

Holy Trinity Orthodox Church Willimantic, Connecticut

~ Annual Meeting ~

Pastor's Report

February 11, 2018

It is customary for a Pastor's Report to be included as part of the Annual Parish Assembly. Much of what follows has been said or written about previously over the course of the past 12 months, but this year I feel a bit more impassioned about my thoughts. During my entire pastorate at Holy Trinity, I have always attempted to build upon the positives, but this year's Pastor's Report may have a different tone to some. Or, as a co-worker, a dear woman from Italy, once told me years ago, "I tell it like it is." My response to her was that is not always a virtue, however in this case, today, I feel strongly some things must be said. It is as close I can get to, "telling it like it is."

Please forgive any omissions, as they are unintentional. Holy Trinity continues to be built on Mission, Mercy, & Ministry. Everything we do falls under one of these three pillars. We would do well to always remember these three pillars and our devotion to them.

2017 Metrics:

Baptisms – 1 (*Alice Mara L*); **Chrismations** – 1 (*Richard K*); **Marriages** – 0; **Funerals** – 1 (+*Zenia Zlotnick*).

A Look Back (2017):

1) Although there were several high points – the consecration of the new altar on September 30, perhaps the most significant, and one of the great moments of sanctification any church can ever experience (thanks again to Jon & Merci Matcheson for the gift of the new altar table) – Alice L's baptism, Richard K's chrismation, a new roof, an Icon Project in full flight; overall it felt like a slog through 2017; **the summer months were especially challenging.** It feels as if we have fallen into the new societal norm which emphasizes that religion doesn't matter, and so an effort is not required. Instead of fighting against this new norm, we have, instead, capitulated to it. Our community has been blessed over the past 18 months by new people, such as Kathy & Dr Chet A, Michael A, Dani L (*and Alice*), Tom S, Pam C-S, Reader Tikhon, Diane K (Welcome Back), Nancy H (Welcome Back) and Richard K. That's eleven new people, and that is very significant for a parish our size. Thank

you to Denise G [redacted] for helping me to see this. They have all been faithful, attentive, and consistent in their attendance, and participation into the life of the community. We are much better for having them with us. **A tip of the hat also to Reader Rob G [redacted] who brings his two young boys (Gus, Leo) every week by himself.** Rob appreciates the helps he receives from community members.

What happens is in most church communities, and we have not been immune to this, is attrition. A few walk away completely, but mostly, people do not come as often; it is a slow erosion, and it extracts its toll over time. Being busy as the reason for not attending Liturgy, is worn as a badge of honor these days, and busy-ness can often replace God as the center of human existence, it seems. If a person can say they are busy, and actually stay busy, then all else is forgiven.

Americans have become so busy over the past few years that we are forcing God out of our lives. Errands, entertainment, and recreation can often have priority on Sunday mornings. We would rather be busy, than devote our time and talents to God. Spiritual development is neglected, and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to find the time to consistently come to Liturgy, and encounter Christ in his Word and Eucharist, on a Sunday morning. I beg each person to devote time to developing a sound spiritual life, one filled with prayer, contemplation, and discernment. It is the only thing that can save us in the fractured and uncertain times we now live in, and sadly, accept as normal.

We often refer to our culture, as an accompanying index finger is pointed wayward, as 'the real world', but that is actually wrong. The church is the real world; that which we acknowledge as the real world, to borrow a phrase from today's lexicon, is actually 'the fake world'. John the Forerunner was the voice of the one crying in the wilderness, and it is our Western culture that has become the new wilderness that is in need of hearing the voice of Christ, the one that Christians can speak. I feel that I am actually the person at fault here, as I fail to continuously emphasize what the expectations are. In this case, it is to attend the Divine Services, and participate. **Expectation #1.**

Together, we comprise the Body of Christ, and thus, we *are* the church. Sometimes, the temple is referred to as the church, but its members, the people, are the church. Individually, we can accomplish little, but we don't function as a single entity, we are called to gather as a worshipping Body. Although there can be no denying the physical distance between us could finally be taking its toll after all these years, still hope can often be a by-product of imagined difficulties. We just have to work harder instead of yielding to the perceived obstacles. Having said all this though, I will admit I have been buoyed by the community's response to worship since December, 2017. A spirit, lacking for too many months, has been rediscovered. There were many who stayed for the Christmas Vigil service after Divine Liturgy on December 24, and there were very solid responses on New Year's Eve, then again the following Sunday (January 7, 2018) when temperatures were bitterly cold.

