
Direction of Youth Ministry

October 29, 2024
Parent University



Introduction

- Voula Ortega
- Youth Director
- BA in English/Secondary Education from Aurora University
- MBA from Aurora University
- Raised in Aurora, IL
- Lives in North Aurora
- Married in 2021
- Parishioner of Saint Athanasios since before birth
- Mom to Leo (puppy), Ezekiel (1) and a baby girl on the way!

Today's Discussion

- Overview of Saint Athanasios Youth Ministries
- Purpose of Youth Ministry
- Current trends affecting Orthodox youth
- Challenges faced by Youth Ministries
- Goals and Objectives of Youth Ministries
- Implementation Plan





Youth Ministries at Saint Athanasios

- **JOY**
 - grades kindergarten to 5th
- **Jr. GOYA**
 - grades 6th to 8th
- **GOYA**
 - grades High School
- **College Ministry**
 - High School graduates and College students



Ministry Focus

What is the vision of the Parish?

“That all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” - 1 Timothy 2:4

What is the vision of Youth Ministry?

“That all, including and especially youth and young adults, should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.”

What are the goals?

- 1) Our Salvation i.e. the people already within His Church
- 2) Our Neighbor's Salvation i.e. those not yet in His Church
- 3) Truly knowing Christ
- 4) Truly knowing ourselves in Christ



Why “including and especially”?

- Youth and young adults are the current generation
- Focusing on them helps develop leaders who will continue and expand upon religious traditions and values
- Youth and young adults often face unique challenges that are important to address in religious contexts
- Engaging youth and young adults increases their involvement and commitment to religious activities and brings them closer to Christ
- Involving youth encourages open dialogue between generations, improving mutual understanding and communication
- Ultimately, focusing on them ensures that they are saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth



The stats

- In 2011, the Barna Group published *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*.
- Authors surveyed young adult Christians, between the ages of 18 and 29, and found that 59% of young Christians report that they've dropped out of attending Church after going regularly.
 - Roughly 60% of Christians are falling away from the Church as they enter young adulthood despite being connected during their teenage years.



The stats

- Generally, Orthodox Christianity in the U.S. tends to have an older demographic compared to some other Christian traditions.
- The percentage of Orthodox Christians under 35 may be estimated to be relatively small, possibly in the range of 20-30%, based on trends in similar religious communities (Pew Research Center).



How should the
Orthodox Church think
about Youth Ministry?





Current trends affecting Orthodox youth

- **Secularism and Cultural Pressures**
 - Society often promotes values that conflict with Orthodox Christian teachings, such as individualism, materialism, and relativism.
- **Social Media and Digital Distractions**
 - The overwhelming presence of social media and technology can consume time and attention, leading to a diminished focus on spiritual growth.
- **Peer Pressure and Identity Confusion**
 - Pressure to fit in with their peers, especially in environments where Christianity or religious beliefs may be seen as outdated or irrelevant.



Current trends affecting Orthodox youth

- **Moral Relativism and Ethical Challenges**
 - Orthodox youth struggle to uphold clear moral standards when it comes to issues like sexuality, substance abuse, relationships, reproductive rights, environmental/climate and honesty.
- **Busy Schedules and Overcommitment**
 - With the demands of school, extracurricular activities, sports, and work, youth struggle to prioritize their spiritual lives. Regular attendance at church services, youth groups, and time for personal prayer are be pushed aside due to overwhelming schedules.



Current trends affecting Orthodox youth

- **Navigating Interfaith and Intercultural Environments**
 - As they live in increasingly diverse societies, Orthodox youth may face challenges in interfaith settings, such as schools or social circles. They may feel misunderstood, isolated, or conflicted about how to express their faith while respecting other cultures and religions.
- **Doubts and Questions About Faith**
 - Orthodox Christian youth have questions or doubts about their faith, Church traditions, and theology. Without proper guidance, these doubts can lead to disengagement from their faith or a weakening of their belief in God.



