

## **DEALING WITH LOW CHURCH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**

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### ***WHAT ARE SOME REASONS FOR LOW CHURCH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE?***

1. **Parents/Families are not making Sunday Church School and Divine Liturgy a priority.**  
Parents do not make the effort to bring their children to church or do not encourage their children to come to Sunday Church School if the children lack interest or complain.
2. **Sunday Sporting events** are scheduled to begin during Church School hours. Students either leave early or do not attend in order to participate.
3. **Parents of younger students** get discouraged trying to keep their children attentive or calm during Divine Liturgy and eventually give up trying.
4. **Students arriving to class for the first time** feel uncomfortable or unwelcome because they do not know the regularly attending students. *Or* Students attend so infrequently, they feel like "outsiders" when they do come.
5. **Students with divorced parents** split their time between two churches or only attend church with the Orthodox parent. In either case, these Students will have a 50% attendance rate at best.
6. **Students are not enrolled in the Sunday Church School** because their families are not actively involved in the parish.

### ***HERE ARE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO TRY***

1. Address the issue of the **importance of Sunday Church School** in letters to the Parents, bulletin articles, sermons, via grandparents and godparents, bulletin boards displays.
  - o Be up front with the Parents by using the surveys of our own Archdioceses departments of Religious Education and Family Life/Marriage, i.e. the reality is this, if the Church and Church School are not important to the family now, the parents cannot expect their children to marry in the church, baptize their grandchildren in the church, nor live an Orthodox life.
  - o Ask, "Who will fill the pews when the parents are older? Who will serve this parish if not for their children? Where is the legacy?"
  - o How you do this is up to you - thoughtfully, caringly, firmly, lovingly, as a family.
  - o Help Parents realize that their children will not, in all probability, become sports stars, but they will become adults needing spiritual direction and a faith to keep them on the right track. That's the Orthodox faith.
  - o Meet with the Parents of Preschoolers about building a "habit of regular attendance" to Divine Liturgy and Church School.
2. **SUNDAY SPORTS:** In the article, "**Parents, Speak Up: Honoring Sunday,**" Fr Andrew George of Cranston, RI offers a "plan of attack to use with [a] both Orthodox Clergy and City-Wide Clergy Associations and [b] parents in the parish. [*PRAXIS* magazine, Winter 2012, pp.31-34]. I reviewed this issue of *PRAXIS* in the March 12, 2012 email.  
To make a difference, we need to enlighten/"get to" the Parents before our Students sign up for these activities - Welcome back letters, Special mailings and/or Monthly Bulletin articles. Some Parents may not realize that they can influence their children's choices. They can

also tell coaches that their family attends church on Sunday mornings and will leave quickly after services in order to be at the games by a certain time. (The family is also making accommodations.) Orthodox Christians are not the only Christians who have one worship service on Sunday mornings.

Jewish children attend Saturday School and Rabbis face the same situation. (Dr Tony Vrame tells the following story more eloquently.) When meeting with the students' parents, one Rabbi asked if they wanted their children to be good Jews. They all answered, "Yes." Then he asked if they wanted their children to be great athletes. They responded, "No." He responded, "Well, you have answered the question about where your children will be on Saturday mornings!" The same is true for us.

Our Parents should want their children to become "Good Orthodox Christians." If so, that takes precedent over Sunday activities. Our difficulty is getting them to understand the consequences of today's choices.

### 3. Parent Survival Resources

- This may sound harsh, but only insensitive or overwhelmed parents expect their young children to sit peacefully throughout a worship service without something to do! (Refer to *Helping Your Children Grow in Faith*; listed below.) One easy and inexpensive tool is **My Church Bag**. Whenever the children are in church, the bags go with them! The directions to fill *My Church Bag* are available at [www.phyllisonest.com](http://www.phyllisonest.com) /Parents/Idea corner/Pre-School Church Bag. (See below)
- **Parishes can also provide** a basket or container in the Narthex (or other convenient area) filled with **My Church Bags** to be used for the day and returned when leaving church services. BASIC CONTENTS: canvas bag (Pat Catan's), colored pencils, pad of paper, sheet of stickers, photo album of icons. (Students should be encouraged to draw what they see in church. This helps them keep focused on where they are and what is happening.) Opt. Create Children's Liturgy Books - albums of photos taken during Divine Liturgy in your parish.
- **Parents can only teach what they know.** The Church School can provide them with short or medium-sized articles containing information about our faith or parenting.
  - ▲ Articles to share with Parents - Go to [www.phyllisonest.com](http://www.phyllisonest.com) /Parents/Parents' Packet Items for [a] Guidelines for Church Etiquette - (1) ***Some Things You Should Know While in Church*** by Fr. David Barr and (2) ***Respectful Worship*** developed by the Outreach and Evangelization Department. Also available from <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/outreach/resources/brochures> [b] ***Helping Your Children Grow in Faith***, [c] ***Resources for Parents and Families*** [need to update].
  - ▲ Throughout the year, distribute articles located on my website and archived **ORTHODOX FAMILY LIFE** journal articles at <http://www.theologic.com/oflweb/archive.htm>. Feel free to reformat them for your church bulletin or Church School newsletter. (Regarding the OFL articles, please give credit to the author and ***Orthodox Family Life*** with the date and/or volume and number.)
  - ▲ Appropriate articles that I receive throughout the year will be forwarded to share with parents. The Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministry produces, **YOUTH WORKER PLUS** weekly articles. (Consider signing up for this listserv.) The Center for

Family Care provides the article for the fourth week and is often good to share with teachers as well as parents.

