

Rector's Report to the 2024 Annual Assembly
Priest Gregory Joyce
February 23, 2025

We first must acknowledge the orphaning of our diocese, including our parish, with the repose in the Lord of Archbishop Peter on the feast of the Great Martyr Demetrius: November 8, 2024. This is a great loss for our parish family, our diocese, and the entire Church. May the memory of our dear Vladyka be truly eternal!

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 continue to 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 school, church, and hall we have been building and 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 building new facilities so that the same number of parishioners can have more space per person to stand in spacious new buildings. Rather, **we are moving towards a new church to bring more – many more – people to the Orthodox faith**. The great churches of Byzantium and 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 build our new buildings as well. May the merciful Lord grant that we continue to march forward as a parish family in 2025 and beyond with this goal in mind: we are here to sanctify the geographical region that the Lord has given us and this is our duty as Orthodox Christians!

Let me be very clear what the vision is regarding building out our campus: to step by step, day by day, prayer by prayer, effort by effort, grow into our new school, church, and hall. 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 as best we can and as quickly as we can. The parish council and various subcommittees continue to work very hard on these projects. Most of us 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 and hall. Fund raising efforts are continuous and bearing fruit, 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 forward on our projects that will bring many more people to the True Faith! **In this regard, we are happy to announce here for the record that our plans have been fully accepted and approved by Lima Township. The only hurdle that remains is we ourselves: we must raise the funds and do the work to build our new church and hall!**

Congratulations to all that our average number of those communing at all Divine Liturgies in 2024 was 68.94%. This is the highest average 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. This may be the most important metric we track because it alludes to the quality of the spiritual lives of our parishioners. Quantity is important. Quality is more important. Let us continuously strive for quality, even and we strive to bring the true faith to more and more of our friends, loved ones, and neighbors.

The average number of people communing weekly in 2024 was 76. This is the second highest number in the history of our parish! Success only comes before work in the dictionary, and building good habits is hard work. So let us work towards the success of exceeding this number in 2025! With our sincere effort and God's help we will more often be in church every Saturday night and every Sunday morning, and more often partake of the Divine Mysteries.

In 2024 the average number of people kissing the cross was 127. This is down slightly from 2023 but rather consistent for the last ten years. The reason we are rather consistent in this regard is that we have essentially maximized the space available for worship in our community. We need to build our new church as soon as reasonably possible. That is going to take the time, talent, and treasure of our parish community. There are two ways in which we can improve here, even if we are, as a group, saturating our parish worship space. First, we must challenge ourselves to be personally more often in God's house. Second, we must invite others to join us in God's house. And then arrange to join them on the day they can attend. Americans are searching for authenticity and truth. We have that because Orthodox Christianity is the faith that the Lord established for all as a means to salvation. It is a sin to hide this "pearl of great price". So let us share it with our friends and neighbors more zealously in 2024! *Ninty-six (96) percent of unchurched Americans are at least somewhat likely to attend church if they are invited. But only two (2) percent of American Church members have EVER invited someone to church.* (Christianity Today: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/july-online-only/102704.html>)

In 2024 we served 168 Divine Liturgies at St. Vladimir's parish, or one Liturgy every 2.17 days. Our all time record for Divine Liturgies in one year (182) was in the pandemic year of 2021. 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 regularly, even in small numbers. So the two pandemic years we can probably see as statistical outliers. **Our previous record for non-pandemic years was 165 (2022), and we exceeded that record this year!** Whenever we serve the Divine Liturgy not only those who are present receive spiritual benefit, but our entire parish family. Let us thank the Lord for His mercy in this regard! And let us thank those who labor so diligently to sing, read, and serve so that our parish family may be benefited in this way! With God's help we will continue to make every effort to serve the Divine Liturgy as often as possible at St. Vladimir's!

In 2024 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. **However, these services are generally very poorly attended.** Are we inviting our friends to these services? Are we inviting them to Sunday services? Are we agreeing to meet them when they come to visit our church? This is base line missionary effort – mustering up the will to invite someone to join us for worship. **LET US MAKE 2025 THE YEAR WE INVITE AT LEAST ONE PERSON TO WORSHIP WITH US!** This small effort will bring many souls to Christ! **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 all-English ministry into the future and to continue to reach out to those around us – that we might not selfishly hide this “pearl of great price” which we have found for ourselves, but that might share it with as many others as we can. **In 2025 we will serve the All-English cycle TWICE per month for the first time** – please participate and please invite a friend!

