

Rector's Report to the 2021 Annual Assembly
Priest Gregory Joyce
February 27, 2022

In the documents of the ancient Church we read how **a Christian community is defined as a worshipping Eucharistic community**. The Russian Orthodox Church's concept of Missions also uses this definition. I would suggest that this is a very good designation and one for which we should strive as a parish family. Through our spiritual struggle and God's Grace, a theological cooperation called synergy, we are to be transformed into the true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we add to this community effort true Christian Love, then the new church and social/educational center we have been preparing to build will be in fact much too small for all those that will be attracted to our parish and our authentic Christian witness.

I would like to make this very clear: we are not moving towards a new church and educational space so that the same number of parishioners can have more space per person to stand in a spacious new building. Rather, **we are moving towards a new church to bring more – many more – people to the Orthodox faith**. The great churches of Rus' were not built to house the existing number of Christians – they were built to house all those who would eventually accept Christ. We must keep this in mind as we plan our new church as well. May the merciful Lord grant that we continue to march forward as a parish family in 2022 and beyond with this goal in mind!

Let me be very clear what the vision is regarding the new church: to step by step, day by day, prayer by prayer, effort by effort, we will grow into our new church. We will not take a wild leap in that direction, but build towards it with God's help and our struggle. We will not take out huge construction loans, but raise the funds needed to build the church. We will not build a barn with a cupola plopped on top, but a beautiful yet affordable traditional Orthodox Christian temple for God's glory. The parish council and various subcommittees continue to work very hard on this project. We do not see this work, but it is happening almost every day. And we are getting closer and closer every day. Building parking lots and paving them was a logical step in this direction. The cemetery was a logical next step. The school is a logical further step. And so we will travel, with the Lord's help and blessing, on the path that slowly but surely leads us to the new church. Fund raising efforts are continuous and moving forward, but your continued prayers in this regard are key to our eventual success. Please consider remembering the parish in your will, or buying life insurance that will benefit the parish. Please contact me or any member of the parish council to discuss how you can help. Let us begin by remembering first and foremost that this is a SPIRITUAL QUESTION – without the Lord's blessing this will never happen. So let us approach this work prayerfully, lovingly, in a true Orthodox Christian manner. Let us work together, repent together, and forgive each other daily as we, hand in hand as a parish family, move towards a project that will bring many more people to the True Faith!

Congratulations to all that **our average number of those communing at all Divine Liturgies in 2021 was 63.11%**. This is the highest percentage in the history of our parish! But we cannot rest on our laurels. Rather, we should continue to strive zealously in this regard, that is, to more often be in the Lord's House and to more often partake of Holy Communion when we are there.

The average number of people communing weekly in 2020 increased by 22% - to 65 people. This brings us back to approximately 2017 levels. Before the pandemic the highest yearly number in this category was 75. The present number is, undoubtedly, a function of generally fewer people being in the church during the pandemic. And that is understandable. But the pandemic is, at least as of this writing, essentially over, or soon to be. It is time to begin to prepare ourselves spiritually

for the end of the pandemic, because it will end. If we are not comfortable coming to church on Saturday night/Sunday morning we really need to push ourselves to be at church some other time during the week when there are fewer people present. The longer we simply allow ourselves to fall out of the habit of attending church AT ALL during the pandemic the harder it will be to come back to church when this is all over. Thus, NOW is the time to start reestablishing the habit of church attendance, even if not on Sunday. Success only comes before work in the dictionary, and building good habits is hard work. So let us work towards success! With our sincere effort and God's help we will prepare ourselves to be back in church every Saturday night and every Sunday morning – with even BETTER church attendance than we practiced before the pandemic. Let this be our goal: to turn the time we spent away from church during the pandemic into even more frequent church attendance when the pandemic ends!

In 2021 the average number of people kissing the cross increased by 37% to 103. This brings us back to approximately 2012 levels. And a huge improvement over last year when this number was at 79. Thank God, that even at the height of the pandemic, nearly 80 people per week came to worship in His House! And thank God that we have improved so much in the course of one year, a year that was not always smooth from an epidemiological point of view. May 2022 see another 37%+ increase in this metric!