4. Provide a **Students' Divine Liturgy Book/Guide** in the pews to facilitate the younger students in following the service.
  - o Our Department of Religious Education offers [a] *Divine Liturgy for Children Service Book & Activity Book* \$10.00, [b] *The Divine Liturgy Illustrated* \$5.95.
  - o Consider making your own book with **photographs taken during the Divine Liturgy in your church**. Place the photos in small, inexpensive photo albums that hold about 30 photos. Just the right size for small hands.
5. Ask **teachers to extend "personal invitations" to incoming students by phoning them or their parents**, depending on the age of the students. If speaking to the Parents, the teachers can answer questions and discuss parental concerns.

Teachers could also suggest ways Parents (Moms & Dads) can help the class. Don't forget to *distribute this list to the Parents on the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday* & if a sign-up sheet is needed, post it.

  - o **Refreshments** - provide allergen-free snacks - weekly or to help celebrate **NAME DAYS**.
  - o **Classroom & Craft Helpers** - extra hands on Sunday, cutting out craft pieces before class, collecting materials for crafts, helping serve refreshments.
  - o **Room Decorations** - 'Keep the classroom fresh and interesting - hang pictures, decorate bulletin boards, make seasonal changes.'
  - o **Help with Memory work** - listen to students recite prayers, the Creed and Bible verses.
  - o **Storytellers & Book Readers** - "read a book to younger students or tell stories to older class." Grandparents are good at both.
  - o **Special Programs** - help where needed, teaching music/hymns, ...
  - o **Guest Speakers** - speak about a career, how they bring their faith into their work/daily lives, mission trips, "how certain feast days or holidays were celebrated in their own childhood or in other parts of the country or world."
  - o **Service Project Coordinators** - "help organize and chaperone the class for short-term or ongoing service projects."
6. Offer a **2<sup>nd</sup> Divine Liturgy** geared for students and young adults, regularly or on a monthly basis if your parish has a second priest or access to a visiting priest.
  - o Our Department of Religious Education offers the *Divine Liturgy Hymnal* (spiral \$7.95; hard cover \$9.50). This book, which is used at our Metropolis camp and retreats, includes text and music. Often referred to as "the green book."
7. Have a **Picnic to "kick-off"** the school year. +Make it a potluck with the Church School or donor providing the hot dogs, burgers or sloppy Joes. +Make a point of introducing families new to the parish to all in attendance. +Group teachers with their students (and parents) for pictures.
8. Offer a **Picture Day** on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Church School. Take pictures of each class. Identify the individuals, then post the photographs on a bulletin board visible to all. At the end of the school year, consider placing each year's class pictures within one large frame to hang in a classroom hallway. Begin the process again the next fall.

9. **Create a Buddy System.**

- Annunciation, Akron's plan - pair up students: 3-year-old class with third graders, who can be paired with 8<sup>th</sup> graders. (4-year-olds, 4<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>), (5-year-olds, 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>), (1<sup>st</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>), (2<sup>nd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>). On different occasions, the Buddies will help one another or work together. For example, the 8<sup>th</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> graders will help the 3<sup>rd</sup> & 3-year-olds learn the music for the Christmas program. The High Schoolers could do a project with or for the younger students. Buddies work together for the Good Samaritan's food pantry.

If the existing groups worked well, they can be continued. The new 3-year-olds would be grouped with the former (2<sup>nd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>), which become (3<sup>rd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and needs 3-year-olds).

- Students of an appropriate age (you decide) within the same class can email or phone one another during the week to keep in touch. Buddies can keep their absent buddies informed of what's happening and note that their presence has been missed. The goal is to keep the connection between students and the Church School open.

10. Teachers need to include a standard "**review**" in their **weekly lesson** plans to help students who have been absent to "catch-up." Consider: Each week at the end the lesson list the main points. The next week, ask a student to provide the main points of the previous lesson, which is valuable for all students. (If the students are collecting points for an award or prize, retelling the main points of the previous week's lesson can be given a set number of points.) If a student has missed repeated Sundays, we cannot expect the teachers to re-teach the lessons. Instead, teachers can send the textbooks home with a list of the missed lessons or photocopies of the missed lessons.

