

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults
Saint Mary Orthodox Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts

By Danielle Xanthos

Saint Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts is a diverse, vibrant, and unique community led by Father Antony Hughes. An exploration of the young adult population was conducted through the interview of both young and seasoned generations, as well as leaders and general parishioners. As this community is highly active in academia, and observations for this report were made during the demanding time of finals, holidays, and the start to a new semester, a variation of reports may be found at another time.

St. Mary's is a particularly interesting case study regarding young adults. While there is a high percentage of people 18 to 29 years old (well over 25 percent on a typical Sunday Divine Liturgy), there are no specific ministries targeted for this age group. Instead, ministries tend to be open to all, such as the national ministry of the Fellowship of Saint John the Divine. This Orthodox parish was selected based on the consistent attendance of young people, their knowledge of their faith, and the integral role they play in the St. Mary's community. It is common in ethnic Orthodox parishes to find a significant gap in liturgical attendance between the ages 18-29. St. Mary's is an example by which other Orthodox churches may evaluate the use of language, time of worship, and intent of ministry in their parishes.

Unity in Diversity

In order to better understand diversity in the context of this community, it is necessary to note unique aspects of Orthodox Christianity. In tandem with unity, the Orthodox Faith encompasses a great variety of regional customs and traditions. Centers of Early Christianity emerged from the very beginning of Apostolic times through the fifth century. These centers, known as the "pentarchy" or five sees, are regions of significant events and influential teachers, including Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. As the Christian world expanded, regions of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa received the faith. As a result of the high influx of Eastern European and Middle Eastern immigration to the United States in the 19th century, Orthodox communities in America tend to maintain, to various degrees, their ethnic background. For this reason, Greek, Arab, Russian, Serbian, Albanian, Ukrainian, Romanian, and Bulgarian Orthodox churches exist in America, yet it is important to note the unity among these nationalities as the one Orthodox Church. In addition, a reported 23 percent of Orthodox Christians in America are converts. (Pew: US Religious Landscape) Considering the diversity within Orthodoxy, this report on the young adult population of St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church cannot be considered a typical portrait of Orthodox parishes, but a lively tile in the mosaic of Orthodoxy.

History of the Community

The community of St. Mary's was founded in 1928 by Syrian immigrants who eventually purchased a Boston school building and converted it into a church. Until the arrival of Fr. John von Holzhausen in 1945, services were predominantly in Arabic. The task of Fr. John was to introduce English into the liturgical life of the church. By 17 years after St. Mary's founding, the common language had become English. The switch to English was quite revolutionary in the ethnic Orthodox parish of the 1940's and resulted in an increased attendance in young people. The community accepted the reality that the young people were no longer immigrants, but mostly first generation English-speaking Americans. Due to continual growth, the community purchased and consecrated the current Cambridge church building in 1954. The tall-steeped white church is still ornamented with brilliant pre-Civil War stained glass and solid oak pews.

Cambridge is home to about 105,000 people (U.S. Census), and along with its neighboring city of Boston, home to over 250,000 students. St. Mary's is located in the very heart of Cambridge, approximately a mile from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University. Students can easily access St. Mary's with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) by subway or bus. From MIT, travel is an 8-minute bus ride down Massachusetts Avenue. Harvard University students may travel on the Red Line from Central Square Station to Harvard Square, reaching the doors of St. Mary's in just seven minutes. Easy accessibility for college and graduate students is a major advantage contributing to the vibrant young adult population of St. Mary's.

While Cambridge is heavily populated with students, there is also a great prevalence of homelessness. It is difficult to walk a block without being asked for change. It is not unusual for a homeless person to come through the doors of St. Mary's during coffee hour. Some members of the community engage in conversation while others remain distant, illustrating an ambivalent attitude toward homelessness in Cambridge. One young adult notes walking along Massachusetts Avenue after a service during which red roses were distributed by the clergy. A short distance from the church, a homeless person was holding a rose given to him by a parishioner.