In 2021 we served 182 Divine Liturgies at St. Vladimir's parish, or one Liturgy every 2 days. We decided early on in the pandemic that we would serve as often as possible so that the most people could participate in the Divine Services, even in small numbers. Our previous record number of Divine Liturgies was 175 – last year. I thought we would never come close to that number again. But, with God's help and the efforts of MANY of our parish family, we managed to exceed that number. This is a very impressive number for a parish. Thank you to ALL who worked so hard to make this possible as a comfort and spiritual nourishment for our parish family! And may the Lord reward you in this life and the next for your efforts for His Church! It is unlikely that we will manage to get to that 182 or 175 number this year. But we will make every effort to serve the Divine Liturgy as often as possible at St. Vladimir's!

In 2021 we continued to serve one liturgical cycle of all-English Divine Services monthly. **This is an important missionary outreach** and to be honest I really enjoy the quiet, prayerful atmosphere these Liturgies afford our parish. **We are purposefully a diverse community: ethnically, nationally, linguistically, and otherwise. Diversity is a HUGE strength of St. Vladimir's and something we need to continue to strive to inculcate.** Yes – occasionally we have a bit of angst that surrounds this diversity. That is normal, and spiritually I would argue that this is even beneficial. If we are never struggling in our faith – if we have no spiritual challenges – we regress into narcissism very quickly. The Lord sends us the appropriate challenges at the appropriate time since He knows what we need for our salvation much better than we do. We intend to continue this ministry into the future and to continue to reach out to those around us – that we might not keep this “pearl of great price” which we have found for ourselves, but that might share it with as many others as we can. Please support us by inviting friends, loved ones, neighbors to these Divine Services and any/all of our other Divine Services and activities. We have seen during the pandemic that many people have come to the Church as they sought answers to the vexing societal and existential problems the pandemic pointed out so starkly. We must be ready to welcome more and more people to our parish family as we ease out of the pandemic and those who wanted to join us during the pandemic, but could not for various reasons, have the opportunity to do so!

We put on hold the Special Needs Service cycles once the pandemic began. We intend to implement these again as soon as we ease out of the pandemic. Almost certainly this 2022 year. Please spread the word in this regard – we want to let those who have special needs family members know that they are welcome here! Many families with special needs folks do not attend church regularly, although all polling in this regard makes it clear that they would like to. Let us be that parish family that welcomes them, gives them a home, and provides them a place in God's House.

Here is a good place to address the present political crisis in Ukraine. In 2014 we decided as a parish family that we do not “do” politics at St. Vladimir's. This has worked well for us and made us a place where Americans, Russians, Ukrainians, and others work together towards the most important goal of salvation, putting all worldly goals in second place. All are welcome to their own political ideals in the parish family. As in all families, there will be a diversity of political views. But these do not have a place in the Church. The Church has only one party, and that party is Christ. Anything that we do to drive another away from Christ is a grievous sin, and this includes bringing politics into the parish family. It is not easy to bite our tongue, to be quiet. St. James writes: “If any man among you seem to be religious, and controls not his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is vain.” (James 1:26). Let us not practice our faith in vain, but rather, control our tongue and refrain from any words that might wound another spiritually – especially in the arena of politics.

Complacency is dangerous and must be fought zealously. **Christianity is a religion of mission and growth**. This has been the case from the time of the Apostles and must always remain so. **Let us redouble our efforts to spread the Good News of the Gospel to those who have not heard it** – not for the sake of being proud that our parish is strong, but so that we may give a good answer to the Lord when our time comes to do this – that we did our utmost to increase His flock.

We want your feedback! We have placed a Google doc on our home page that allows you to provide feedback anonymously. You can also email us. You can leave us a note on Facebook. You can even talk to us! Please share your thoughts with us – we know you have a lot of value that you can add to your parish family. Please share!

I would like to thank our Membership Coordinators: Dmitri Knysh and Konstantin Poplavksy for their diligent work! Membership is important, and we urge all who are eligible to become members. **This is important to our parish because it is important to our local governments and to our diocese.** Our traditionally strong membership also puts us in a leadership position in our diocese, and I feel that this is a good thing in that it does not allow us to rest – we need to keep working hard to bring more people to the faith, which is exactly the charge our Lord gave us when He instructed us in the Great Commission: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” (Matthew 28:19-20) May we continue this work for which we have been blessed by God Himself! **Fr. Paul Karas, our former Rector, always said that as a parish we have to either go forward or fall back – we cannot hold ourselves in place without regressing.** I could not agree more!