11. **Combine classes** so there are more students to interact with one another and the teacher. It is disheartening to teachers who have prepared a lesson to have but one or two students when there could be five, six, or more.

It is also disenchanting for students to be in a 1:2 teacher to student situation. Can you hear the students asking, "Why aren't the other students coming? My parents say this is important. I don't like having just two or three of us in this class. We can't do interesting stuff because the class is too small!"

12. **Keeping tract of our potential students** is not only important, but it helps with planning. It may require perusing baptismal records.

- With the **use of computers** (possibly with the computer program in use by your parish), newly baptized children can be entered into an attendance program. Develop a code to identify babies [B-0, B-1] and toddlers [T-2, T-3, T-4]. Move them to the next level yearly. Accurate print outs of these groups provide tentative class rosters for the preschool and kindergarten classes and you will know which families to approach.
- Compare registered students against the list of available students. They are all part of your Church School program. It's just a matter of getting them enrolled.
- **Develop a plan to welcome the families of the new preschoolers.** Consider: One or two weeks before class officially begins, gather the students and their parents in their new classroom during the regularly scheduled class time. During this time, the students can have refreshments, meet their classmates and play a bit. Meanwhile, the teacher can speak to the parents about the weekly schedule, topics of the year and how the parents can be involved. (Refer to #5.)

- o **When I was a Church School Director**, in late May or early June I approached the children who were to enter the Pre-School-3 class the following September. I related that "Miss so-and-so" and I looked forward to them entering her class and expected them to join the other students their age. I invited the children and their parents to meet the teacher in her classroom so they all could see where the children would be going and the surroundings. (This was done one child at a time.)

This was the time to emphasize the importance of regular attendance at Liturgy and Church School with sound reasons. *This would be time* for the Parents to complete Registration Forms so they would receive the mailings to Parents in August or September. The Parents need to be included in this process since we want them to be enthused about bringing their children.

I did not want to wait for the Parents to bring their Children. They could delay! I wanted the Parents and Children to know the Church School was waiting for the Children to become three years old so they could begin. We were a family and I knew my Children.

14. If a **family is not actively involved in the parish**, Church School may be the way to reach out to them. This takes the personal touch of the priest and the Church School director or his/her representative. These people can send personal notes, make phone calls, seek the help of other family members in the parish, including godparents, invite the family to a social event at the church so they can meet others, possibly visit them or invite them to their home along with other students' families in the same grades.
  - o The "Kick-Off Picnic" may be a good time to invite these families.
  - o At the beginning of the year, consider hosting families of select grades to "Getting -to-Know-You" lunches on different Sundays during the Fellowship Hour. Provide food, possibly an organized cover dish where each family has an assigned category of food.
    - ▲ Then use "ice breakers" to get each group - parents and students - to meet one another.
    - ▲ Encourage families to host gatherings in their homes for their children's schoolmates.
    - ▲ Be sure the inactive families meet everyone and that they know before they leave that you look forward to seeing them at Liturgy and Church School. Make sure they have someone with whom to sit during Liturgy.
  
15. Provide the Parents with a **Schedule of Church School Activities** for the year - mission projects, St Nicholas Day collection, Christmas play, March 25, Orthodoxy Sunday's procession of icons, Vasilopita cutting, Oratorical Festival and any activities planned specifically for each class. Include pan-Orthodox and Metropolis events. Promote your Church School and your parish as good places for children to make friends and for Parents to rear their families.
  
16. On the Parish Level: The parish can offer **Family Sponsors** to new members of the church. Families are so mobile today they frequently move to cities where they have no family or friends. When they go to the church, how can we help them become better acclimated and involved?
 

Each parish has individuals and families that are great at welcoming visitors. Now let's go one step further. Ask them to serve as sponsors for new families or individuals. Job description: For a year, introduce these new people to others in the parish, invite them to church gatherings, sit with them in church and at church functions and encourage them to

- ⤴ Note: This can be valuable to families that undergo divorce, especially when there is no family in the parish. Divorced individuals/families need to know they still belong and are supported by their parish family... Church School.

**17. Work at making classes more interesting and exciting.**

- Add crafts related to the lessons.
- Involve Students in the parish's outreach ministries.
- Encourage learning via competition and prizes.
- Learn fun Christian songs as well as hymns. Refer to the songs in each textbook.
- On Sundays when low attendance is expected - Thanksgiving, possibly Christmas & New Years, western Good Friday, Memorial Day - change the format for the day. Meet as a large group for an activity related to missions or stewardship, or show a movie, make special crafts, make a Church School-wide art project.

- ⤴ Resources: [1] The Church School staff of Annunciation Church, Akron provided the basic list of observations and suggestions. [2] "Some Ideas" from the Sept/Oct 2010 monthly bulletin of All Saints, Canonsburg, PA provided ideas for getting Parents involved in the classroom.
- ⤴ I will gladly share additional Reasons & Ideas from your parish's experience in future emails and Newsletters. There are good things happening! Let me know. pmo