

**SYMPOSIUM
CHURCH GROWTH
CHURCH SUPPORT/GIVING (TITHING)**

**THE RESPONSIVE CHURCH IS A HEALTHY CHURCH:
A HEALTHY CHURCH IS A GROWING CHURCH!**

A Presentation given at the the 5th Biennial Parish Council Symposium by

His Grace Bishop Demetri

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I.) OPENING REMARKS:

On behalf of his eminence Metropolitan Phillip, Fr. Michael Massouh, the director of this Center, Mr. Ron Nicola, Chairman of the Department of Stewardship of the Antiochian Archdiocese and myself, I welcome you to this, 5th biannual **Parish Council Symposium**.

Our focus for this symposium is that of Church Growth and financial stewardship. Our speakers for this symposium will go into detail on our topics, and discuss ways in which we can begin to achieve specific goals. Today I will touch briefly upon these topics, and share with you some of my thoughts on these matters.

II.) INTRODUCTION: The Call to Godly Service:

Once a man entered a store where fine glass and chinaware were sold. Addressing the store-keeper he said, *“I would like to purchase all the glasses that you have in your store which are pitched in the musical key of ‘A.’”* The store-keeper looked amused, and said, *“My friend, I don’t buy glasses here because of their musical qualities, so I am not able to select the ones which possess the proper key you desire!”*

The man who had requested the glasses reached his hand into his pocket and took out a tuning fork. When he struck the tuning fork against the counter, every glass on the shelves that was pitched in the key of “A” immediately responded to the tuning fork with its own vibration in the key of “A.” So it is with the Christian heart -- the souls of all who are born of God -- who are ***tuned-in*** to the vibration of God’s saving grace – **will respond** when the voice of Jesus Christ calls them to devoted service. I thank you for responding to Christ’s call to His holy service. We must always remember that a church which is responsive to God’s Voice, is a healthy church -- and a healthy church is a growing church.

Indeed, as Orthodox Christians gathered here in this place, both lay and clergy, we are called to the Apostolic responsibility. We are called to **reach** the world for Jesus Christ, and to **strengthen** Christ's Body - which is His Church! Jesus told His Disciples before His ascension to the Father, "***Go into all the world and preach the Gospel!***" That is, go and tell all the world about the *good-news* of Christ's salvation for all humanity. Go, take the message to them, so that they too may have hearts receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, we gather together in order that we may be led by the Holy Spirit: so that by His leading we can **identify** ways in which to continue, in these days in which we live, **to be responsive to God's Voice and to reach the world** with the Gospel message. There is no greater responsibility – indeed, there is no greater or more wonderful privilege than to serve the Living God! For, if we are responsive to the voice of God, then we become instrumental in the building of Christ's Holy Church.

A.) **BEGINNING WITH THE PROPER FOCUS:**

In discussing matters of Christ's Church, it is imperative that we begin with the proper focus. The Church is not simply another organization. It is not the product of human reason and genius. By no means can a local church, for instance, take on the position of being a social or ethnic club and at the same time remain a vital part of the CHURCH Universal! The Church is a Divinely established living organism, for it is Christ's own Holy Body! It is a place where people go to be healed of spiritual illness.

Accordingly, we cannot think in terms of Church Growth by simply identifying methods and their application. While methods and programs often produce results, **standing alone** they are blunt instruments. When it comes to the Holy Church of Christ, methods and programs must first be **tempered** with the Gospel message of faith and hope; they must be **sharpened** with heart-felt prayer and the love of God and of our fellow man. Only then will our programs have eternal value. For, *unless God build the house, it will not stand*. Therefore, with this understanding, and its application to every word spoken on this subject, let us next consider the goal of Church Growth.

C. **THE GOAL OF GROWTH:**

1. **Bringing as many people as will heed the voice of Christ into *spiritual well-ness and oneness with God:***

What is the goal of Church Growth? I believe that when we think of Church Growth we are frequently short sighted. Too often we think in terms of (1) simple adding more people to our congregations, and/or (2) increasing the size of our church buildings. But, the real goal of Church Growth is identified in the Priestly prayer of Jesus: "***Father, may they be One, as You and I are ONE.***"^{1[1]} Just as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are ONE, so

1[1] St. John 17:21.

too Jesus wanted His disciples to share in that same relationship of *ONENESS*. Indeed, this is the salvation which Christ brings and makes available to us – union with God!