In 2021 we held our Russian Festival again after a year's hiatus. And what a great festival it was! Undoubtedly one of the best! Thank you to all who worked so hard to make the festival a success

by every metric we track! BE PART OF THE WINNING TEAM! Join us as a volunteer this year at the festival!

In 2021 Deacon Colin Bower completed his theological studies and was ordained a priest for our St. Vladimir parish. Fr. Colin's ministry has been a great blessing for our parish family in the less than one year that he has served us as a priest. He is diligent in the exercise of his duties and has a true pastoral heart. I am very thankful for his hard work and support. Let us all thank Fr. Colin, but also his family: Katherine, Macrina, and Mardarije, for sharing their husband and father with our parish family! May the Lord always remember their efforts for His Church!

I would like to thank Deacon Vladimir Pyrozhenko for his service to our parish family. Again this year Fr. Vladimir led us in prayer as our senior parish Deacon and we are very thankful for his ministry! We also must thank here his family: his wife Alexandra and children Daria, Anthony, Anna, Alexander, and Seraphima for generously sharing their husband and father with our parish family as he leads us in prayer fulfilling his obedience as a Deacon. May the Lord reward them all in this life and the next for their service to the Holy Church!

I would like to thank Deacon Dmitriy Kashchenko for his service to our parish family. It is simply impossible to understand how we ever existed with only one deacon! We are thankful for Fr. Dmitriy's efforts. He is a great help to the entire parish family! Many thanks also to his wife Elena for generously sharing her husband with our parish so that he can exercise his ministry! May the Lord reward Fr. Dmitriy and Elena for their service to the Holy Church!

WE NEED MORE CLERGYMEN! This means you. Men. All of you. If you are canonically eligible to be ordained you should be seriously considering this opportunity for service to our community. If you are not sure if you are eligible please see me!

I would like to take this opportunity to **urge everyone to prepare as much as possible for their transition to the next life** – whether the actuarial tables make the likelihood of that transition soon or far from now. Most importantly we should prepare spiritually by living a Christian life to the best of our ability. Secondly, **for the sake of our family and their peace of mind we should arrange our affairs so that our wishes will be known through our wills or even better: through a will AND trust.** Please contact me to learn more about this. The Holy Church guides us in this regard – there are practices we follow and those that we do not. **It is especially important for those without Orthodox relatives to prepare appropriately so that your wishes are followed after your repose.** I am happy to help in this way however I can – but the key is to prepare now so that all flows smoothly when the time comes. In this regard, **we offer spaces in our parish cemetery – the only Orthodox cemetery in Michigan accepting new burials at this time.** Graves are presently available for purchase, and many people have purchased burial rights already. This will be an important part of planning your final affairs and we encourage all to arrange for burial in the future parish cemetery. In this regard please note: having a parish cemetery means that it will be important for us to serve the Divine Liturgy as often as possible to commemorate the departed resting in the cemetery and our other parish departed. **We hope in the future, once we have moved into our new church, that we would even be able to serve the Divine Liturgy daily and Archbishop Peter has blessed us to strive towards this goal.** But this means we would need adequate clergy and singers to do so, which will mean more resources from the parish. Ideally income from the cemetery and the growth in our parish will cover all this, but I want to share this with the parish so that everyone understands the vision of the future in this regard.

Our Choir, Readers, Church School, Youth Group, Sisterhood, and Brotherhood continue to provide great value to our parishioners through their service to our community. **Thank you to all who head and participate in these important efforts:** Julia Easson, Ken Doll, Alexandra Pyrozhenko, Ksenia Nikulshina, Konstantin Poplavsky, and all our Youth Group volunteers. Thank you to Katherine Mihaliyov who leads the weekday Divine Services and to Ken Doll who leads the Saturday evening Divine Services. Thank you too to those who led the efforts at beautifying our parish gardens in 2021 and Elena Mullin who leads the effort to beautify the interior of the parish church. **Thank you also to all those who volunteer for the parish in other ways as well. You are too numerous to name, but may God bless you for your work for His Church!**

I want to thank Deacon Dmitriy Kashchenko, our web master. We have a wonderful web site and this is the most important way that we reach those outside the parish. In other words, this is an important ministry and we should see it as such.

