “traditional, stricter in interpreting Church teaching” needed assistance with evangelism and outreach.

Fig. 10

Need for assistance in the area of “evangelism and outreach into wider community” in more “modern,” “typical” and more “traditional” Orthodox parishes



The fact that “more modern” parishes are more likely to look for assistance in the area of outreach into the wider community than the “more traditional” parishes, raises an important

further question: are “modern” parishes more concerned with the goal of reaching out, or are they simply less prepared to deal with this goal?

8) What is the general financial situation in American Orthodox parishes?

As noted, 40% of parishes consider “more money” an especially urgent factor for their further growth and strengthening. Thirty-five percent of parishes reported that they need “financial assistance” to a “great extent.” Does this mean that 35-40% of Orthodox parishes are in a situation of actual financial crisis? According to the survey’s results, the answer is “not exactly.”

The survey participants were asked: “How would you describe your parish’s general financial situation, currently and five years ago?” Thirty-nine percent believed that their current situation is “good,” 40% said “tight but manageable,” and only 21% described their parish finances as “in difficulty.”

Put differently, there are twice as many parishes that are doing financially “well” than those that are really “in trouble.” There are also more parishes that improved their financial health since 2000 than the parishes whose financial situation worsened during the last five years.

Tab. 10 How would you describe your parish’s general financial situation currently and 5 years ago? (% of respondents)

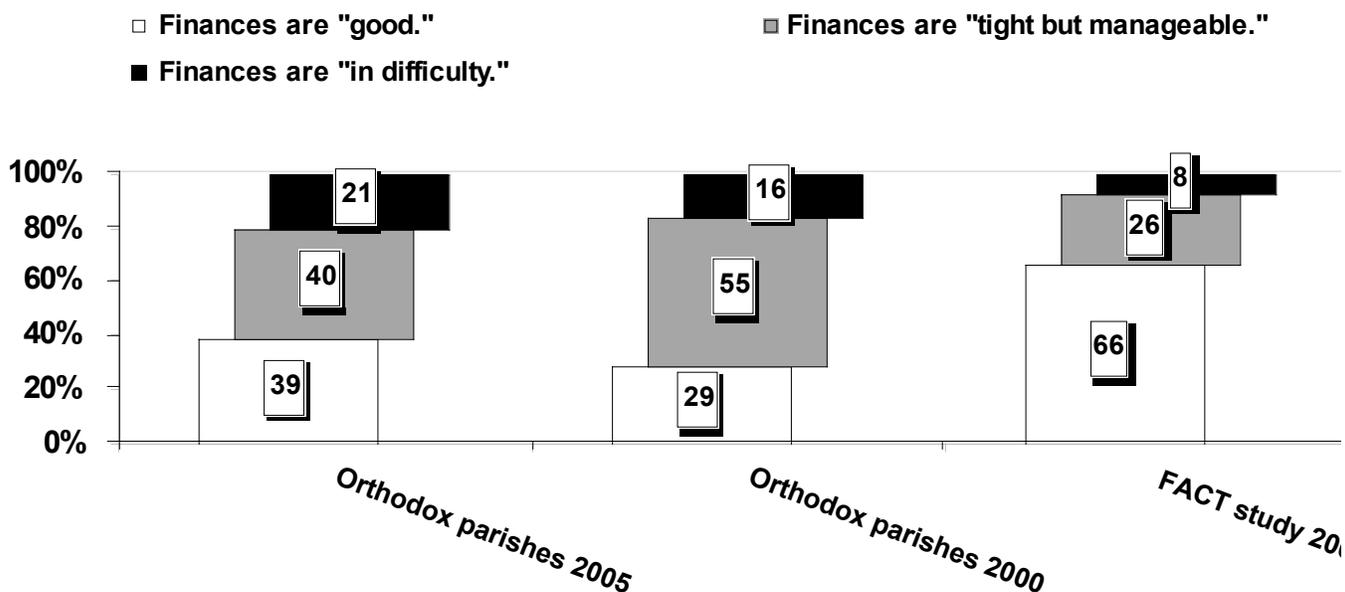
	Currently	In 2000
Good	39	29
Tight but manageable	40	55
In difficulty	21	16

However, the financial situation in the parishes of the four major American Orthodox jurisdictions is far from being bright, in comparison with those of mainstream American religion – the Roman Catholic and various Protestant churches. The national “Faith Communities Today” (FACT) study completed in 2000 examined various aspects of life in 14,300 congregations which belong to 41 denominations and faith groups. According to the FACT survey, in 2000, 66% of American congregations described their finances as “good or excellent,” 26% as “tight

but manageable” and only 8% reported that their finances are “in difficulty” [http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/index.html].

