

“It Takes a Village...”: A Holistic Parish Approach to Youth Stewardship



It Takes a Parish

The oft-quoted African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” means that an entire community of people must interact with children in order for those children to grow in a safe and healthy environment. Together with the clergy, youth director and parents, the youth of Resurrection Greek Orthodox Church in Castro Valley, CA are growing in their faith and in stewardship of their community.

In 2021, this parish of approximately 250 families celebrates its silver anniversary. It sits about 40 minutes east of San Francisco but the parish is preparing to build a new church in Pleasanton - another 10 minutes east. It is one of 14 Orthodox parishes in the U.S. participating in the Telos Project for young professionals.

Under the spiritual direction of Fr. Niko Bekris, who came to the parish in 2015, and the guidance of Youth Director Anna Teodosiadis, the parish has fostered a dynamic youth program that spans all age groups, includes local and international service projects and has the youth serving as ministry leaders within the community.

“Having a Youth Director has been a tremendous blessing to our parish. We have been able to expand the variety of activities we offer our youth, offer them more consistently and involve more parents,” said Fr. Bekris, who served as Youth Director for the Metropolis of San Francisco from 2008-11. “Anna has enabled me to launch other ministries such as bereavement group, a young married couples group and more.”

Teodosiadis estimates there are 100 children participating in youth programs that include HOPE, JOY and GOYA, dance group, youth choir and more. And the kids in these groups are active stewards of their time and talent – visiting senior citizen homes, volunteering in the parish food pantry, going to Project Mexico, creating hygiene kits for FOCUS and IOCC, partnering with Philoptochos’ Kids & Cancer Program, raising money for missions trips and adopting a family at Christmastime.

“We incorporate service in all of our youth ministries,” said Teodosiadis, a 2017 graduate of Hellenic College and Holy Cross, “and a lot of our families are involved in everything we do as a parish. During COVID, it has been a way for the kids to see one another while serving others.”

Resurrection has begun using a youth stewardship commitment card. Kids are asked to offer their time and talent to the ministries of the parish. As for treasure, Teodosiadis says any financial support offerings by the kids are directed specifically to a service project. This year, the youth of the parish are supporting Project Mexico.

Making Time

Most parishes – and most religions institutions – compete with athletics, music, dance and other extracurricular activities (as well as school) for the limited amount of free time in what are often over-scheduled lives.

“Kids are busy and involved in a lot of things these days,” added Teodosiadis, “but our parents do all they can to ensure their kids are present for church activities and are a priority in their lives. Parents also come up with ideas for projects because they are so invested. In the success of our youth program.”

Resurrection keeps its many youth activities organized with a quarterly meeting. Calendars are aligned, events are planned (so as to not conflict) and efforts between groups are coordinated. The Youth Committee is part of the Council of Ministries, which contains representatives from every ministry in the parish.

Communication within the various youth groups is yet another challenge for parents, Fr. Niko and Teodosiadis, who says they use an “all of the above” approach.

“We use ‘FlockNote’ to send out a newsletter, we have events on our online calendar and also in our weekly bulletin – but that’s mostly for the parents,” said Teodosiadis. “We use social media for middle- and high-school students, we send texts and we’ve found that individual contact is effective too. Kids will call and text each other to make sure they know what’s going on.”

In the ultimate testament to the strength and organization of Resurrection’s youth program, the parish has seen many of its high school kids become ministry leaders – as dance instructors, a choir director, HOPE/JOY advisors and Sunday School teachers.

“Once a month, all of the kids – all ages – get together for a Sunday School lesson and this has helped them form friendships, friendships that make the older kids want to spend time with the younger kids, and vice versa,” said Teodosiadis. “That’s how the older kids end up as ministry leaders, which is awesome to see. Our parish is creating a good culture for our youth, one that we hope keeps growing for years to come.”

Takeaways

Integrating parish activities as a regular part of children’s lives is critical

A true partnership with parents is vital to youth program success

A program is stronger and self-perpetuating when older kids serve as teachers/coaches/mentors to younger kids.

Incorporate service (offering time and talent) in youth activities

Working together, a youth committee and Council of Ministries enable cooperation

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