Services and Statistics

The evening prayer service of Great Vespers is held every Saturday at 5pm, with the option to have the sacrament of confession at 6 pm or by appointment. Each Sunday from September through June the morning prayer service of Orthros begins at 8:45am, followed by Divine Liturgy at 10am. During the months of July and August, Orthros begins at 8:15 am, followed by Divine Liturgy at 9:45 am. On the eve of feast days of the Church, vesperal liturgies are held at 6:30 pm. This is a pragmatic solution to schedule conflicts of weekday morning services, provided by the blessing of the Antiochian Archdiocese. Typically, an estimated 20 people are in attendance at vesperal liturgies.

On Holy Saturday [the day before Easter Sunday] morning the church is filled with young people. At this time, catechumens are baptized at St. Mary's. In the past there have been as many as 25 people received into the Orthodox Church on Holy Saturday. The church seats 500 on the floor level and 250 on the balcony. There are currently 137 pledging families, though many others who are not "members" attend services. On a typical Sunday, an average of 250 attend Liturgy. On a particular Sunday prior to the spring academic semester, of the 154 people in attendance, 38, or 25 percent, were young adults. As recorded by leadership observation, growth in the past five years has flourished. Thirteen people are currently enrolled in the catechism class. Fr. Antony reports, "The people coming in are young, and many of them are not Orthodox."

While twenty-three nationalities have been represented among the faithful, English is recognized as the common language of the community. In a multi-ethnic and pan-Orthodox parish, the use of English allows young people to understand and learn the faith through liturgical life. While the majority of prayers and hymns are in English, there is use of Arabic, Greek, and, to a lesser extent, other languages.

Growth of Young Adult Attendance

A parishioner since 1980, Charlie M., shares his experience of moving from New Jersey to Boston as an undergraduate at MIT. He admits being advised not attend St. Mary's on account of a weak young adult ministry. He attended St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church of Boston, located in West Roxbury. While he attended with friends, this was a tedious commute. Citing a change in public transportation services, Charlie began riding his bike to St. Mary's just as the newly assigned Fr. Gregory Phalen set a welcoming environment. Charlie recalls only three college students attending at the time, though as Fr. Gregory's mission to preach the gospel gained momentum, there was a greater desire and capacity to learn what it means to be Orthodox. A catechumen class was developed and the tone of the parish became one of sharing the Orthodox faith, not only with newcomers, but also with those who had been baptized during infancy.

This rebuilding of the community marked the start of the young adult ministry. Charlie reflects on the great impact Fr. Gregory had on him, the community, and the other young people. As a convert, Fr. Gregory preached the gospel in a way that had a different character. He focused on attracting young people, recognizing the need to show an interest in them. For young people raised in religious community, college often marks a time in life in which church attendance is no longer an obligation but a conscious decision. Charlie recalls thinking as a college student, "If you come to church and hear a good message, you'll keep coming back." Fr. Gregory seemed to recognize this, and valuing the Sunday morning of college students, he put great effort into his ministry. Fr. Gregory's ministry is marked by a reestablishment of liturgical life, a high percentage of young adults attending Saturday vespers, the celebration of vesperal liturgies, allowing people to attend services without conflicts of their work day, and an increase in celebrating feast days. The changes brought lasting effects of growth in understanding services and traditions.

Fr. Gregory provided the Harvard University chapter of the Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) with a chaplain. The OCF is a nationwide collegiate campus ministry organization under the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and South America. OCF provides Orthodox Christian college students with the opportunity to grow in faith and friendship through prayer, service, and fellowship. From the time of Fr. Gregory's death in 1989, Fr. Alexis Khoury continued the campus ministry of OCF, as well as starting a new chapter at MIT with Charlie and his wife. By 1990, there were six OCF chapters in Boston, at Tufts University, Northeastern University, Boston University, Boston College, Harvard and MIT.

