

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today, I'm grateful to be able to share with you our annual report. This year's meeting will mainly be delivered by me. And hopefully, it will be quick and easy.

Financials

In the past couple of years, our Church's giving has always exceeded expectations. In the past, we've always doubled our account each year. This year though, COVID has hit us hard between losing parishioners and giving just being down in general due to attendance. Though giving was down overall this year, you can still see in our Treasurer's Report we currently have over 20k in our checking account. In spite of the setbacks we've faced this year, we've managed to stay in the black, ending the year with an almost \$8k surplus while having many of the same expenses.

Based on pledges, this year's budget will be just shy of 5k a month. As you can see, we will just be covering expenses. Hopefully, as the year progresses, we'll be able to get in more than we budgeted for.

Liturgical Life

Our Liturgical Life this year has obviously taken a hit. We began the year with high hopes and an increase in our liturgical schedule, especially during Lent before we were hit with the unknowns of COVID. In a pastoral response of care for our community leaders of our Diocese directed us to limit services to a small cohort and livestream for the rest of our people. This was seen as a temporary measure as entire communities across the country were asked to quarantine at home.

Unfortunately, this required us not to be able to celebrate Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha as we would have hoped. But as in all circumstances of life, we did the best we could with what we had, and prayed that Christ would bless our efforts.

By June, we were back in Church serving two liturgies a week so that everyone who wanted to attend, could, at least a couple of times a week.

Once the weather became cooler and after I returned from Paternity leave, we were finally able to serve Liturgies and our Festal services outside to open these services to more people.

We now have an event tent to act as our outdoor chapel. We continue to have Liturgy on Sundays outside, as well as major feasts. The weather is often cold, but we've done a lot to help everyone stay warm with the firepit, patio heaters, and the Church building acting as a warming station.

I don't expect things to get back to normal before Pascha, so we'll continue to have services as much as possible outside, weather permitting. I look forward to us having a more robust Lent with Presanctified Liturgies on Wednesdays, Vespers on Saturdays, and Liturgy on Sundays, followed by Holy Week services, and God willing, an outdoor Pascha.

Church Life and Growth

When we talk about growth, it's hard not to talk about numbers, though numbers aren't at the heart of things. But it's exciting to see new people enter into the faith, become a part of the community, and grow spiritually. This past year we received SEVEN people into the Church through baptism and chrismation. We currently have 11 catechumens [with 3 of those being received into the church in the next couple of weeks] and in spite of the many trials and tribulations we've had this year, 13 people are at various stages of inquiry into the Orthodox Faith. Currently, we're averaging below in Sunday attendance than this time last year, for various reasons. Right now about 30 people brave the cold to attend services each Sunday morning.

Inquirer and Catechism class will begin again this month after a long hiatus. Joining me in teaching Catechism I will be both Professor Christopher Johnson as well as Caleb Rexford. They'll eventually continue with the now Catechism I class and eventually graduate them to the Catechism II class.

I'll continue teaching the Inquirers Class and Catechism I once our current class moves on, and other book studies throughout the year.

Looking further into the year, we have much to be excited for.

This year, I'd like the Mission Council, as well as the parish as a whole, take another look at planning for the future. As we grow, we will need to have ministries in place in order to plug new people into. Last year, I introduced you to the idea of using Met Tikhon's little book entitled "Of What Life Do We Speak" to help guide us. This year I'd like us to take this book again and really look into what it says.

In it he writes:

...the Church faces great obstacles and tremendous change in the world as she makes her way through the 21st century. We ought to ask ourselves if we love the people of our lands, and if they love us? Do they voluntarily accept baptism and smash the idols that are provided to them by the shamans of our age? Can we, as the Church in North America, genuinely sing along with the paschal hymn: "Lift up your eyes, O Zion, round about and behold. Lo, your children like divinely shining stars assembled, from the West and from the North, from the Sea and from the East, to bless Christ in you forevermore." Do these words ring true for us or do they remind us of the reality that the light of the resurrection may have not yet completely pierced through the darkness of the world and of fallen humanity?