“The measure of a great church is not how many people come, but how many people live differently as a result of coming.” - Anonymous

Small communities can best flourish when ALL its members are active participants. The other truth we must confront is the same that Saint Alexis of Wilkes-Barre, when he was serving in Minneapolis, MN, noted a century ago; that is that church communities are built less on families, less on married couples, but more, much more, on simply one person attending alone. With few exceptions, that is also a portrait of present day Holy Trinity.

2) Fair Share: In 2016 just \$800 was taken from the General Operating Fund to make up the difference in the Fair Share. Last year (2017) that number rose to \$2,000. We need a volunteer to send out quarterly statements as a reminder that all are accountable and responsible to honor their Fair Share commitment. **Expectation #2.**

3) We must do a better job of identifying need areas where help is required; small stuff. It is not the responsibility of one person to empty the trash, put paper towels in the bathrooms or kitchen, sweep leaves in the fall from the back entrance, or occasionally pick up trash that has blown up against the outside of the church. Sometimes it seems as if we would rather walk over the leaves, then pick them up. No one person owns anything at Holy Trinity. Be observant, identify a need, and fill it. We do a great job of identifying need areas, rather than stepping up to assume the responsibility that is required to actually fill that need.

4) Participation at Covenant Soup Kitchen. Several years ago when Timothy F [REDACTED] put together an on-line survey for the Annual Meeting, working at a soup kitchen was high on the list of priorities. You spoke, we listened; and we thank all those who have served over the past year, and since 2013. Please note the following 2018 Covenant Soup Kitchen Community Service dates: March 31, June 9, September 22, and December 8. Everyone is asked to take a turn serving; it is a ministry of our entire church, not just a few members. No one who has served previously has not been humbled and thankful for this blessing. A special thanks to Tim who coordinates each serving date, and on every occasion the past five years, has been in attendance. Many Years to all those who serve at the soup kitchen.

5) A new roof was put on in late December (2017). Greg Zlotnick & ZCI has picked up the entire estimated \$25,000 bill. When George is feeling better, we hope to honor Greg & George with a Gala Luncheon at Holy Trinity on a Sunday afternoon (since identified as March 11, 2018) to fittingly thank them for their extraordinary contributions to Holy Trinity over the years. As an FYI, in reading through nearly 1,000 pages of journals (thank you +Mrs Anna Laptik of *Blessed Memory*) dating back to 1965 (previous entries were written in Russian), there was not a single mention ever made of a new roof. Could it be the original roof, the one put on in 1957, lasted for six decades?

6) Our income in 2017 was nearly \$55,000. **Thank you to all those who support Holy Trinity with their stewardship of time, talents, and treasures.** May God repay.

7) As part of my pastoral responsibilities, I make weekly to visit our shut-ins, parishioners, and friends of Holy Trinity. Most often, I do not return home from church on Sunday afternoons until after 4:00pm.

8) A note about our choir: it is excellent. A special thanks to Jason G [REDACTED], Mary Ellen J [REDACTED], and Timothy P [REDACTED] who conduct the choir nearly every week, and do a splendid job. The choir sings with joy, beauty, and enthusiasm. May God repay.

Icon Project:

The first four early church fathers, pillars of the 1st-4th century church, were installed in late September, 2017, by local businessman, Bill Bender. Cveta Marinova has now completed two of the six female saints:

- Saint Thekla of Antioch, Equal-to-the Apostles (*Completed, December, 2017*)
- Saints Catherine of Alexandria (*Completed, September, 2017*)
- Saint Helen of Constantinople, Equal-to-the Apostles
- Saint Nina of Georgia, Equal-to-the Apostles
- Saint Barbara of Syria (*Currently in production; should be completed in February, 2018*).
- TBD: Perhaps St Genevieve of Paris, or St Anna (Anastasije), the mother of Saint Sava, the Enlightener of Serbia, and Equal-to-the-Apostles.