Fig. 11

Financial situation in Orthodox parishes participating in “Parish Needs Survey” in comparison with the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches participating in FACT study



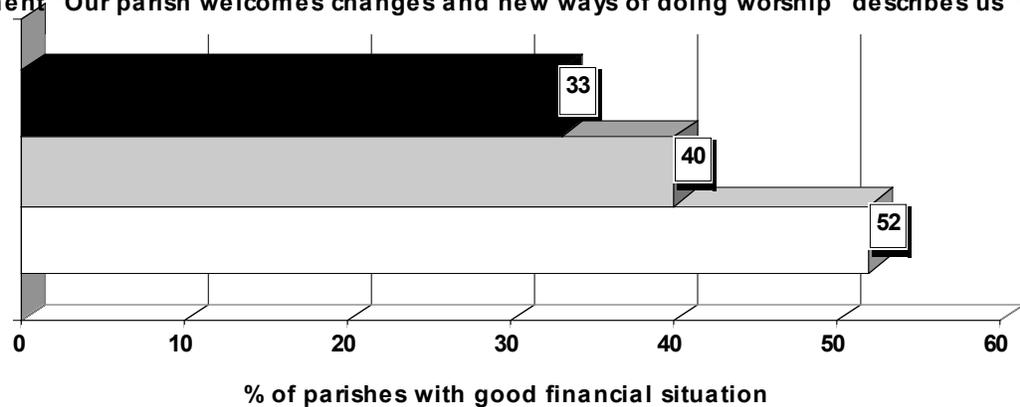
Is there anything “special” about Orthodox parishes with the sound financial health? In order to answer this question, we analyzed the relationship between the financial situations and various other characteristics of parish life investigated in the survey. Three distinct features appear to be most closely associated with parish financial well-being:

First, more “innovative parishes” are more likely to be in good financial situations. Fifty-two percent of parishes that said the statement “our parish welcomes changes and new ways of doing worship” describes them “quite well” also reported good financial situations. But only 33% of churches that believe the statement “our parish welcomes changes and new ways of doing worship” describes them “slightly or not at all” are in good financial shape.

Fig. 12

Financial well-being of a parish and the statement "Our parish welcomes changes and new ways of doing worship"

- Statement "Our parish welcomes changes and new ways of doing worship" describes us "not at all"
- ▣ Statement "Our parish welcomes changes and new ways of doing worship" describes us "somewhat."
- Statement "Our parish welcomes changes and new ways of doing worship" describes us "quite well"