In 1993, Fr. Antony Hughes was assigned to St. Mary's. Fr. Antony was chaplain of the OCF chapters at both MIT and Harvard. With a great number of colleges and universities, as well as Orthodox parishes of various jurisdictions, many young people have been exposed to the pan-Orthodox spirit of the area. OCF gives students the opportunity to experience both the diversity and unity of the Orthodox faith. After six years of this service, Fr. Antony resigned from his duties as OCF chaplain, explaining, "When students started coming to church, I realized this is where I can really do the ministry to the college students." At this point in the 1990's, approximately 20 college students were attending services at St. Mary's regularly.

Ministering to the Cambridge community, a highly educated and motivated setting, it is beneficial for the leaders of the parish to have knowledge of academia. Fr. Antony is passionate about learning. With a degree in sociology, he highly appreciates and incorporates the fields of psychology and neuroscience into his ministry. Drawing on modern psychology and meditation, he lights up when speaking about dialectical behavior therapy, unconditional positive regard, and mindfulness practices. An empirical understanding of young adults informs the unique way in which he ministers to them. He recognizes the unique needs of the young people who come into the community, "Different people are at different places in their lives," he observes.

Mindfulness practices emphasize the experience of the present moment to be crucial in our overall human experience. Fr. Antony applies this in ministry in order to "meet the need that presents itself." By incorporating concepts such as mindfulness into his sermons and connecting them with the teachings of examples, such as St. Isaac the Syrian and St. Gregory Palamas, he invites young people to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ as relevant to the world in which we live. In doing so, he encourages awareness of the presence of God in every single moment of their lives. Contrary to what many young people assume, Fr. Antony believes, "There is nothing more relevant than the Gospel of Jesus Christ," but it must be preached and lived. He shares, "I teach a very practical spirituality, and that's what young people crave." The community of St. Mary's does not fear the secular world. Instead, they embrace it through the filter of their Orthodox faith.

Finances

The late 1990's marked a low point in parish finances. At this time, dues were no longer required and a new stewardship program was enacted. This program was based on the individual or family's ability. As a result, St. Mary's experienced a great increase in pledges, which significantly helped the financial stability of the community. This change was based on scriptural teachings of offering according to ability. To date, the community does not spend a great amount, as it relies mostly on volunteer work. In fact, the budget information contains no expenses for young adult ministry. Income circulates through stewardship donations and hall rentals, which help to offset costs. According to the 2012 annual budget report, the actual income was \$53, 889.

Change

As more young people began to regularly attend services in the 1990's, the older Syrian generation questioned the seriousness of young adults regarding their faith and community. Transition occurred with the forming of the Fellowship of St. John the Divine. Young adults took a great stride in immersing themselves in the community when dozens of young people attended a parish council meeting asking, "We're here to serve you. What is it that we can do?" The young generation took on the work the older generation had been doing each Sunday for 50 years. It simply began when the older generation asked the young group to put the chairs away after coffee hour. This offering of service allowed the older people to recognize the readiness of the young people to contribute to their Church. The older ethnic generation embraces and educates the young people through their faithful practice of the Orthodox Tradition.

Program Philosophy

The spirit of tradition lives through a personal relationship between generations. Transition of leadership is passed down in a unique way through education concerning both the history and ethnicity of the parish. Through the liturgical life, coffee hour, community meals, and various other events, young people offer their service to the older generation. There are no ministries specific to young adults at St. Mary's. This is reflective of the community's unique interconnectedness between and among generations. Young adults are involved in various capacities of church life, in contrast to the common assumption that age dictates one's role in the community. Age-specific programs do not fit the life of St. Mary's. Fr. Antony reasons, "It is the organic life of the community... the program is at work all the time; It's the love of the community."