It is this same relationship of *Oeness*, of union with God, that the Resurrected Jesus tells His disciples take to all nations, when He says “*go into all the world and preach the Gospel.*” “*Go,*” Jesus says, “*and bring as many people as will heed your voice into this blessed state of union with God.*” Thus, keeping in mind what the Church is – *a place where people go to be healed of Spiritual illness in communion with God* -- we can define the goal of Church Growth as follows: **bringing as many people as will heed the voice of Christ into spiritual well-ness and oneness with God!** This is the purpose of the Church! This is the Apostolic mission! This must, therefore, be the goal of Church Growth!

III.) **CHURCH GROWTH: 4 GENERAL TYPES OF GROUPS:**

Thus, like the disciples before us, we are called to reach as many people as possible with the life-giving message of God’s love and spiritual healing! But who are the people to which we are to take this message? The answer is: ***All people who will listen!*** For purposes of focus and direction, we can identify different groups of people who will be receptive to the message of salvation - but not always receptive in the same manner. For this presentation I have identified four (4) groups of people to whom we may deliver the same message, yet with different focus.

-First, evangelism to the unchurched;

-Second, outreach the non-Orthodox “believer”;

-Third, reclamation of the lapsed Orthodox; and

-Fourth, in-reach and progressive maintenance to our current Membership.

A.) **EVANGELISM TO THE UN-CHURCHED:**

- 1.) Bringing in the Un-Churched with the message of Christ’s salvation through the Church

When we speak about the unchurched, we are talking about those persons who do not have any meaningful spiritual relationship with God and His Church. There are approximately 60 to 65 million Un-churched adults in the U.S.A.^{2[2]} Within the New Testament context we are talking about the “*evangelism*” of those who are “*lost in their sins.*” Thus, when speaking about the Un-churched we can understand Church Growth in terms of *evangelism*.

Evangelism is the *Spirit-led* communication of the gospel of the kingdom, in such a way or ways, that the recipients have a valid opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,

^{2[2]} Barna Research Group, “*One Out of Three Adults is Now Unchurched,*” (Feb. 25, 1999). (Source: Barna Research Group, Ltd., Ventura, CA) at <http://barna.org/PressOneThreeUnchurched.htm>

and become responsible members of His Church.^{3[3]} As a general rule we may think about people who have never been to church, or have only visited a church on one or more occasions. Further, within this group of people we may include those who have gone to church occasionally for events such as weddings, funerals, and special programs.^{4[4]} If we were to envision these Un-churched in terms of the Orthodox Church building itself, these would be the people who simply do not enter the Church with purpose – they are outside the doors of the Church – outside the Kingdom of God.

Are we, as members of Christ’s Church, providing Un-Churched peoples a valid opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to become responsible members of His Church? If we are within the Church, and these un-churched are outside, we must go and bring them into the Kingdom of God. We cannot simply be happy to stay within the confines of the Church building. We must go to them. Jesus did not tell His disciples to go to Jerusalem, and to stay forever in the upper room. Rather, He said “Go!”: “*Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation.*”

Now, let me ask you this: ***What is the best way to bring the Un-churched through the doors, and into a meaningful relationship with God and His Church?*** There is a way which Christ teaches us is fool-proof! At this point I am not talking about programs and methods. Rather, I am talking about the realm of spiritual truth. Christ tells us that we, as His followers, are to be “*cities upon a hill*”; “*salt which has flavor*”; “*lights of the world.*”^{5[5]} The real beginning of Church growth rests with each of us who are in the Church – especially with those of us who are church leaders. It is a time tested truth that “*the person who has no fire in himself cannot ignite others.*”

We must ask ourselves, “Are our churches turning out virtuous Christians?” More specifically, are we, each one of us, leading a life which will attract others to Christ? Are we *cities set upon a hill* shining with the light of Christ’s glorious salvation and life changing truth?

I believe that if we are, then programs and methods will have a different focus. For if the Spirit of God lives brightly in us – for all to see – people will be naturally drawn to our churches by the quiet richness of our love for God and neighbor. This is true concerning evangelism of the Un-churched, as well as all groups and subjects which we will talk about throughout this symposium.

B.) OUTREACH TO NON-ORTHODOX BELIEVERS:

- 1.) Bringing believers (non-Orthodox) into to the Fullness of the Faith.

^{3[3]} Holman Bible Dictionary (1991).