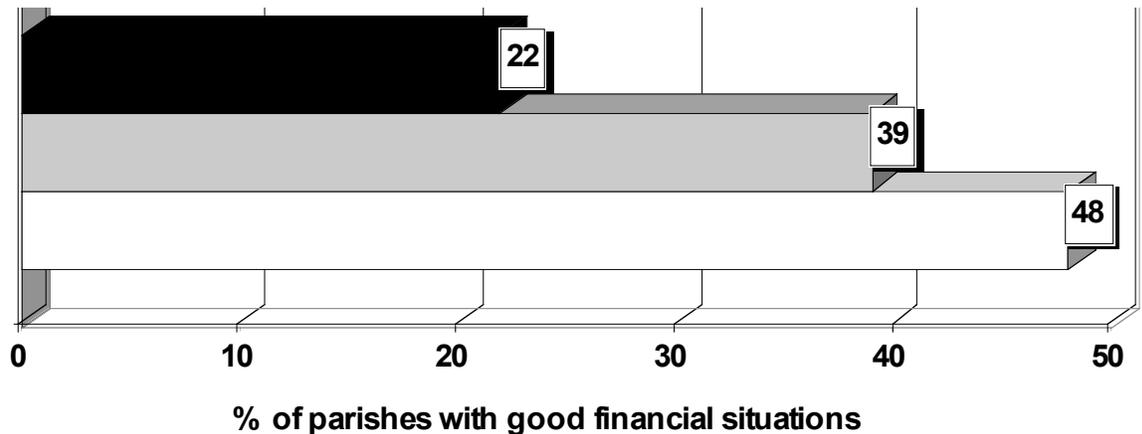


Second, the parishes with a wide range of social programs are more likely to be in good financial situations. Forty-eight percent of parishes that said the statement "our parish has various well organized social programs and activities" describes them "quite well" reported a good financial situation. Only 22% of churches that feel this statement describes them "slightly or not at all" have a good financial situation.

Fig. 13

Financial well-being of a parish and the statement “Our parish has various well organized social programs and activities”

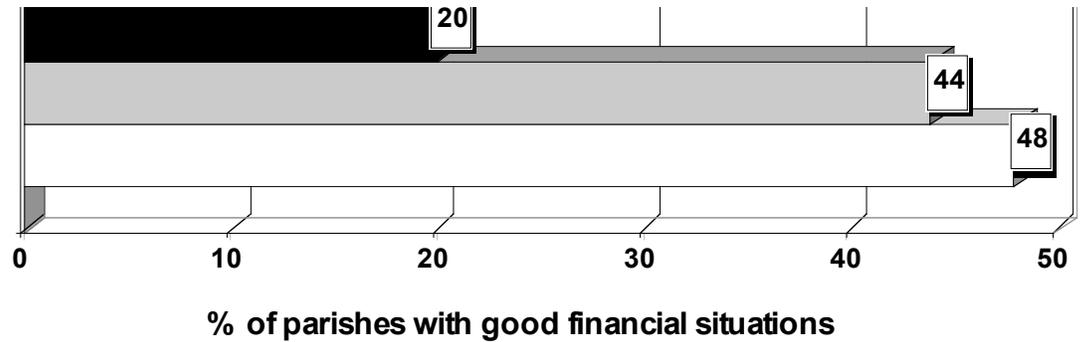
- Statement "Our parish has various well organized programs and activities" describes us "not at all."
- ▒ Statement "Our parish has various well organized social programs and activities" describes us "somewhat."
- Statement "Our parish has various well organized social programs and activities" describes us "quite well."



Third, the parishes where the members volunteer readily are more likely to be in good financial situations. Forty-eight percent of parishes saying that the statement “we do not have a problem finding volunteers to do work in the parish” describes them “quite well” reported good financial situations. Only 20% of churches that believe this statement describes them “slightly or not at all” have strong finances.

Fig. 14 Financial well-being of a parish and the statement “We do not have a problem finding volunteers to do work in the parish”

- Statement "We do not have problem finding volunteers to do the work in parish" describes us "not at all"
- Statement "We do not have problem finding volunteers to do the work in parish" describes us "somewhat."
- Statement "We do not have problem finding volunteers to do the work in parish" describes us "quite well."