Programs are not limited to particular age groups, but are open to all. The Fellowship of Saint John the Divine, a program of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, is focused on the unity, missions, outreach, evangelism and spiritual renewal of members. Through the Fellowship, the community comes together to participate in the liturgical life in numerous ways: by reading the Epistle, holding the Communion cloth and blessed bread, greeting parishioners and visitors as they enter the church, sponsoring coffee hour, cleaning the hall, organizing meals for College Students' Welcome Back, Meatfare

Sunday, Palm Sunday, and Easter, organizing the Father John vonHolzhausen lecture series, organizing potluck dinners following Pre-Sanctified Liturgies throughout Lent, and decorating the hall and Church for Feast Days. (Church Web site, "Fellowship")

The surrounding community of Cambridge is active in social outreach. This is an interest that is infused within the individuals of the church. Considering the Syrian ethnic background of the parish, the community of St. Mary's honors a great sensitivity to political outreach. Young community members are socially conscious and provide outreach to a local battered women's shelter, Open Door Ministry (a ministry of Holy Resurrection Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Allston, MA through which dinners are served, with dignity, to the hungry), training to serve the Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry with Deacon Jeff, and through the International Orthodox Christian Charities and the Orthodox Christian Mission Center. Through these outreach ministries, there is an awareness of what Fr. Antony describes as, "traditions and transitions."

Influence of Orthodox Youth, Camp, and College Ministries

The active young people at St. Mary's are highly influenced by youth and college ministries. Many young people come to St. Mary's because of their experience of the Orthodox network of camp ministry. During the 1990's and 2000's, Fr. Antony was highly active with Antiochian Village, camp ministry of Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America located in Bolivar, Pennsylvania. His role as clergy at the camp made a significant impact on many campers who have now grown to young adulthood. Through Antiochian Village, many young people are familiar with Fr. Antony and the community of St. Mary's. This has been instrumental in attracting young adults to the parish. In recent years, Fr. Antony has served the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston Summer Camp in Contoocook, New Hampshire.

Young Orthodox people are exposed to St. Mary's through other programs such as CrossRoad, a summer institute for high school juniors and seniors located on the campus of Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts. During the CrossRoad program, participants are exposed to the diversity of Orthodoxy by visiting parishes of all Orthodox jurisdictions throughout the Boston area. During the past summer's visit to St. Mary's, participants celebrated vespers, followed by Fr. Antony's sharing of his own journey, as a Southern Baptist, toward Orthodoxy.

Exposure to St. Mary's also occurs through participation of parishioners and clergy at various OCF programs such as College Conference and Real Break. College Conference brings hundreds of Orthodox students together at Antiochian Village and Saint Nicholas Ranch in California annually. In the past, Fr. Antony has presented workshops at College Conference. His workshop on meditation drew over a hundred students. He plans to continue to attend the Conference in coming years. Real Break provides college students the opportunity to experience the world through service and learning in Greece, Alaska, Romania, Guatemala, Jerusalem, Constantinople, El

Salvador, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, among others. At the time of this writing, St. Mary's is working to build a church and tend to an orphanage in El Salvador.

Clergy from around the country encourage their young people to attend services at St. Mary's. Involvement of clergy and parishioners in ministries of the Orthodox world has allowed St. Mary's to become a well-known parish throughout the country. However, because of the large percentage of students, the young adult population has a transient nature. Each year, college and graduate students complete their programs, often leaving the Boston area, and new students are welcomed.

Transience of Young People

Adam M., a college freshman, expresses this phenomenon of transience as an attribute that encourages the "different flavor" of St. Mary's. There is a constant rotation of young people each year and due to this, St. Mary's provides "a different feel at any given time by the different people who are there." He describes this as potentially good or bad. There is a danger of new members taking on too much responsibility without learning the dynamics of the community, yet it also provides the community with new ideas. Adam, whose family converted to Orthodoxy when he was two years old, grew up attending St. Mary's until moving at the age of twelve. He returned to Boston to attend college and chose to make St. Mary's his home parish once again. St. Mary provides a great opportunity for learning Byzantine chant and for his study of liturgics. Adam chants during Orthros and, as a subdeacon, serves in the Divine Liturgy each Sunday.