Please remember to pick up the 11" x 17" booklet in the rear of the nave to learn more about the life and work of Saint Justin Martyr, Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, and Saint Athanasius the Great.

Nearly 75% (\$14,600) of the project has been funded through private donations. Donors, thus far, include: Jon & Merci M [REDACTED], Barbara & Jim L [REDACTED], Robert & Carol H [REDACTED] (New Jersey), Nancy H [REDACTED], James & Lorri K [REDACTED] (Enfield, CT), George G [REDACTED] (Marlborough, CT), Boris G [REDACTED] (Rochester, NY), Robert V [REDACTED] (San Antonio, TX), Robert M [REDACTED] (Waterbury, CT), Alex S [REDACTED] (Storrs), and Father Marc Vranes. Two additional pledges promising support have also recently been received. The entire project is approximately \$20,000, which includes \$2,000 for installation (\$200 an icon), and brokers fees to get two shipments through Customs at Logan Airport in Boston. The icons are \$16,500 (\$1,650 each), and an additional \$500 to iconographer Cveta Marinova for materials and shipping costs. At the completion of this project, a plaque will be commissioned listing all donors, along with the name(s) of whom their donation was made, either in memory of, or in honor of. Any interested donors are asked to contact Father Marc.

A Look Forward (2018):

1) Perhaps the single biggest difference is that I will be away from Holy Trinity more than at any other time since my arrival in December, 1995. There have been many years when I was away on just one Sunday; there were even a few years I was never away from the parish for even one week. I will be away at least six Sundays in 2018. My brother, Robert, recently retired from his medical practice in San Antonio, and has invited me to do some traveling with him. He has been extraordinarily kind and generous in making this happen. I will be away, and out of state, on Sunday, March 4 (my dear Aunt Betsy's 90th birthday in Pittsburgh), Sunday, April 22 (Czech Republic and Budapest, Hungary), an out of state wedding in May, then three consecutive Sundays in Septembers (9th, 16th, and 23rd) when I will be travelling to Italy with my brother. Replacement clergy will serve on several of these Sundays, but not all.

2) The 19th All America Council is scheduled to take place in St Louis, MO, from July 19-23. Fr Marc will be attending, as all Orthodox Church in America clergy are expected to be in attendance. I cannot use my knee, or an expected sinus headache that I can feel coming on right now, or that the St Louis Cardinals Baseball Club is out of town for the week, as reasons for not attending.

3) In identifying future maintenance and upgrades at HTOC, I would submit the following for consideration:

- New doors which lead from the narthex to the nave. The current doors are dated back to the 1950's. New doors would add a lot, and would not break the bank.
- New outside front doors.
- Bathroom renovations (new toilets & vanities; upgrade lighting).
- Interior window & sill replacement (long-term project).
- New liturgical appointments (Memorial Gifts?): Wooden Candle Boxes, Memorial Tray, Censer Stand.
- Removal of *some* of the Current Pews. This was discussed at a Summer 2017 Meeting, and should be revisited. We would not be removing all the pews, just some, which would open up the center of the nave and allow children to move about with fewer distractions and reduce the energy level. For those who must sit, there will be seats for them. Large Oriental rugs can be laid in open spaces to give the nave added warmth. Historically, the removal of pews has been known to get clergy in hot water, so every precaution must be made in order to calm the waters here, if that time does arrive. I think it is important, to at least keep the idea on the front burner.

We should not expect Greg & ZCI to step up each time maintenance and upgrades are needed. There is no reason why we could not replace the doors from the narthex to the nave in 2018, and do it on our own.

A Look Beyond (2018):

1) After 31 years, I retired from my full-time position, effective January 25, 2018, although I will continue to look for other work to provide financial sustenance. My Social Security begins in mid-February. Also, given my age, and the distance I must travel to Willimantic during Lenten services, evening travel is difficult. Additionally, I won't be here forever. What type of community do we want to be, and that potentially a new pastor would be able to grow? Over the years we have more or less flown by the seat of our pants, but it has worked. A Strategic Plan should be considered and would be beneficial. Where do we want to be a year from now, five years from now, a decade from now? It would be helpful to have a Strategic Plan in place soon (12 months?), so that when something is proposed in the years ahead, it is not a surprise to anyone. Whatever suggested changes there are, they will be out in front of everyone to see. It will create additional transparency.