^{4[4]} Barna Research Group, “*One Out of Three Adults is Now Unchurched,*” (Feb. 25, 1999).

^{5[5]} Matthew 5:13-16.

We have seen over the last two decades an influx of Evangelical Protestants, Episcopalians, Catholics, and others into the Orthodox faith, and particularly into the Orthodox Churches of the Antiochian Archdioceses. This migration to Orthodoxy has been by people who were **Churched**, to the extent that they attended other, non-Orthodox churches. Accordingly, this exodus to Orthodoxy was comprised of people who already “believed in Christ.” They knew a great deal about the Bible and their own traditions about the Christian faith. Yet, they came to Orthodoxy, and are still coming!

Now, we **would not** necessarily use the term “evangelism” when speaking about this group of people. For they have heard the message of salvation and have responded with their hearts and souls. Yet, these people have begun a process within their same hearts and souls: they have begun to understand the truth that ***the Church is One***, and that therefore ***Her people must also be One***. We, therefore, must respond, and eagerly **reach-out** to them to bring them into the fullness of the Faith, into the blessedness of The Church!

Why? Why are these people, who already call themselves Christian, coming to the Orthodox Faith?

Because they are looking for the **fullness of the Christian Faith**, and Orthodoxy offers that fullness to the world. They have left what they have known, in order to become richer in faith and love. They love God, and His Son, Jesus Christ. But their spirits are crying out for something very important, which was missing from their lives. As Fr. Peter Gillquist once said, ***“The people who are interested in Orthodoxy today are those who fear God and seek to be righteous.”***^{6[6]} They are people who want to move away from **partial truths** to **complete Truth**.

Professor Robert Bellah, PhD., of Berkeley, himself a non-orthodox, points out what he believes to be the **weakness** of most non-Orthodox church teaching. Dr. Bellah asserts that the greatest problem is that of **radical individualism**. Which, he says, has arisen from the mistaken belief that salvation and spiritual direction are only personal matters. In his estimation, this **radical individualism** permits people:

[T]o believe that they can develop their own system of belief, and establish their own standards of behavior... [This] weakens both the church and the culture. Individual rights at the expense of group responsibility plague American culture in the late twentieth century.^{7[7]}

^{6[6]} Rev. Fr. Peter Gilquist, *“The Best Kept Secret.”* The Christian Activist. *“And I believe that as these people form the foundation of the movement to Orthodoxy, then more and more we are going to see people who are unbelievers converted to Christ.”* Found at: <http://www.tca1.org/vol3/TheBestKeptSecret1.html>

^{7[7]} Dr. Robert Bellah, *How to be the Church in a Society that Has Gained the Whole World*, Paper from the 1999 Conference held by Evangelism and Church Growth Division at Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri.. Found at: <http://www.nazarene.org/cg/research/ansr99bellah.html>

In short, *radical individualism* is the belief that one can create their own way of salvation (Jesus & me *only*), without responsibility to, or benefit of, the Church Community or its tradition. As far as Dr. Bellah is concerned this is why non-Orthodox Christianity *fails to be an effective means of redemption* in modern day America. Not only do churches fail because of this mistaken belief, but so do individuals, families, and society in general.

What is his suggestion to cure to this ill? Simply put: a return to faith centered in the **Trinity**, experienced within a **community of believers**, who collectively know themselves as the **body of Christ**, and who recognize the holiness of **sacraments!**

What Dr. Bellah recommends, whether he knows it or not, is a return to the ancient Christian faith! **Isn't this what the Orthodox Church offers to those people who are looking for direction in their Christian walk.** This is why they seek out the Orthodox Church. These people want a more vibrant and complete faith, in communion with God and His universe. They are reaching out to find the fullness of the spiritual life. Ineed, the Orthodox Christian Church is the place of cure for these folks.

If we were to picture these people in terms of the Church building, we can say that they are in the Narthex (Vestibule) of the church. They have heard the message, but have not fully entered into the Nave of the Church. They have yet fully to enter into the Worship of the Church. They are waiting to be welcomed and invited in. The central question we must ask at this symposium with respect to this issue is: *What are we doing to welcome these people into the Church?*

Basic preparation for a ministry of out-reach to these people includes:

1. Identify target faith groups. Also consider outreach to more cult type groups.
2. Identify target age groups: examples: families, children, teens, college students, elderly, etc...
3. Determine the best target areas for outreach: colleges, interfaith gatherings, Christian concerts/festivals, newspapers and other advertisement or promotional resources, putting on your own music/ethnic festivals, putting on Seminars, etc.
4. Set up programs of Bible Studies (both in homes and in Church), Youth activities, Vacation Bible School, Singles' groups, etc.

