

# Pastoral Report

Holy Spirit Orthodox Church

2026 Annual Meeting

This year begins my 25<sup>th</sup> year as pastor of Holy Spirit Church. It is also my 40<sup>th</sup> year being a member of this parish. Somehow, I've become one of the "old timers!" It is hard not to be reflective when one reaches such a milestone.

Unlike most of our first time visitors today, I had no idea what to expect when I walked through the door in 1986. In fact, my first visit was to the old church on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and I had trouble figuring out how to actually get into the building. What looked like the main entrance was locked and apparently not used. Fortunately, I figured out that people were entering through the basement entrance that was at street level. I don't remember if I was greeted by an usher, and I don't remember if people were friendly or not, but I do remember the distinct feeling that I was in the right place. My first visit was on the Sunday of the Holy Cross during Great Lent but didn't come again until after Pascha. After that, I never stopped coming.

The Orthodox faith remains unchanged. A parish, however, does change. Two-thirds of the names on our memorial plaque in the narthex are folks that I remember. I have experienced that same feeling that I've heard some of you describe that it's hard to recognize our church now because so many of the familiar faces and personalities that seemed to define Holy Spirit Orthodox Church during those early years are no longer with us. It is good to remember and appreciate the past. We were all edified by the talks that Julian Saad and Joe Touma gave for the Heritage nights. We must remember that are more than just a singular parish, but we are part of an Antiochian Archdiocese that stretches across this continent, and our roots are deep in the ancient Patriarchate of Antioch – in Lebanon and Syria. The history of that land is still our history. The martyrs and the holy strugglers of that land are ours, as well as the those remaining still today. We can't forget that. But we are not there. Our task is to live out this Faith here and now.

Let's talk about where we are now.

- First off, it's hard not to notice—like many other Orthodox churches across our country, we see new faces in church every week. Numbers are not the only metric for a healthy parish, but we **have** increased attendance this year, and for that we are thankful to God. People are coming as a rule, not because one of us invited them, but there is a hunger for a true spiritual life. And unlike my first experience of 40 years ago, they do have at least some understanding of what Orthodox Christianity is. Whether you have been here from the beginning or are new to this parish, we thank God for you.
- There is a real hunger for a deeper spiritual life. More people are asking questions, getting involved, and wanting to grow in faith.

- Our ministries are getting stronger. The Antiochian Women, men's fellowship, ministries of compassion, communications, ushers, Parish Council, and Christian education for our children, adults, and inquirers—all of these areas are blossoming. Our beautiful choir continues to practice diligently to prayerfully lead our responses in the Divine Liturgy and the Byzantine chanters have faithfully honed their skills into an outstanding ensemble. You'll hear more about these ministries later in the meeting. Most of us haven't travelled extensively to other parishes, but I want you to know how incredibly blessed we are by the talent and dedication of all those who offer their gifts in our parish.
- We've invested in new construction and iconography, which bring fresh beauty and experience in our worship. Before long, we will have a chapel that will be wonderful for the weekday services when fewer people are present. We will soon hear bells singing to call us and our neighbors to worship and mark the important seasons of our life, be it the joy of a wedding or the sorrow of a funeral. You can see that we're ready to finally install the iconography in our dome. For a parish of our size, we have been incredibly blessed.
- And let's not forget—the desire for fellowship is growing. Just look at how lively coffee hour has become; people genuinely want to spend time together after service. We live too often in isolation in our society, where the sense of belonging to a real community is fading. A lot of us travel from a long distance, and that time spent together in coffee hour is invaluable.

And, yes, we do face some challenges.

- We are right to expect to come to church to receive good things. Jesus tells us that he is the way, the truth, and life. All this is freely offered to us through living the life of Christ within his Church. Yet we also know that our life in Christ is also one of our own offerings. How often in the various services are we reminded that we "commend ourselves, each other, and all our life unto Christ our God." Our life in the Church is one of offering and receiving. No one is under any compulsion to give in this parish. In fact, to be a member in good standing, our bylaws simply state that we must be in good sacramental standing in terms of receiving the Eucharist and making confession and offering some financial support to the church. However, as Christians, we should not be content with minimums. Being good stewards means that we receive everything from God and offer it back in thanksgiving, which includes our financial offering but also our time and our talents. A ten percent tithe is a good goal and is attainable, but more importantly, we should have the mindset of freely offering a portion of what God has given us back to him. Our offering of money should not just be what we may have left over, and our offering of time and talent should be the same. We are told to first seek the Kingdom of God. Our life in his Kingdom should be priority, not something we add on in the end as a leftover.

- Another challenge we face is integrating everyone into what we call our “church family.” This takes time, it takes effort, and it takes patience. I am probably the worst at remembering names and faces. Many folks drive a long distance to get here and many can only be here once a week or even less. That is why our coffee hour is a critical part of our parish life. It can make for a long day, but that is where we get to know each other, and for many, it is the only time during the week that we can interact together. I am thankful to everyone who has stepped up to make the coffee hour more than a snack. It allows us to have a chance to break bread together and visit. The occasional potluck dinners after Vespers, our book study, and every other opportunity to be together and share our lives is important. All of us would do well to venture out of our comfort zone (i.e. our regular table) and get to know someone new.
- Communication is another area that we have seen improvements, but we can still improve, to make sure everyone is connected and informed. I am thankful for our new tools through the church app, emailing, texting, and Facebook that more easily allows us to communicate. If you haven’t started regularly going to our church app, and most especially signed up to receive updates, please do it. And, if you don’t know how, we have folks to help you.
- With more people coming, parking has gotten trickier, and space in the church is starting to feel a bit tight. It is a good problem to have. Parking will be the first challenge that we hope to tackle after the completion of current construction. It’s not just for our convenience, but also to be good neighbors to the folks who live around us. We hope to see a paved lot across the street sometime in 2026.

I have offered these reflections with thanksgiving to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom we offer glory together with his Father and Holy Spirit. I thank God for the many blessings poured upon us and I thank all saints and angels who diligently intercede for all of us. Although I haven’t specifically mentioned anyone in this report, because there will always be an omission, I will remember one special parishioner who has stood by me as a laborer for many years. We all know that Khourieh Loukia has taken a well-deserved retirement. Her life has been one of dedication to her craft of teaching at Marshall and her real love of laboring in the church. Because of her employment, the parish has not been burdened with paying for a health plan for my family, which has been an invaluable contribution over these 25 years. The final decision to retire came only when it was clear that a perk of high education is that her health plan from the state could continue for five more years until we both pass the 65 threshold. She has made me a better priest (or has at least tried to) and in her retirement she will be an even more valuable partner to me and to our parish. Thank you, Loukia.

In closing, I offer God thanks for each of you. Whether you were here to welcome me 40 years ago or came this morning for the first time, I am thankful for you. I am thankful to you

call you my family and my friends. Let us all continue to commend ourselves to Christ and to his Holy Church, and to each other. May the coming year be blessed.

Yours in Christ,

Fr John