2) For years, I have scheduled four, then three, now two Pre-Sanctified Liturgies during Great Lent, and the response gets less and less each year. It is disheartening. Part of the reason for scheduling them, in addition to being faithful to the church's liturgical cycle, is to provide opportunities to hear Confessions. I would like to avoid hearing so many confessions after Vespers and prior to Matins (of Holy Saturday) on Holy Friday. The long drive home after Pre-Sanctified Liturgys on Wednesday evenings is becoming more challenging for me. I am committed to serving two Pre-Sanctified this year on either a Wednesday or Friday morning during Great Lent, hold a Bible Study afterwards, then do parish visitations. More than 60% of our membership have full-time jobs, live a distance from the church, so that makes it very difficult to attend weekday services during Lent, be it in the morning (less so), or evening (more so). Of course, there is an alternative, and I would like to make this suggestion, and use the Holy Friday Burial Service as an example. Attendance at the Burial Service is typically poor, and it declines each year. The reason most often stated is work. Since we are not adverse to using personal time off go to the beach, shopping, day trips, long weekends, an occasional day to declutter our homes, might I suggest taking a ½ day off on Good Friday to devote to the Lord, or a few hours to attend a morning Pre-Sanctified Liturgy? Where there's a will, there is a way.

Estate Planning:

1) Please remember Holy Trinity when doing your Estate Planning.

I would like to conclude this 2018 Pastor's Report, by offering a part of my presentation that was given at our Centennial Celebration on October 9, 2016. It speaks of the benefits of being in a small church. I feel it has relevance given what has been written to this point in this Annual Pastor's Report, and hope that it inspires increased attendance and participation in 2018 and beyond:

We are a small church, have been one for a century now ... and we are comfortable being a small church ... **and we don't spend our time trying to figure out how we can become a big church.** One hundred years has taught us we are who we are, and we embrace who we are. We have learned our history lesson well; we get it. We do not mistakenly perceive ourselves as a future large church. To do so would take away who we are; we would lose our identity. We have never been embarrassed by being small, instead we have used it to our advantage. Every church community can thrive I have learned, no matter what size it is.

There are many wonderful attributes of being a part of a small church community. The small church is different; and in our case, ***the small church is so much better.*** We don't consider our being small as a problem; we accept it as a blessing. Our emphasis has always been on being healthy, not necessarily being big. Permit me please, to detail just a few reasons why the smaller church can be a better church. **This is *our Holy Trinity*:**

- The small church places a high priority on relationships.
- At Holy Trinity, we care more about people than anything else. The functional and administrative aspects of ministry somehow get taken care of.
- Developing relationships, for example, loving each person is the single most important component to what are building. I have often stated in speaking for each of us, "We will not be out-loved."
- Parishioners feel valued, needed, and are nourished in this type of small environment. I am convinced that a small parish is where most people receive their greatest spiritual nourishment and find a place of mission and ministry.
- Our own community is very young. There is no divisive gap between future vs. past.
- We are intergenerational. Our older members know each of our smaller children by their first name. This is so huge.
- We accept and affirm those who may have been rejected, or else not welcomed elsewhere.
- There is a place for everyone at HT. We also enjoy outstanding support and encouragement from non-Orthodox spouses who are a significant part of our parish. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We applaud each of you; and thank you for your nearly two-decade commitment to Holy Trinity.

- By being small, we are able to actively celebrate each other's victories; and emotionally bear one another's burdens. Long-time pastor V. Rev. Daniel Rentel, now retired, once told me during a telephone conversation we shared, "**When you belong to a small church, you just don't get to show up.**"
- When smaller churches like ours take attendance, we count faces, who is missing. In larger churches, people count furniture, the number of empty pews.
- We are small enough to respond when one of our own is in crisis. We are able to provide assistance spontaneously and immediately, rather than working our way through an elaborate structure which only increases response time.

Small churches do not need to become big churches. They just need to become healthy churches. I have learned that even small churches can still contribute to the growth of God's Kingdom.

Father Marc Vranes
1 February 2018

Pre-Feast of the Presentation of the Lord into the Temple.

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