Current trends affecting Orthodox youth

- **Mental Health Issues**

- Anxiety, depression, and stress are rising among young people today. Orthodox youth struggle to reconcile their mental health challenges with their faith or feel unsure of how to seek support within the Church for these issues.

- **Religious Indifference or Apathy**

- Orthodox youth feel indifferent or disconnected from their faith because of a lack of engagement, spiritual depth, or understanding of the significance of Church teachings. This can lead to a sense of apathy toward their spiritual development.



Challenges faced by Youth Ministries

- **Busy Schedules:** Involvement in school, sports, extracurricular activities, and part-time jobs
- **Drop-Off In Teen Years:** Youth struggle with a lot during their teen years, and sometimes don't seek the Church for their struggles, resulting in a drop of in attendance.
- **Transition to College:** Once young adults leave for college, keeping them connected to the church can be a challenge, leading to disengagement.
- **Social Media/Technology:** Fosters distractions, negative comparisons, and influences that pull youth away from their spiritual development.





Challenges faced by Youth Ministries

- **Secularism:** Pressure from secular culture, which can conflict with the teachings of their faith and make them feel isolated or different.
- **Need for Authenticity:** Youth often desire real, authentic experiences, and they may disengage if they feel the church isn't addressing real-life challenges/concerns.
- **Shortage of Volunteers:** Many churches struggle to find committed volunteers or leaders who can connect with youth and serve consistently.
- **Lack of Intergenerational Interaction:** Youth often feel disconnected from the church, especially older members. Ministries that don't encourage intergenerational relationships may struggle to integrate youth into church life.
- **Judgment or Misunderstanding from Older Generations:** Youth may feel judged or misunderstood by older church members, which leads to siloing of youth.



Challenges faced by Youth Ministries

- **Losing Youth in Adulthood:** Though youth are active during their younger years, many churches struggle with how to retain them once they enter adulthood. Transitioning from youth ministry to young adult ministry is difficult without proper guidance and programming.
- **Limited Budgets:** Many churches face financial constraints, limiting the scope of youth programs, trips, retreats, and events that can foster deeper engagement.
- **Lack of Resources for Effective Ministry:** Some youth ministries lack the resources or tools to develop programs that are relevant/engaging.





5 Challenge to Effective Ministry

- Doubt
- Self-Preoccupation
- Loneliness
- Choice Paralysis
- Experience of Flatness