Thank you to Dmitry Knysh who has led the pilgrimage efforts in our parish for several years. Pilgrimages to monasteries are an important part of our spiritual lives and Dmitriy's efforts make it possible for our parishioners to go on pilgrimage to Holy Trinity Monastery, Holy Cross Monastery, and other important spiritual centers of the Orthodox Church in North America. God willing, we will continue to resume these efforts as our society eases out of the pandemic.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Subdeacon John Zroika, our Head Altar Server Emeritus, Subdeacon Robert Lanterman - our Head Altar Server, Reader Michael Marsh – our assistant Head Altar Server, and **all those who serve in the altar** for their service. They add greatly to the service and make it possible for the parish clergy to pray in the altar without distraction, which is their principle ministry. Thank you all!

I would like to thank all those who are laboring zealously to fulfill the Matthew 25 challenge the Lord gives us. In fact, that was the gospel reading we heard at today's Divine Liturgy. **WE NEED MORE HELP!** The Lord instructs us to give drink to the thirsty, feed the poor, clothe the naked, give shelter to the stranger, and to visit the sick and those in prison. Each of us has this charge as a follower of Jesus Christ. But we probably can't all do all those things. So our parish family labors to help those we can however we can. To those who lead and participate this work: may the Lord remember you! And may your efforts serve as an example to all of us to be more zealous to follow the Lord's commandments in this regard!

I would also like to thank Albina Serafimovna Poplavskaya and Svetlana Mitchell for their diligent work heading up our **parish kiosk**. The income from the kiosk is very helpful, to be sure, but even more so is the valuable ministry of greeting those visiting the parish that our kiosk provides. Thank you Albina and Svetlana!

In 2021 we did hold a **Vacation Bible School** and it was a great success! We had skipped that in 2020 due to the pandemic. God willing, we will hold a VBS in 2022. Our VBS has traditionally been centered on the commemoration of the Royal Martyrs over the last year and this will be the case this year as well. Thank you to all who worked so hard on this project in 2021 and all who will do so in 2022! We need more volunteers to help with this important ministry – please talk to me if you could lend a hand.

I would like to thank Natalia Joyce for her diligent work taking pictures of Divine Services and other St. Vladimir's activities for our **on-line photo album**. This is a very important ministry of our

parish. **BUT WE NEED MORE HELP!** Please consider if you might be able to fulfill this duty for the good of your fellow parishioners and especially for the good of those who are seeking a church home.

As most of our parishioners are aware, I have several responsibilities in addition to being our parish Rector. I am the Dean of the Michigan Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, the Dean of our Diocesan Seminary, the Secretary of the the Diocesan Council, and the President of our parish school Board of Directors. All these things are getting done, but with some help they could be done much better than they are. I could use help with these duties this year – please contact me if you can help. In this regard I too want to say thank you. Sometimes I am not around when you need me to be because of these other duties. That is rare, but still happens occasionally. I appreciate everyone's understanding in this regard and ask your prayers! And I am very thankful for those that already help with these duties, and cover for me in my absence.

Last, but certainly not least I want to thank our outstanding **Parish Council** and especially the Starosta of our parish. Frankly, we have a great team and I am very appreciative of their hard work in leading our parish! Please take a moment to thank our Parish Council for their sincere work for the good of our community the next time you have an opportunity to do so.

People often have many good things to say about our parish, but the praise should not go to the priest. Rather, it should go to the team – all those I have mentioned here yes – but really to the whole parish family. A parish cannot be a vibrant community without the willing and zealous participation of the members of the parish in the spiritual and social activities of the parish family. **You all make this a wonderful, unique, loving, vibrant place and I thank you sincerely for your efforts to make our community one that is reflective of God's love!**

Elizabeth and I continue to consider it a privilege to serve this community. We thank you for your spiritual, moral, and financial support and we look forward to another wonderful year at St. Vladimir's!