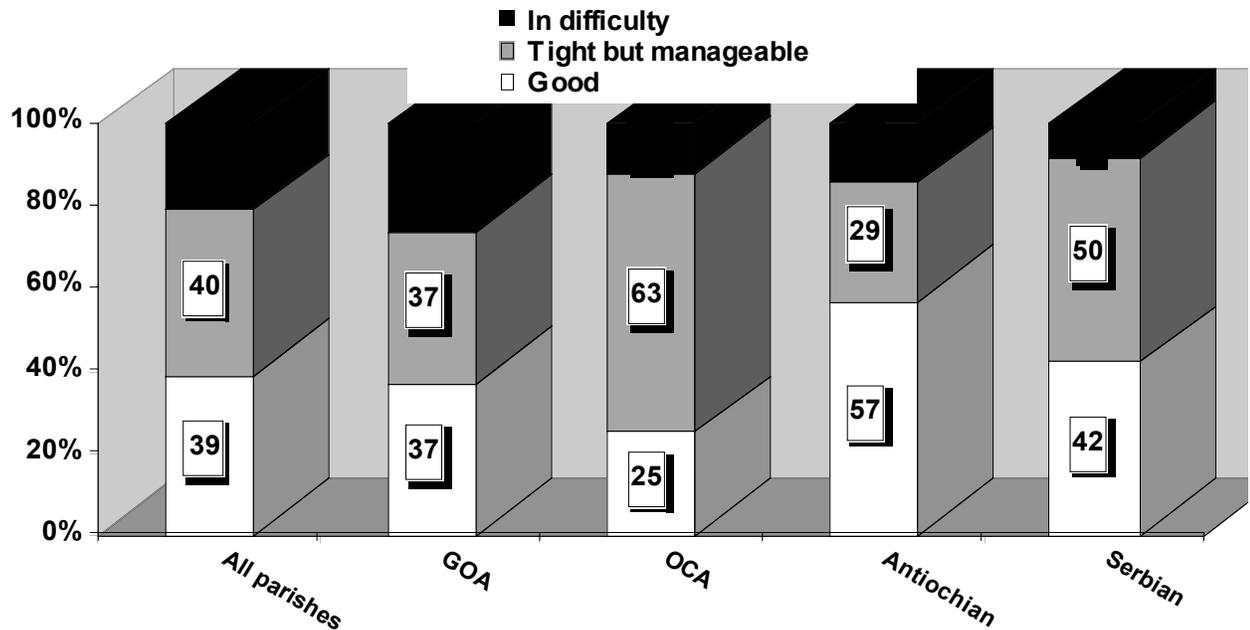
9) Is it true that of all the American Orthodox jurisdictions, the Greek Orthodox parishes are economically the most “well off by far?”

According to the survey and from the perspective of the parish leadership (both clergy and lay leaders alike), the financial situation in Greek Orthodox parishes is not as bright as we tend to think.

In fact, of the four Orthodox jurisdictions participating in the survey, the GOA has the highest proportion of parishes reporting “difficult” financial situations (26% of GOA parishes in comparison with 14% parishes of Antiochian Archdiocese’s parishes, 12% of OCA parishes and 8% of Serbian Orthodox parishes). In contrast, more Serbian parishes (42%) and Antiochian parishes (57%) report good financial situations than the GOA churches do (37%).

Fig. 15

How would you describe your parish's current financial situation? (% of respondents)



Does this surprising fact reflect actual differences in financial resources available to the parishes of various jurisdictions? Not necessarily, because our survey did not look at parish budgets or bank accounts or at any other quantitative measures of parish finances. This fact means, however, that the leaders of one-quarter of the GOA parishes feel that their parish budgets are in trouble, and/or that parish income does not meet adequately the plans and goals of the parishes.

Financially, churches are largely dependent on the contributions of their members. How generous are parishioners in the GOA, the OCA, the Antiochian and the Serbian Orthodox parishes?

The “Parish Needs Survey” asked “How would you describe the strength of the financial commitment demonstrated by your parishioners?”

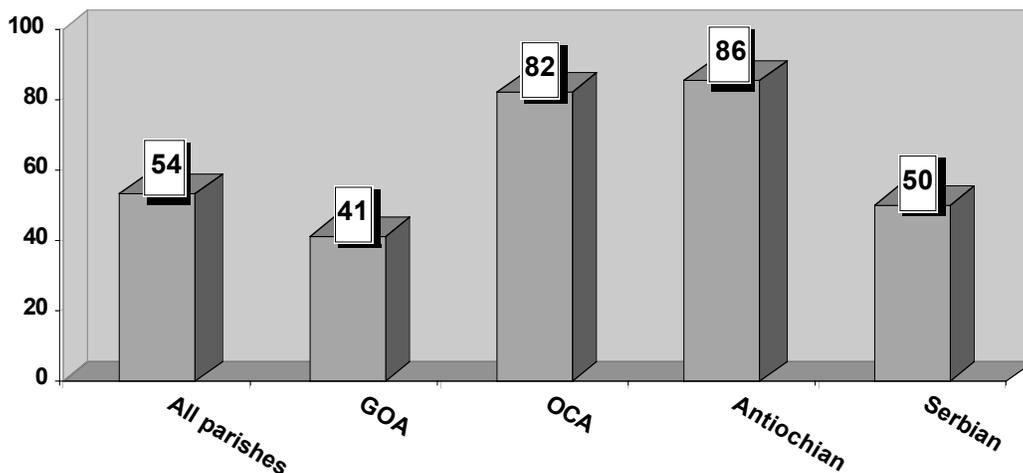
Tab. 11 How would you describe the strength of the financial commitment demonstrated by your parishioners: differences between jurisdictions (% of respondents)