Growth and Salvation as an Ongoing Process

Fr. Antony strives to provide a place for young people where "it's safe to be who they are." There is a pastoral, as opposed to legalistic, approach in the ministry of the parish. The uniqueness of each person is honored and the spiritual growth of each person is cultivated. In depicting this, Fr. Antony paraphrases St. Gregory of Nyssa, "The only sin is failure to grow." (Danielou, p. 60) St. Gregory tells of St. Paul's continual growth toward God, "Paul does not let the graces he has obtained become the limit of his desire, but he continues to go on and on, never ceasing his ascent." The environment of St. Mary embraces this constant process of growth of which the fourth century saint speaks.

This sentiment is recognized by the young people of the parish. Steven P., a recent graduate of Harvard graduate studies in philosophy, characterizes the community by its "striving toward complete love for everyone and everything." He goes on to explain how an attitude of openness towards the truth is fostered at St. Mary's, but this truth is not a "stabilized system" by which one declares, "Finally, I've arrived."

Steven explains, "Truth is always challenging you in an uncomfortable way." While attending St. Mary's, he has come to understand, "Christianity is love and openness, but not in a way that is easy... it's a lot more difficult than following a set of rules." In his own spiritual journey, Steven recognizes his imperfection. Through Fr. Antony's

sermons and his own academic pursuits in philosophy and theology, Steven has reflected a greater understanding of Orthodoxy since his conversion as a college freshman in 2005.

Oftentimes, he observes a zealous enthusiasm in the newly Orthodox that wanes when “things get tough.” He notes that a possible cause of this may be due to idealization and idolization of a faith rather than genuine desire for transformation. At St. Mary’s, Steven says, the faithful are challenged to “approach the Word with a sense of awe and wonder, even in the most insignificant...and dark moments of life.” He appreciates the challenge to “open your eyes to see the beauty of the world.”

Fellowship

St. Mary’s provides a community of fellowship that extends beyond official Church events. Whether watching a Patriots game together or sharing an apartment, young adults find friendships in the warm environment. Tom P., a 27-year-old high school teacher, describes the young people of St. Mary’s as “down-to-earth; they like to have fun but are also very serious about their religion.” Tom was raised Episcopalian until the age of 7, when his family converted. While living in Boston during the 1970’s, decades prior to his conversion to Orthodoxy, Tom’s father had visited St. Mary’s during Holy Week. Tom attributes his choice to continue attending St. Mary’s to the liturgical practices of the kiss of peace, the warmth of Fr. Antony, and the network of people, both young and old. As a member of the Fellowship of St. John the Divine, Tom shares in the various events organized by the group. These events cultivate a sense of fellowship through coffeehouse events, talent shows, and decorating the Church. He is also involved in teaching the Sunday Church School.

There are various key elements of the community that people like Tom find appealing. Among those is the approachability of Fr. Antony. Each morning Fr. Antony sends a daily text message of inspiration and thought from various fields such as theology, psychology, or literature. Another key element is the diversity that reaches many levels. The great variety of professionals allows young people to develop relationships with mentors who have similar interests and careers. The diversity of people includes those from Syrian, Romanian, Ethiopian, Russian, Greek, Lebanese, Palestinian, Italian, and Eritrean people. Taking the opportunity to sit at one of the many vibrant tables during coffee hour exposes young people to unique stories of different lives, from which much can be gained. Through these relationships the diversity of the world is witnessed in the unity of Orthodoxy.

As a graduate student of Social Work at Boston College, Jerred E. reflects on his journey through Orthodoxy. Jerred was baptized into Orthodoxy in Wichita, Kansas, during his infancy; however, his family soon moved a two-hour distance from an Orthodox Church. While growing up in Indiana, he explored different churches with his Protestant friends. In his adolescence, Jerred began to learn about Orthodoxy through the camp ministry of Antiochian Village, where he met Fr. Antony. Antiochian Village provided Jerred with an Orthodox setting that he could not experience within a two-hour

drive from home. He continued to grow in his faith through Antiochian Village until attending college at Purdue University, where he was involved in OCF. During college, Jerred kept in contact with Fr. Antony through weekly phone calls and care packages.