We put on hold the **Special Needs Service** cycles once the pandemic began. We began advertising this service in late 2024 again, to begin in 2025. 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 we should address the ongoing 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 aside all earthly cares. 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 **political view 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 or send a letter! Please share your thoughts with us – we know you have a lot of value that you can add to your parish family, but if these good ideas stay in your head they benefit no one and just cause pride. Please share!

I would like to thank our Membership Coordinator Dmitri Knysh, with support from our parish Secretary Marina Edwards, for their diligent work! Membership is important, especially as we undertake our biggest construction project in our history, 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 2023 we brought back our festival and named it the “Ann Arbor Russian Orthodox Festival”, redoubling our focus on our faith, which our culture playing a supporting role to that faith. That is the historical truth: Orthodox culture supports the Orthodox faith, and not the other way around. We stayed on this track in 2024 and I do not believe we are ever going to deviate from this path again. **WE NEED YOUR HELP TO KEEP THE FESTIVAL GOING STRONG! BE PART OF THE WINNING TEAM! When someone comes to your house you serve that person. The festival is thousands of people coming to our house.** Thus – we serve. The festival is fun – and we should enjoy it. But it is simply wrong for parish family members to come have fun and not work. Do both! Volunteer some and have some fun! We are literally known throughout America for our festival – let this be a good work that we accomplish successfully together year after year!

Fr. Colin was ordained a priest in 2021 and has been serving our parish family in this capacity since then. Fr. Colin’s ministry has been a massive blessing for our parish family. He is diligent in the exercise of his duties, shows great leadership potential, 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, Mardarije, and Kassiani for sharing their husband and father with our parish family! May the Lord always remember their efforts for His Church!

Fr. Vladimir Pyrozhenko was ordained a priest in 2025 (so this doesn’t really belong in the 2024 report, but we can’t wait a year to acknowledge this great blessing for our parish family). Fr. Vladimir served us as a deacon for 10 years. And because I have been called, after Archbishop Peter’s death, to be more involved in the Diocesan Administration, and the Diocesan Cathedral, Fr. Vladimir agreed to be ordained to make sure that my absences because of these diocesan duties do not impact our parish negatively. We hope that a new bishop will be appointed for our diocese after Pascha 2025 and things can get back to “normal”. And thank God we will have three priests then to serve our parish full time! 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 undertakes his new duties as a Priest. 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. Now that Fr. Vladimir has become a priest Fr. Dmitriy is our only deacon, and he labors zealously on behalf of us all in this ministry! 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! We need another deacon most certainly. This works best when the candidate comes from within the parish family. This means you! Please consider this your personal call to seriously consider this important ministry to serve our parish family as an ordained clergyman!

I KNOW ALMOST NO ONE READS THIS PARAGRAPH BECAUSE THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE DEATHS/FUNERALS IN OUR PARISH ARE COMPLICATED UNNECESSARILY BECAUSE ADEQUATE PLANNING WAS NOT DONE. I would like 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, Jacob Stein, and all our Youth Group volunteers. Thank you to Maria Joyce who leads the weekday Divine Liturgies 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 2024 and Katherine Miller who leads the effort to decorate the parish church with flowers for the major feasts. **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 Dmitri 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 Dmitri'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.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Subdeacon John Zroika, our Head Altar Server Emeritus, Subdeacon Michael Marsh - our Head Altar Server, Subdeacon Robert Lanterman – our assistant Head Altar Server, and **all those who serve in the altar** for their service. They add greatly to the Divine Services 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 – WE NEED MORE MATTHEW 25!** 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 2024 we held a **Vacation Bible School** and it was a great success! Our VBS has traditionally been centered on the commemoration of the Royal Martyrs over the last years and God willing this will be the case this year as well. Thank you to all who worked so hard on this project in 2024 and all who will do so in 2025! 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 and Instagram**. This is a very important ministry of our parish. Angelina Alvarez has been helping with videos, and this is great! **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. Our video team of Jacob Medina, Luke Racine, and Timothy Racine have been a huge help this year! We have been able to post almost all our Sunday sermons this year, as well as most of our parish lectures. Thank you to them for their efforts! And to Jacob too for overseeing our parish Telegram channel.

Let us thank ALL who labor for the Lord in our parish family, and let us pray for their continued success and the involvement of more and more of our parish in these salvatory ministries!

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 the First Deanery of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (parishes of Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska), the Dean of our Diocesan Seminary, the Secretary of the the Diocesan Council, the President of our Ann Arbor Orthodox Classical Academy Board of Directors, and the Director of Holy Virgin Protection Cathedral Schools in Chicago. 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, Jack Mitchell. 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, **the praise should go to the team** – all those I have mentioned here yes – but really to the whole parish family, working together with God's help for His glory. 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!