	All	GOA	OCA	Ant	Serb
Most of our parishioners willingly contribute generously to the parish	29	23	53	43	8
Although many of our parishioners have limited finances, they contribute what they can to the parish	25	18	29	43	42
Some of parishioners demonstrate a strong financial commitment to the parish, while others don't care at all.	31	42	6	9	25
A small core group of parishioners donates most of the parish contributions while most give very little	14	17	12	5	17
Very few of our parishioners consider parish needs among their personal priorities	1	0	0	0	8

The data in the Tab. 11 show that clergy and lay leaders of the OCA and the Antiochian parishes are largely satisfied with the strength of the financial commitment of their parish members. Eighty-two to eighty-six percent of them believe that either “most of our parishioners willingly contribute generously to the parish” or “although many of our parishioners have limited finances, they contribute what they can to the parish.”

Fig. 15

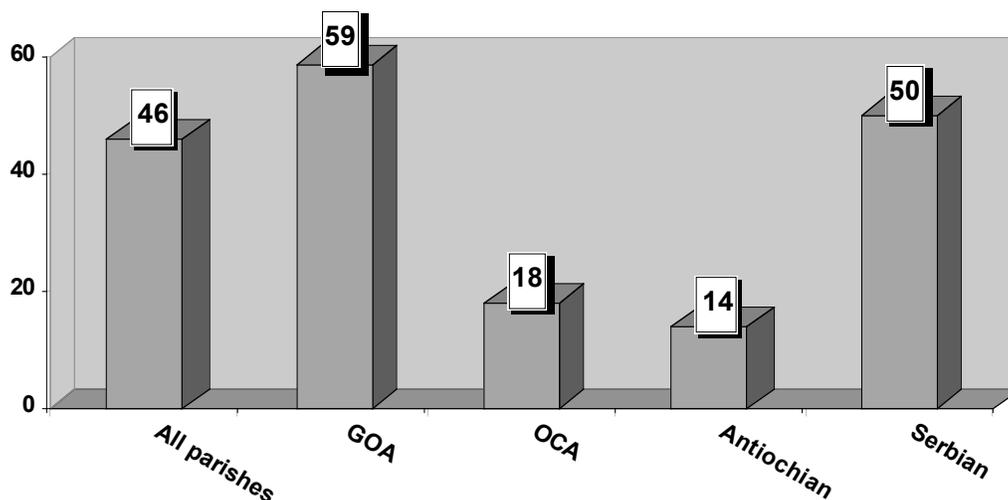
% of parishes where “most of the parishioners willingly contribute generously to the parish” or where “many of the parishioners have limited finances, but they contribute what they can”



On the contrary, the leadership of the GOA and the Serbian Orthodox parishes seem to be more disappointed with the willingness of their members to contribute to the parish. Fifty-nine percent of respondents in the GOA and 50% in the Serbian Orthodox parishes feel that either only “some of parishioners demonstrate a strong financial commitment to the parish, while others don’t care at all,” or “a small core group of parishioners donates most of the parish contributions while most give very little,” or even “very few of our parishioners consider parish needs among their personal priorities.” The proportion of respondents in the OCA and the Antiochian parishes who selected those three answers is much lower: 18% and 14% respectively.

Fig. 16

% of parishes where “some of the parishioners demonstrate a strong financial commitment to the parish, while others don’t care at all,” or “a small core group of parishioners donates most of the parish contributions while most give very little,” or “very few of parishioners consider parish needs among their personal priorities”



10) Are Orthodox parishes doing their best to improve their financial situations?

Unfortunately, the answer is “no.”