In many cases this group of persons will find us, before we find them. In such cases we must be willing to accommodate their inquires and help them in their growth in Orthodoxy. Thus, programs set up for *inquirers of the faith*, and for those who become *catechumens* are likewise essential for productive out-reach to those persons looking to become members of the One, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

C.) **RECLAMATION OF THE LAPSED ORTHODOX:**

The next two categories of people, both the *Lapsed Orthodox* and those who are in the Church, but who need to also be *reached and maintained*, are people who either are, or were, in the Church. In relationship to the church building, they have entered the Nave, at least physically, and become a visible part of the community of believers. They have worshiped with us, cried with us, celebrated with us – they are one of us. Or, at least, so we thought.

But something has happened, or hasn't happened in their experience with the Church that has affected their lives. They have either left the church, are close to leaving, or live only in the shadow of true spirituality. These two groups are very akin to each other. Thus, the things pointed out about one group may have equal application to both groups. We will deal first with the lapsed Orthodox.

1.) **Bringing back to the Church those who have Fallen away from the Church**

Many of our churches experience a turn-over in their membership. People come and people go. But right now we are talking about those persons who have been members of the Church, and then left. Often they may have had a very long term relationship with us, and then slowly they left. As someone had said, "*Church members are like automobiles--they start missing before they quit.*" Somehow they have lost touch with the Church and its life-giving mysteries. From a spiritual standpoint, They have lost a part of who they are. The following story illustrates the point:

A man had a fine canary whose song was unusually beautiful. During the summer, it seemed a shame to keep the bird inside the house all the time. So the owner placed the cage in a nearby tree for the bird to enjoy the sunshine and the fresh air. Many sparrows frequented the tree and were attracted to the cage. At first the canary was frightened, but soon enjoyed his new companions. But gradually, and almost imperceptibly, he lost the sweetness of his own song. By the end of the summer his "singing" was little more than the twitter of the sparrows. Spending his summer in the wrong environment caused the canary to lose his finest song.^{8[8]}

Those who have left the Church, more often than not, have lost their sense of identity with Christ and His Church. The song of spiritual life given them at the time of their Baptism has become confused and silent. They have lost a "piece" of themselves! They have become angry, hurt, dejected or simply fed-up. They may have left us, but in many cases, they feel we have left them.

We must deal with this situation. They are like the lost sheep in Christ's parable: the shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one. Thus, as His followers, we have a duty to try and reclaim these lost sheep. How can we begin to do this?

1. **Identify these persons:**

^{8[8]}Jerry Lock, "Church Music World" (Nov./Dec. 1985). Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 4.

First, we must identify these persons. This is by far the easiest step in the process. Our own personal knowledge, current members, as well as old membership lists are valuable sources of information.

2. **Identify the reasons for falling away:**

The next step is to identify, if possible, the reason(s) for the person's having left the Church. Again, current members will be a source of information. But, we must always beware of gossip and rumor. Go to the source – the person who has left the Church. Often times the person is only too willing to convey his or her reasons for leaving. Person to person interaction can often lead directly to resolution of the problem – and bringing them back into the fold.

However, we must also be able to see the trees from the forest. Meaning that what is often verbalized as the reason for leaving, may only be a symptom of the greater illness underlying the problem. The underlying, and often un-verbalized, problems include, but are not limited to:

- personality problems with the priest or other fellow members;
- lack of spiritual nutrition and motivation from the Church;
- lack of inclusion in the life of the church, including under-utilization of their spiritual gifts and talents;
- worldliness in their personal life, or perhaps even in the Church;
- failure to ever have real ownership of, and responsibility to, the community of believers which make up the body of Christ.

In order to get at the source of the problem you will need to develop a relationship with this person. In fact, the issue of relationship is one of the strongest factors for bringing these people back into the Church. This means letting them know how they fit into God's plan as a member of His body, and as a vital part of the local church. Moreover, it means letting them know that **you** care about them, and their perceptions. It also means that this is one of the most time consuming ministries – because it is, more often than not, a one-on-one situation.