As a child, Jerred considered the ordained priesthood. Fr. Antony was open to dialogue about the priesthood while honoring Jerred's freedom to decide his own path. He came to realize his priestly vocation was outside of the ordained priesthood. Learning about eastern practices of martial arts and meditation, Jerred shares the words of French Eastern Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement, "Not a blade of grass grows outside the Church." Jerred's interests lie in mindfulness-based therapy, stating, "To be mindful is to be present... God is in the moment." He relates his study of mindfulness to the practice of Orthodoxy, recognizing "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Emphasizing the impacts this understanding has on the way in which one chooses to live right now, he explains that the Kingdom of Heaven is happening here and now, as a process.

Dena F. was baptized Catholic and grew up in a Protestant mega-church in California. She was introduced to Orthodoxy by a friend in high school, and is continuing her journey toward the Orthodox Church as a catechumen. After college she lived in Bulgaria for a year, where she began attending the Divine Liturgy every Sunday. She is currently living in Cambridge as a Ph. D. student of English at Harvard University. Upon moving to the Boston area, Orthodox friends suggested she attend St. Mary's, where she quickly felt welcomed,

"I definitely felt way more at home and part of the community when I walked in," she says. "I could have gone to another Orthodox church in the area, but I wouldn't find this sort of network of people who are studying what I am studying." Dena feels comfortable and at home, instead of feeling like an outsider.

Having only been to Greek and Bulgarian churches, she has an appreciation for the slightly different style of the Antiochian parish. As a young person attending St. Mary's with the intention of converting to Orthodoxy, Dena appreciates the mix of old and new generations. The older generation provides wisdom and experience to guide young people toward a healthy and balanced faith.

The first sermon Dena heard at St. Mary's was Fr. Antony speaking against fundamentalism. As a convert himself, Fr. Antony is aware of the "traps that people can fall into" during their conversion into the Church. In that same sermon, he spoke against superstition, which often has a stronghold in more ethnic populations. She feels, "I can be myself in this environment."

As a Ph.D student, Dena is encouraged by Fr. Antony's words, "Our theology is expansive and dynamic and not afraid of knowledge. As long as our message to the world is reactionary, then we will be afraid of knowledge." Encouraging young people to challenge the common belief that faith and our modern world are in opposition, she recalls the sermon as saying, "Orthodoxy offers so much to postmodern culture."

Emphasizing metanoia, she quotes Fr. Antony, “Repentance is to change one’s mind; Fundamentalism is incompatible with metanoia.”

Entering into the St. Mary’s community from a Greek Orthodox background was challenge, at first, for Jenelle M., a young Boston optometrist. Initially focused on the high use of English and more western-style iconography, she felt distant from the service. However, over time, the acceptance and welcome into the community allowed her to experience the parish in a different way. With the service in English, even for a modern Greek-speaker, she was better able to connect spiritually as she understood the service on a different level. She notes the consistency of attendance. A relatively high percentage of young people attend Orthros prior to the Divine Liturgy. Young adults accounted for 30 percent of attendance for the morning service. Throughout the year, a comparable number of people are present during Holy Week service as compared to attendance on a typical Sunday. In many ethnic churches, this is not the case. The colloquial term “Chreaster,” used to describe those who attend church only on Christmas and Easter, simply does not apply to St. Mary’s. There is a great consistency that displays a genuine worship in the life of St. Mary’s.

While St. Mary’s provides an example of successful ministry, it is important to recognize the uniqueness of the Cambridge area. The transience of the young people allow those of ethnic Orthodox backgrounds to freely practice their faith in a pan-Orthodox way. Each interview credited Fr. Antony as a great influence in the consistent attendance of young adults. He leads his community by example of love and awareness of the Gospel through the warmth he provides to all. This community exhibits the importance of faith, fellowship, unity, and diversity.

This case study of St. Mary’s provides an example of an Orthodox parish in which a population is booming. Further studies of young people in other Orthodox communities would allow for a greater understanding of why young people choose to remain, leave, or enter the Church. Considering the great student population, one might question where the other Orthodox students may be. Further studies as to why Orthodox students choose not to attend church services regularly would provide insight for the Church’s outreach to young people.

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