How can we as a local parish respond to this? In answer, Met Tikhon sketches a plan that could provide a framework within which to recapture the Alaskan missionary zeal of our forebears. In preparation for the 19th All-American Council in St. Louis, he set out a vision expanding upon four broad areas, and using the image of four pillars. He says that...

This image refers to the four pillars of the altar table, which are the first items to be blessed during the beautiful and moving service for the consecration of a church temple. I chose this image as a way of calling to remembrance the centrality of Jesus Christ to absolutely every part of our existence as Christians and as authentic human beings. Christ is the King of Glory Who is enthroned upon the altar, which also represents His tomb. It is around this tomb and this altar that we gather to worship and glorify Him. The image of the Four Pillars is a poetic one but the substance of that image is practical, with an emphasis on four concrete areas—the spiritual life, stewardship, relations with others, and evangelism—that require our attention and our action.

It is these four pillars of the spiritual life, stewardship, relations with others, and evangelism, that we will seek to build our parish life around. In the coming months, the Mission Council will be meeting to discuss the breakdown of what each of these mean and how we can best implement them among our community. If you'd like to buy a copy of Met Tikhon's book, we have copies available in our bookstore.

On a personal note, there are a lot of changes in store for the Earl family in the coming year. Presbyteria Stephanie has recently received a promotion at her job with the Atlanta Birth Center. That, coupled with our strong desire to be nearer to our parents/Anne-Marie's grandparents and their familial support, we've asked and received a blessing from Archbishop Alexander to move back to Atlanta.

As of now, this won't change much as far as my status here at St Tikhon. I'm still assigned here as the priest in charge and will be continuing to come up every week to serve the services. I also plan on coming up for Feast Days as well as every Wed during Lent for Pre-sanctified Liturgies. Catechism will continue on Zoom, and I will have meetings with people outside at the Church, as well as hear confessions on Saturdays.

In the long run, our Dean, Fr David Arnold, wants to assign someone here who can live here and really invest in the community, and I think that's wise on his part. When this will happen, I don't know. It could be six months, it could be a year. It just depends on when a priest might be available, and right now, we have a major clergy shortage in the Orthodox Church.

Mission Council

At this point I'd like to announce who our mission council members were and who will be. The current Mission Council is made up of our Choir Director, Dean Arnold, Carien Houck, Caleb Rexford, and Molly Sissom. Dean and Carien are just finishing up their terms and will be rotating out. I'd like to thank them here and now for all their hard work and service to the parish. Being on the Council isn't an easy or glamorous job, so thank you guys for being willing to serve. Our council for 2021 will be two old members, Caleb Rexford, who will be taking on the role of Parish Warden, and Molly Sissom, who will be taking on the role of Parish Secretary.

In addition to these two we are adding three new members. Shady Gergis will be joining and taking over as Treasurer and Zach and Mary Zacharias will be rounding out the council.

Parish Compliance

The final thing I'd like to touch on is parish compliance. This was also something I brought up last year at the Annual Meeting, but due to the events of last year, much of it was derailed. As we grow as a church community, we should seek to align ourselves with the expectations from the OCA and the Diocese of the South for what a parish looks like. One of these expectations is a more robust liturgical life, which we are currently working on as mentioned earlier.

Another is record keeping. The mission needs to know who its members are, both those who have become members of the church through chrismation and baptism, as well as those who have moved to other communities and wish to become a part of ours officially.

According to the Diocese Parish Guidelines, a member of the church is considered to:

1. have been baptized and chrismated, or otherwise canonically received, into the Church and who consciously uphold and profess the Orthodox Faith;
2. be a regular communicant, that is, a frequent participant in the Holy Mysteries of Confession and Communion. Members ideally partake of the Mysteries weekly
3. fulfill the financial obligations established by the Parish. All members are urged to make a yearly commitment for financial support of the Parish in the form of a pledge, the standard of which is a tithe (one-tenth) of their income; and
4. declare their intention to be members.