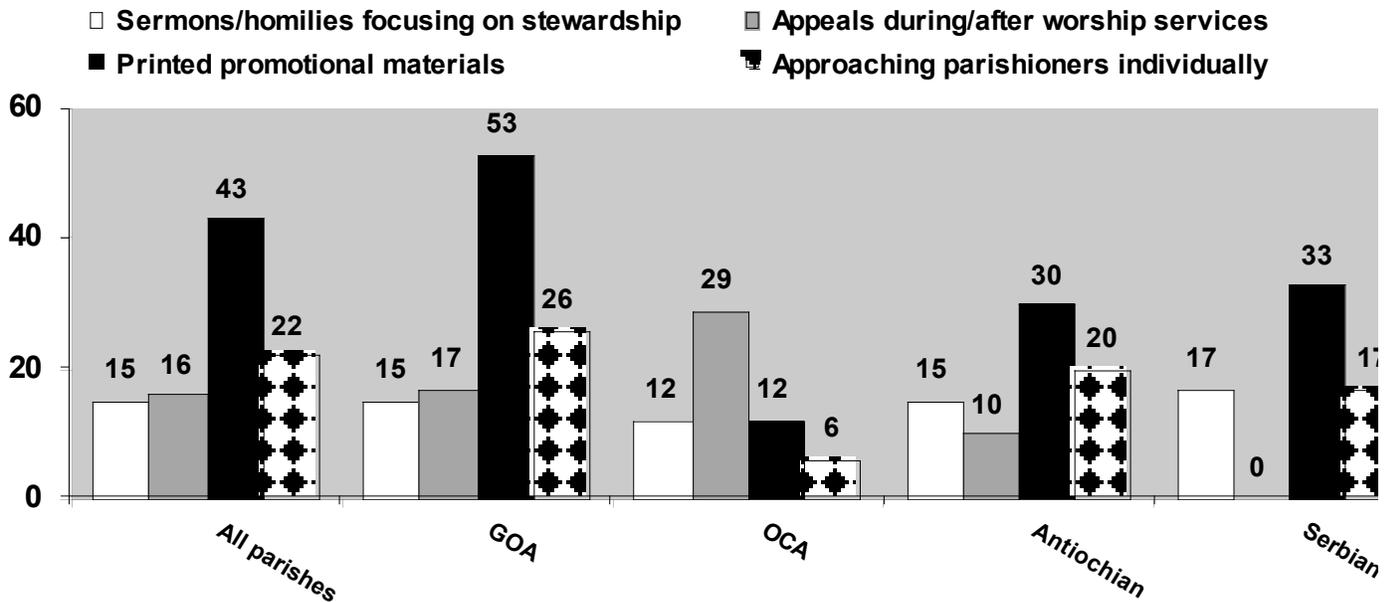
The survey asked, “What strategies are used to encourage donations among parishioners to support the operations budget of your parish?” The respondents were given four possible choices: “sermons/homilies focusing on subject of stewardship,” “appeals during or after

worship services,” “distribution of printed promotional materials,” “approaching parishioners individually in person or by phone.” They could choose among three responses: “regularly,” “occasionally,” or “not really.” The results show that very little is done on a regular basis in order to increase contributions from parishioners in the parishes of all four Orthodox jurisdictions (Fig. 17).

Even in the case of the most “passive strategy” – distribution of promotional printed materials – less than half of the parishes (43%) reported that they use it on a regular basis. Apparently, parishes are reluctant to use church space to address “money matters:” only 15-16% of parishes reported that they have regular “sermons focusing on stewardship” or “appeals during/after worship services.” Only slightly more than one-fifth of the parishes (22%) pay attention to approaching parishioners in person.