3. **Identify the ways to bring them back**

Even once we identify the problem(s), there still remains the challenge to bring them back. This often very tough! Some problems are not very easily solved. In fact, a large portion of personal problems may not be solved at all, and the person will stay outside the Church. Personality problems, prior exclusion from Church life, and a perceived or real worldliness of the Church, are often the toughest. But we must be willing to go the full course with these people – prayerfully, cautiously, and lovingly.

4. **Follow up**

Because this is a one-on-one situation, follow-up is essential. The Christian walk is much like riding a bicycle; we are either moving forward or falling off. Some people are just waiting to be invited back to Church. Their's is an easy solution. Others, feel wronged by the Church or those in it. Thus, a process of healing – often a long process – is necessary.

D.) **IN-REACH & PROGRESSIVE MAINTENANCE OF OUR MEMBERSHIP:**

Perhaps the most overlooked area of Church Growth, is from within the Church itself! We could have actually begun with this topic in our discussion of Church Growth. For there are many people within our Churches who are there, but only in body, and not in spirit. These include those who do not enter into the fullness of God's grace. Or those who fail to fully understand and participate in the purpose of the Church.

We must ask ourselves the question: *if our own people are not energized for God, how can we possibly began to reach out to others effectively?* In fact, if our own people are not on fire for God, how can we possibly dare, with a good conscience, to begin programs to bring others into the Church! In all practicality, we must deal with this issue of ***in-reach and progressive maintenance*** first! Our own people need to be awakened.

Indeed, we can compare these people to those who are within the Nave of the Church, but who are asleep during the service. They completely, or at least partially, miss the opportunity for a relation with the Living God and His family. They fail to partake of the richness of faith in Christ. They, for one reason or another, are not on fire for God, and are very much in danger of becoming one the *Lapsed Orthodox!* We must help these people maintain their fire!

There is a story about a little girl who got home from church school, where she had been taught the verse: *Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.* She asked her mother, when she repeated the verse, what it meant.

Her mom said, *"Well, it means that when you are good and kind and thoughtful and obedient, you are letting Christ's light shine in your life before all who know you."*

The very next Sunday in Church School, the little girl got in a bit of a fight with another student and created somewhat of an uproar – to such an extent that the teacher had to go and find her mother to get her settled down a bit in the class. Her mother was concerned when she got to the classroom and said, *"Dear, don't you remember about letting your light shine for the Lord before men?"*

The girl blurted out, *"But, Mom, I think I have 'blowed' myself out."* 9[9]

Many of our people have done just that. In their relationship to Christ and His Church, their spiritual fire is out or fading fast. Not only does this lack of spiritual fire put the individual

9[9] W. Frank Harrington, *"The Love That Brought Him,"* Preaching Today, Tape No. 51.

at risk, but the local church as well. For instance, in 1993 a study was done which demonstrated that in the proceeding 20 years over 400 Christian Churches in London, England, had closed down and converted to mosques.^{10[10]} The change was due to churches dying out – the people had lost their Christian fire.

I noted earlier that it is a time tested truth that “*the person who has no fire in himself cannot ignite others.*” However, it is equally true that “*all it takes is a spark to start a fire.*” The spark is the Holy Spirit, the fuel is the human heart. Our churches are full of people waiting to be *ignited*. But we must, ourselves, first be on fire for Christ, so that others can catch the same spiritual fire. This means that we must both **reach into** and **progressively maintain** our congregations.

In-reach and ***Progressive maintenance*** of our congregations means that we focus our attention on the **things which enhance the growth** within the church, and **remove anything that inhibits such growth**. In many of His parables Christ uses the image of the sower (gardener or farmer) whose efforts at planting produce various results -- including producing up to one-hundred fold.

We are to be like this good worker of the earth who plants seed. But within our churches we must not only be faithful to plant spiritual seeds of ministry: we must also water, fertilize and provide ample opportunities for the sun to shine on our ministries. Additionally, we must also remove the weeds and bugs that can destroy these ministries.

