24/06/2020

P.A.R.T. = Parish Assistance Response Team



Doing Their 'PART' to Help During a Pandemic
There are parishes throughout the Archdiocese that have had the unenviable task of responding to a natural disaster – floods, hurricanes, wildfires, etc. – but none could be prepared for the pandemic that gripped the United States in the opening months of 2020. Parishes could only respond to their best of their abilities to minister to the spiritual needs of the faithful. In responding, they discovered the many gifts of their stewards.

One such parish is Sts. Constantine & Helen in Reading, PA, under the spiritual guidance of Fr. Theodore Petrides. Upon learning of the restrictions on church attendance in the midst of Great and Holy Lent, the parish quickly formed their 'P.A.R.T.' – the acronym stands for "Parish Assistance Response Team."

An initial group of 12 parish leaders, including current parish council members, Philoptochos leaders, heads of other ministries, Fr. Petrides, Deacon Jim Elliker, pastoral assistant Dino Alexandrides and others met and determined four areas of focus:

- Continuation of ministries
- Reaching those at risk

- Developing digital content
- Assuring financial resources

“It started with a few people volunteering, but we quickly pulled in others with a variety of vocational background and experience. We found that we are blessed with many gifted, capable and faithful people who wanted to use their gifts to the glory of God and the benefit of our entire parish,” said Fr. Petrides. “We realized that we had to adjust how we do the work of ministry, of how we be Church.”

Among the first task was communicating with parishioners. The parish had several contact lists that were culled, cleaned and combined into a single master list on a Google drive. Each parishioner could be communicated to in their preferred manner. From their master list, they estimated that 30 percent of parishioners did not have an email address. This led them to utilize a service for recording a voicemail and calling homes.

“Phone calls are important, not just because you’re reaching those who don’t have email, but because you’re making a personal and meaningful connection,” said Fr. Petrides, who recorded several encouraging short messages which were sent to over 550 phone numbers at once.

He also began writing what he entitled ‘Messages of Hope,’ which had more content than the phone calls with links and attachments to a variety of resources to help their parishioners cope with the stay at home order and to keep practicing the faith. He now has begun also writing ‘Messages of Faith’ and a ‘Messages of Love’ further focusing on faith and practice.

The P.A.R.T. team also recognized that parish life had to continue as normally as possible – in exceptional circumstances. The ‘Our Life in Christ’ catechetical study group moved online as a Zoom video conference and grew from a dozen to close to 20 participants. Alexandrides started ‘Downtime with Dino’ for GOYA-aged children as a way to stay connected to the parish youth. Sunday School went on remotely with ‘Virtual Church School’ lessons from Orthodox resources and their own ‘talent’. The clergy and teaching staff take turns recording children’s sermons and lessons that sometimes include special guests.

At the time of the stay-at-home order, Sts. Constantine & Helen did not offer a way to view services online and Fr. Petrides admits early attempts using his smartphone were…rather humorous (one such attempt remains archived on Facebook to lighten peoples’ day).

“Live streaming our services has been a big change for us. We are ministering to

more people online, people who were not previously attending church in person" said Fr. Petrides. "During Great Lent, we were usually offering two services a day, as well as services not frequently attended, which were very well received."

As an integral player in P.A.R.T, the 'St. Xenia Philoptochos chapter' identified 108 parishioners they defined as 'most at risk' – elderly, living on their own or in assisted living facilities. They began making weekly check-in phone calls to them all. Philoptochos also provided assistance with groceries or prescriptions, transportation to doctor's appointments and other needs. Along with Philoptochos, the parish's newly created Agape Fund is being utilized to provide assistance.

In assessing the parish's financial situation, P.A.R.T. members determined how long their parish could continue without any income and it completed a Payroll Protection Program loan application to ensure it could maintain its current staffing level. "We've been blessed that most of our stewards are maintaining their financial commitment to the parish," added Fr. Petrides and donations during Holy Week matched last year's income.

In responding to this crisis, Fr. Petrides admits he had his own mental hurdles to overcome. He was not a fan of social media and uncertain about the benefits (or pitfalls) of broadcasting services online. But he also recognizes that the pandemic has changed parish life – hopefully for the better, he prays – forever.

"My hope is that this kind of outreach within our parish never stops, that it becomes a permanent part of our lives because we're not going back," said Fr. Theodore. "The apostles followed the roads that the Romans built– they used the social infrastructure then to spread Christianity. We are just using other roads today in a faithful response to this crisis."

goarch.org