5 Needs of Youths and Young Adults

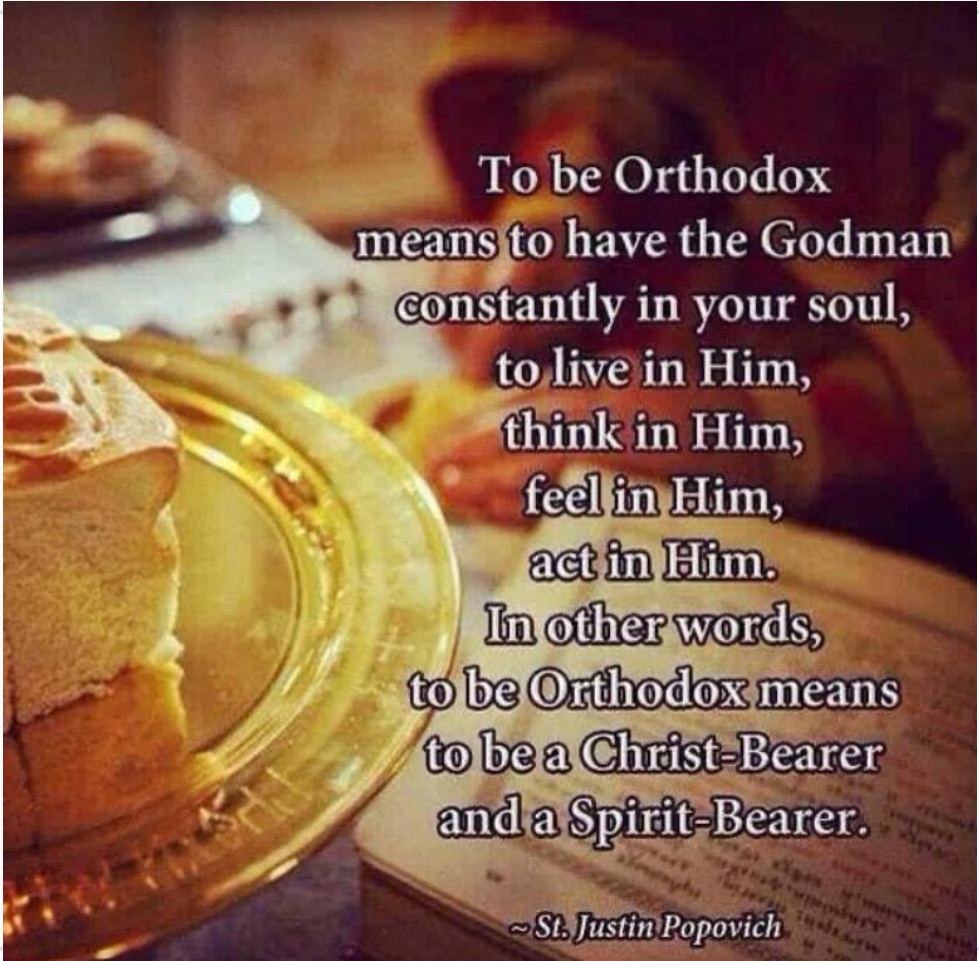
- To know Jesus Christ
- To know themselves truly in Christ
- To belong to the full community of the Church
- To be empowered with a faith that makes a difference
- To be equipped with the teachings of the Church



How are we going to
address these challenges
in our youth ministries?



“That all should be saved
and come to the
knowledge of the Truth”



To be Orthodox
means to have the Godman
constantly in your soul,
to live in Him,
think in Him,
feel in Him,
act in Him.

In other words,
to be Orthodox means
to be a Christ-Bearer
and a Spirit-Bearer.

~ St. Justin Popovich



Sunday School

- Goal Focus: Coming to the knowledge of Truth
 - Truly knowing Christ and truly knowing ourselves in Christ
 - Be equipped with teachings of the Church so they can come to know Christ and know themselves in Him
- Implementation:
 - Revamp the Sunday School curriculum
 - Current: Curriculum is through the Archdioceses
 - Revamp each grade level and explore other curriculum programs and resources
 - Align each grade level curriculum with the students' age level and with the understanding that this is the first step in coming to the knowledge of Truth



Sunday School

- Implementation:
 - Create a scope (outline of what content will be taught) and sequence (order in which it will be taught) for each grade level
 - Topics: The specific subjects or themes that will be taught.
 - Skills: The abilities or competencies students are expected to develop.
 - Concepts: The ideas and principles that will be explored.
 - The scope ensures that all necessary content is included and that the curriculum covers everything that students need to learn in a particular grade level or course.
 - Progression: How students will move from one topic or skill to the next



Sunday School

- Implementation:
 - Create a scope (outline of what content will be taught) and sequence (order in which it will be taught) for each grade level
 - Building Complexity: Ensuring that earlier content lays the foundation for more complex concepts or skills.
 - Learning Flow: Creating a logical and coherent path for learning that helps students make connections between different topics.
 - Provide teacher training to ensure all are using the same language (vision)
 - ECM Training for all teachers
 - Understanding why we are following the vision created
 - First step in living our church's vision

JOY

- Goal Focus: That ALL will be saved and coming to the knowledge of Truth
 - Our salvation (people already within His Church)
 - You are a full member of the Church at your initiation (baptism)
 - You are an Orthodox Christian at baptism not when you come of a certain age
 - Truly knowing Christ and truly knowing ourselves in Christ
 - Be equipped with teachings of the Church so they can come to know Christ and know themselves in Him



JOY



- Implementation:
 - Continue instilling teachings and practices of an Orthodox Christian
 - Show them “How to be an Orthodox Christian”
 - Provide Orthodox Christian “training”
 - Hymns
 - How to pray/importance of prayer
 - How to fast/importance of fasting
 - How to empty self (confession)



JOY

- Implementation:
 - Continue instilling teachings and practices of an Orthodox Christian
 - Show them “How to be an Orthodox Christian”
 - Provide Orthodox Christian “training”
 - Feast Days
 - Importance of prioritizing feast days
 - Taking time away from other activities to focus on Christ and spending time with Him
 - Saints
 - Patron Saint
 - There’s a Saint for that?