In-reach and ***maintenance*** to our people includes giving ample opportunity for spiritual growth and health. Thus, such ***in-reach*** and ***progressive maintenance*** should include:

- 1.) Bringing those in the Church, simply out of habit, culture, or a sense of family obligation, into a vital and living faith in Jesus Christ;
- 2.) Bringing those in the Church, whose spiritual gifts are un-utilized or under-utilized, more into the center of Church life, and giving them opportunity to fully realize their God ordained gifts;
- 3.) Bringing all persons in the Church into more defined roles in synergy with their spiritual gift(s), especially identifying those who can actively serve in the areas of evangelism/outreach/reclamation/progressive maintenance;
- 4.) Be actively removing the problems (weeds and bugs) in our ministries, including:
 - a. Making our programs **God centered**, rather than egocentric (ego-centered/self-centered) or ethnocentric (culturally-centered);

^{10[10]} Charisma, 11/93. "To Verify," Leadership.

- b. Enabling our leadership to both minister and **equip** others to be leaders and minister;
- c. Prayerfully moving our services and programs from mere events into **a relation building process** (both with God and each other);
- d. Training our people to be **contributors** rather than consumers of our ministries.

I am sure we can think of many other things to add to the list. But the point is this: unless we first do *in-reach* and *maintain* the Spirit of God in our people and our current ministries, we will not likely be effective in reaching out to others.

IV.) **STEWARDSHIP:**

The issue of stewardship, and especially of tithing, is perhaps one of the hardest to approach. Yet, it is essential to the issue of Church Growth and out-reach. In general, our people have good and generous hearts. However, they do not wish to *commit* themselves to specific giving – they too often fail see themselves as stewards of God’s Holy Church. There is a story which illustrates the difficulty of the issue.

It is about a man of wealth who was approached to contribute to a Church’s urgent need. The urgent need and compelling case were stated, and the call was made for his support.

The man responded: *"I understand why you think I can give fifty thousand dollars. I am a man with my own successful business and, it is true, I have all the signs of affluence. But there are some things you don't know. For instance, did you know that my mother is in an expensive nursing home?"*

"Well, no, we didn't know," the man from the church said sheepishly.

"Did you know also that my brother died, and left a family of five and had almost no insurance?"

"No, we didn't know that either." responded, the now, red-faced man.

"Did you know my son is deeply religious, has gone into social work, and makes less than the national poverty level to meet the needs of his family?"

"No, we hadn't realized ..." stammered the man as he nervously glanced down at his shoes.

"Well, then," the man of wealth retorted, "*if I don't give any of them a penny, why do you think I'll give any to you?*" 11[11]

Unfortunately, this too often represents the reaction of our own people who have been asked to give of their resources. Still, we are *all* called to be godly stewards of Christ and His Church. Just as God has given us all things, we are to do likewise and to *give cheerfully*, "*For God loves a Cheerful Giver!*". 12[12] Thus, although the matter may be hard to face, we would be negligent in our duties to Christ, and his people, if we fail to deal with this issue head-on!

A *steward* is defined as "*a person who manages another's property or financial affairs; one who administers anything as the agent of another or others; a person who has charge of the household of another, buying or obtaining food, directing the servants.*" A person is not made a steward over their own property, but the property of another.

Simply stated, the *doctrine of stewardship*, as taught by Christ, means that our money, every penny, comes from God. Thus, a person's duty is to return as much as possible during his lifetime. From this perspective, "*he who dies rich - dies disgraced,*" as Andrew Carnegie declared.

Not only our money, but our time, our breath, our very life, all that we have – has been given to us by God. Except that God has given it to us, we would have nothing! Our Archdiocese's Department of Stewardship's pamphlet, entitled, "*Standing Ready to Serve,*" makes the same point:

Life is a gift from God. All that we have in this life is part of that gift. Stewardship reinforces this belief and reminds us that our time, talents, and resources are the gifts through which we show our love and appreciation to God.

Stuart E. Jacobson has published a book called *The Art of Giving*. Whether or not one has read the book, the title is interesting and makes a point. Indeed, the Bible suggests that there is an art to giving: "*Let him [who gives] do it with simplicity.*" 13[13] Why, then, is the issue of stewardship, and especially tithing, such a hard one?

Perhaps it is because our people do not understand that they are of *infinite value to God* and are a vital part of the *stewardship of His Holy Church*. Perhaps they have forgotten that *the Church is not just another charity*, but the source of our salvation and the Mother of our souls.

11[11] Donald E. Messer, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) pp. 239-240. Edited slightly for affect.

12[12] 2 Cor. 9:7.

13[13] Romans 12:18, KJV.

Too often, I fear, the church is looked upon as just another organization, rather than the living, contemporary, and active Body of Christ! The Church is not something from the past – it is alive – right now – and filled – right now – with the Holy Spirit of God, and every good gift from Heaven!