Following the Tradition of the Church, the purpose of membership in the Parish is to seek the knowledge of God and union with Him through Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and to express that unity with God in Christ in all family, business, and social activities.

Generally, this expression consists of an enlightened obedience to the teachings of the Orthodox Faith, and is manifested in regular attendance at the Parish's divine services, in frequent reception of the Holy Gifts of the Body and Blood of Christ, in regular cleansing of the soul through Confession, in care for the Parish property and buildings, in regular contributions in fulfillment of their financial commitment, and in doing everything possible to promote the Christian spirit of love, unity, and brotherly concern among the members of the Parish.

For New Members: Any person who desires to become a member of the Parish and who is baptized and chrismated, or otherwise canonically received, into the Orthodox Church, must present himself to the rector or the priest-in-charge, who will inform him of the life and activities of the Parish. When that person shall have received the Holy Mysteries of Confession and Communion, he shall then declare his intention to become a member of the Parish by means of a written declaration which the Parish shall provide for this purpose, and he shall then be accepted as a member and enrolled by the pastor and Parish secretary on the list of members.

To help us better fulfill these obligations, I encourage you to make the liturgical life of the church a priority in your family. As I tell our catechumens, the worship of the church and her liturgical life is as much a part of their learning as any books that they read. It's in the prayer and the Divine Services that we encounter Jesus Christ, and in our encounter with Him, we can become like Him.

I know this has been difficult in the time of the pandemic. But as we allow for more services to be served as safely as we can, as vaccines become more available, I encourage you all to make Church attendance a regular part of your life again. Depending on where you are, this may mean just coming to an outdoor liturgy once a month. This may mean coming to Vespers on Saturday night. Whatever it is, in 2021, I pray that you'll begin to make the Church and her services a part of your life.

Those of you more comfortable, I encourage you to prayerfully consider being here as often as you can. Be here for Sunday services and Feast Days. Take advantage of the extra upcoming Lenten services as they are there to help us better see ourselves, and encourage us towards repentance and reliance on Christ. I also encourage you, if you haven't already, to consider stewardship, make or renew your pledge of monthly giving [no matter the amount!] and look for opportunities to serve in the

church. We're here to imitate Christ. As our Lord reminds us "whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..."

I'd also like to institute a more formal initiation for new members of our church.

This serves a two fold purpose:

1. It helps introduce new people to the parish, and helps the parish get to know them
2. It is good for new members to make a commitment to the life of our parish. To be with us in our struggles, our grief, our celebrations, and our joys, to truly lift each other up, and pray for each other, and be there when each other needs the other.

I ask everyone who has started attending the parish in the last 6 months, to send me an email and we will have a formal service for welcoming new members.

Finally, I want to thank all of you for all you've done. When I first started here a little under four years ago now, we were probably averaging 25-30 people [adults and children] a week. Last year, we were averaging 50-60. At this point in 2021, we're probably back to averaging around 25-30 people a week. But based on our stewardship pledges, we have 43 adults and 20 children for a total of 60 people who consider themselves to be members of St Tikhon. This just means everyone isn't comfortable with attending for various reasons, or are just not attending at the same time. It also means, by God's grace, we are continuing to grow.

So my encouragement here at the end, is to continue to grow. Continue to welcome those interested in the Faith. When new people show up, be kind and loving, as God is kind and loving. Make sure the beauty of Orthodoxy that people see isn't just our icons and incense, but hearts changed by the love and mercy of God. Love your neighbors. Let that be what draws people to the Faith. As we start a new year and a new season in our parish life, let us continue to seek the blessing of God on all we do, and to share His mercy and love with everyone we meet.

With love in Christ,

Fr Seth