Fig. 17

% of parishes where the following strategies are “regularly used” to encourage donations among parishioners



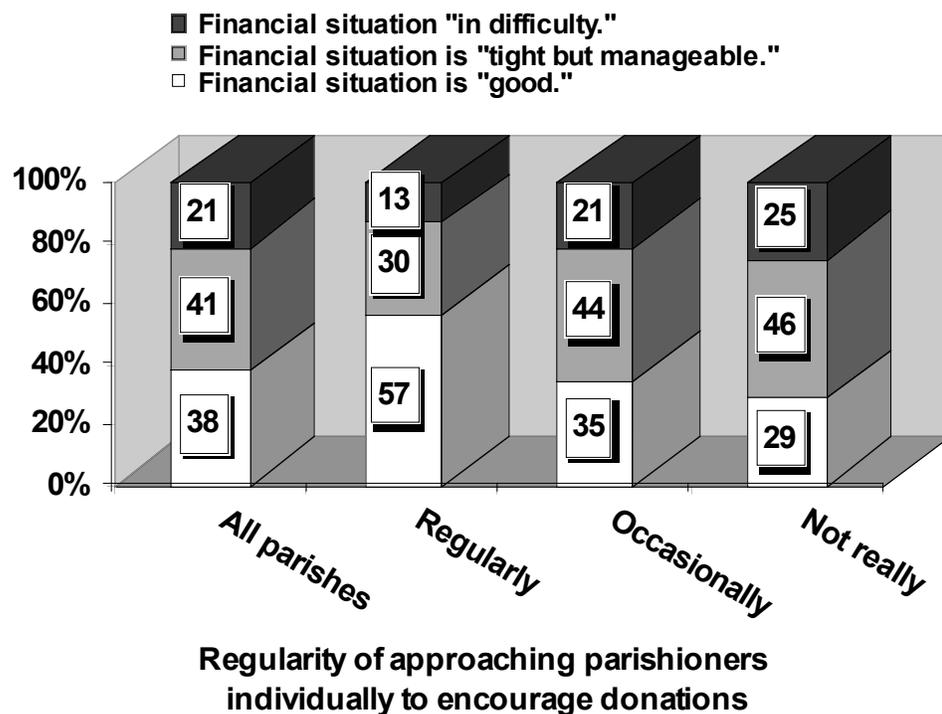
Of the four Orthodox jurisdictions participating in the survey, the GOA parishes are somewhat more consistent in using various approaches to fund-raising. Yet, even in the case of Greek

Orthodox parishes and with the exception of the “distribution of printed promotional materials,” no more than one-quarter of churches make regular and purposeful efforts to encourage donations.

Further statistical analysis of the relationship between the regularity of usage of various financial strategies and the financial well-being of a parish indicated: out of four options only “approaching parishioners individually in person or by phone” is a strong predictor of parish financial strength. Put differently, the parishes which use “approaching parishioners individually: in person or by phone” are much more likely to report that their financial situation is “good” (Fig. 18).

Fig. 18

Regularity of “approaching parishioners individually with the goal to encourage donations” and the financial situations of the parishes



Concluding remarks

I have presented in this paper only a few of the results of the 2005 Parish Needs Survey. Further, ten discussed general findings are neither really “simple” nor even “answers.” True, they give

good insight into various areas of the life of American Orthodox parishes. At the same time, each of them allows multiple interpretations and provokes further research questions. Of these possible questions, two deserve particular attention:

- 1) The results of the survey demonstrated that within some general common trends and patterns of Orthodox parish life, the differences among various American Orthodox jurisdictions in most measures remain great. The question is: are these differences growing or decreasing? More particularly, to what extent does the thesis about the growing “internal fragmentation” of American Orthodoxy on both denominational and parish levels proposed by A. Papanikolaou [Papanikolaou, 2003] reflect reality?
- 2) At this point, the Parish Needs Survey looked at various characteristics and features of Orthodox parish life in the western United States. The next research question is: how distinct are these characteristics from the mainstream American Christian churches? Further, to what extent are Eastern Orthodox Churches influenced by the general trends in American religious life (growth of conservatism, new forms of religious participation, etc.)?

The accurate - based on objective sociological data - answers to these two questions will both discern an actual place of Orthodox Christianity in American pluralistic religious landscape and allow for informed prediction on “where we are heading.”

Reference:

Papanikolaou, A. 2003. *“The One Becomes Many: Orthodox Christianity and American Pluralism”*. A paper presented at the workshop “Orthodox Christianity in American Public Life: The Challenges and Opportunities of Religious Pluralism in the 21st Century.” Institute on Religion and World Affairs, Boston University, 13 December 2003.