Thus, our approach to stewardship and tithing must be begin by educating ourselves and our people *of the Biblical aspect of giving*. Only by this education can our people respond faithfully. This must include, as noted by our own Ron Nicola in *Stewardship: A Future Vision*: 14[14]

- a. To teach that everything comes from God. God is truly Sovereign and everything, our time, our abilities, and all of our possessions, are derived from His gracious gifts.
- b. To teach Christians how to properly use God’s gracious gifts. “*We are but stewards of these for a time . . . we will have to give an accounting. This means one-hundred percent of our treasure! Our accountability is not for one, two, or ten percent of God’s gifts, but for the full measure.*” 15[15]
- c. To insure the development of each and every Orthodox Christian. Towards this purpose, a program of stewardship should be implemented which teaches and encourages the giving of time, talents, and resources (all given to us by God in the first place), and to use these as stewards of the world He (God) created.

Moreover, we must help develop within our congregations a true sense of the vision of *what the Church is!* Throughout the history of Orthodoxy the Church has been know as:

- a. The *Body of Christ*;
- b. The *Ark of our Salvation*;
- c. Our *Mother*, who gives us life;
- d. The fountain of the *living waters* which causes us to grow with spiritual life;

among many other and equally beautiful images. For instance, St. John Chrysostom, in stressing the importance of having a true sense of the Church, said:

14[14] *The Word*, June, 1983. Pp. 31-33. May also be found at:
<http://www.antiochian.org/Midwest/articles/StewardshipAFutureVision.htm>

15[15] Quoting David Crockett from a sermon called, “*Grace, Freedom and Stewardship.*” (reprinted in *Jesus, Dollars and Sense*, Oscar C. Carr, Jr., Editor).

*Your hope is the Church alone: your salvation is inside the Church only, your refuge is the Church. She is **higher than the heavens, and wider than the whole earth.** She **never grows old, but is always full of vigor and vitality.** Holy Scripture, when pointing to her strength and stability, calls her **an unshakable mountain.***

Our people need to take these truths into their hearts, before they will respond to them. I believe that only then will they begin to understand their role of steward: Not merely stewardship as a duty, but as a privilege from God. They will know that stewardship is truly a way in which we show our love and appreciation to God for the wonderful gift of life, which is made complete in the Church.

V.) ***FINAL ANALYSIS: Setting Faith Goals & Fighting the good fight.***

In the final analysis, the key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will be that of its **internal health**. Thus, to a great extent, the most important question is not what will make our churches grow, as much as **“what is keeping our churches from growing?”** Like all living organisms, God has designed the church to grow all by itself. If we are responsive to God, then our churches will be internally healthy -- filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit – and they will grow!

Our’s must be an Orthodoxy that is living, contemporary and relevant to the culture within which it was found. Accordingly, effort on our part – which means working in synergy with God – is essential! We must begin to set plans for the future direction of the Church. We need to set faith visions for our churches as we enter into this new millennium. We can no longer be happy to sit by and hope our church survives. It is a truth worth noting that, *“he who fails to plan, plans to fail.”*

We must be spiritual men and woman who are responsive to God’s voice. A healthy church is a spiritual church. A spiritually healthy church is a growing church. The Church is not a business, it is a divinely living organism – the Body of Christ.

Perhaps you could implement programs which do not have any spiritual focus at all, and still draw people into you church. But will such *“spirit-less programs”* change peoples lives? We need to understand that we are not here to involve ourselves in a *numbers game* – that is, we are not here **just** to add more people to our parish roles. Rather, we are involved in a life and death struggle for the human soul.

Yes, methods and programs for church growth and stewardship have their place. However, unless the people who are implementing the programs are responsive to the Spirit and Love of God, programs will eventually fail. I believe that only when we are on fire for Christ:

- when we are people of Christian faith and virtue;
- who live and breath the precepts of the Church;

- who are in a constant struggle against sin and selfishness;
- who not only participate in, but live the Liturgical Life of the Church;
- who love God and neighbor more than self;
- and, who have become fearless by the leading of the Holy Spirit of God;

then, and only then, will we reach the world for Christ. In fact, not only will we reach the world, but we will change the world by the dynamic power and love of God through the Church of Jesus Christ.

May God, by His mighty power, equip us to respond to His Calling, and transform the world with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; whose name is blessed, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. AMEN!