JOY

- Implementation:
 - Stillness
 - What is stillness? Importance of it
 - Being comfortable with the state of calm and quiet where one can connect deeply with God.
 - Training them on how they can connect with God





Jr GOYA

- Goal Focus: That ALL will be saved and coming to the knowledge of Truth
 - Our salvation (people already within His Church)
 - Belong to the fully community of the Church
 - ALL means ALL - regardless of age
 - Our Neighbor's Salvation (those not yet in His Church)
 - ALL means ALL - they don't need to look, act, seem, smell, etc. like me.
 - We are ALL Christ's children
 - We are ALL made in the image and likeness of Christ
 - We ALL have His love



Jr GOYA

- Goal Focus: That ALL will be saved and coming to the knowledge of Truth
 - Truly knowing Christ and truly knowing ourselves in Christ
 - Be equipped with teachings of the Church so they can come to know Christ and know themselves in Him
 - Know Jesus Christ
 - Know themselves in Christ - all other identities are false. One's true identity is who they are in Christ





Jr GOYA

- Implementation:
 - All means ALL
 - Youth Stewardship Program
 - Service - contribute to the life of the Church and begin to serve those outside of the Church
 - Learning to share their stories
 - Learning to frame their own story in the story of God
 - Learn to see Christ's work in their lives
 - Hearing the stories of others in the parish (Agape Ministry)
 - Normalizing confession



GOYA

- Goal Focus: That ALL will be saved and coming to the knowledge of Truth
 - Our salvation (people already within His Church)
 - Belong to the fully community of the Church
 - ALL means ALL - regardless of age
 - Our Neighbor's Salvation (those not yet in His Church)
 - ALL means ALL - they don't need to look, act, seem, smell, etc. like me.
 - Service for all



GOYA



- Goal Focus: That ALL will be saved and coming to the knowledge of Truth
 - Truly knowing Christ and truly knowing ourselves in Christ
 - Be empowered with a faith that makes a difference (Matthew 25:35-40)
- Implementation:
 - Youth Stewardship Program
 - Service in and outside of the Church



GOYA

- Implementation:
 - Parish Partners/Youth Ambassadors
 - GOYAns to minister to young people who are exploring the Church
 - Check in/invite to services
 - Invite friends to services and Church events
 - Young people are ambassadors for their school clubs and sports, they should be ambassadors even more so for our Church and Faith.
 - Train GOYAns to minister to their peers

Next Steps

- Explore opportunities in the local area where we can achieve these goals
 - Radical Love
 - Focus North America
 - YES (Youth Equipped to Serve)
 - Service projects that bring people to our parish
 - Change the identity of the parish in the community



Next Steps

- Make gradual changes starting January this coming year
 - Begin with a revamping of Jr GOYA
 - Marginal changes to JOY and GOYA





Next Steps

- Parent University
 - Three times a year
 - Combination of Orthodox Christian practices and trends in youth today
 - Parents are the primary youth ministers in their children's lives
 - The Church supports, but the parents lead their children's spiritual journey
 - If parents aren't engaged in their children's spiritual journey, our ability to support them is limited.





Parent University Dates

- ~~October 29, 2024~~
 - ~~Parent University: Direction of Youth Ministries~~
- January 21, 2025
 - Parent University: An Orthodox Christian Household
- April 29, 2025
 - Parent University: Tackling Challenges in Today's Orthodox Youth



Questions
&
Discussion

