

Committee for Youth Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation

Framework

This document is intended to be used as a guide for the development of a unified vision of Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation by the Assembly of Canonical Bishops of the United States of America (“Assembly”). It is not intended as a final statement or decisive roadmap for achieving the vision, but rather is a starting point for discussion on how best to view, further develop, and enact such a vision. We note that each archdiocese is beginning to make headway in developing a more comprehensive approach to Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation from both theological and practical perspectives.

The Committee for Youth (“Committee”) has drafted several initial papers that are initial steps in trying to define Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation. These papers can be accessed at <http://www.orthodoxyouth.net/youthworkers/formation>. This document summarizes those papers and is designed to both present a rationale for acting, as well as providing actionable steps and recommendations for furthering this work in a unified manner.

Rationale

The disturbing trend of young people leaving the Church as they enter adulthood has been well documented. While there have been seen significant efforts to minister to youth during their teen years, as well as during college, the question remains, “what distinguishes those who remain involved in the Church from those who reject the Church, either outright or simply by drifting away?” Although there may be any number of contributing factors, at the most basic level, the response often depends on whether or not the young person has a living, experiential relationship with Christ. Current American culture presents a unique set of challenges to youth formation that cannot be sufficiently addressed by trying to replicate models of Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation that have been successful in other historical and geographic Orthodox contexts. We do not live in an Orthodox majority country and only rarely live in tightly knit Orthodox minority communities.

Within the North American context, there is a great deal of diversity among Orthodox communities that results in a broad range of models of Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation. In the past many of our Orthodox communities have relied on Western Christian approaches for Youth Formation that are not Orthodox in their ethos or praxis. These past approaches have had varying levels of success and theological consistency. The challenges that the American context presents for supporting our youth require a distinctly Orthodox approach that attends to the particularities of this context, and which can be applied and adapted across Orthodox communities in America. It is not enough to be Orthodox by heritage, to know the teachings and practices of the Faith, or to participate in youth ministry organizations. To remain steadfast, the young Orthodox Christian on the threshold of adulthood, must come to know Christ very early in their life, even from birth. Consequently, there is an essential need for the members of the Assembly to purposefully develop a vision of, and support for Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation.

The purpose of this document is to:

1. Begin to discuss and define what is meant by Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation and affirm the principles which underlie it.
2. Outline practical steps the Church might take to support the work of Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation.
3. Provide recommendations on how the Assembly might move forward to further discuss and restructure our approach to Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation.

Guiding Principles

In developing this document, we were guided by four key principles:

1. A vision of Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation must be theologically Orthodox. Its development and enactment need to reflect Orthodox Christianity specifically, and not simply be borrowed and repurposed from other groups.
2. Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation is not a singular event or activity, nor is it an individual program. Rather, it is a continuous and unified integration of our youth within the life of the Church. It is supported not only by parents, clergy, and youth ministers, but also through the entire Body of the Church, on a daily basis in all that we do.
3. Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation must develop our youth's faith, knowledge, and skills to engage the world around them to the glory of God.
4. Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation must include the home and more importantly, parents. In many homes, parents may be no closer to a relationship with Christ than their children. Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation, therefore, must encompass the entire family.
5. A vision of Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation must be accessible to all members of the Church. It needs to be communicated in a language our youth can understand and be adaptable to the diverse circumstances in which our youth live.

What is Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation?

Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation is, broadly, the growth in spiritual maturity among our young people that enables them to see themselves in Christ, and to see Christ at work in them.¹ As we consider both the potential that our young people have in Christ, and the spiritual dangers that confront them, we are committed to building up young people as members of the Body of Christ.

Spiritual formation is not separate from youth ministry in general but is a broader description of what youth ministry has as its true aim. We fall short of the mark if we reduce youth spiritual formation to youth ministry programs. Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation should not be merely accidental. It should be a deliberate effort to transform lives and save souls. Our youth are either "conformed to this world," or they are "transformed by the renewing" of their minds, which can only happen as Christ is formed in them.² Formation of our youth, as Saint John

¹ "Working Document of Spiritual Formation," Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese Department of Youth.

² Rom. 12:2, Gal. 4:19

Chrysostom reflects³, is about choosing to be formed as a beautiful person from within. The gifts of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”⁴) are essential in forming the identity of Children of God. Our task is to help form disciples who are beautiful in their identity and personhood before God and His people. It is also about developing in our youth the yearning for the very presence of the Lord – the yearning for the full establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven here and now – the yearning for the end of the nonsense of this fallen world and the restoration of the Kingdom in all places. Not in the sense of avoiding the world, but fully engaging the world as a citizen of the Kingdom.

Practical Steps the Church Can Take to Support the Work of Orthodox Youth Spiritual Formation

1. To truly care about the salvation of our youth, and really seek to form them as children of God – as disciples and leaders of the Church, we must take seriously that we are raising up a generation of disciples and leaders for Christ and His Holy Orthodox Church.
2. We must actively invest the development of not just our youth, but also in those ministering and supporting our youth. This includes clergy, families, youth workers, religious education instructors, and anyone else directly involved in forming our youth.
3. Develop and provide accessible resources that are connected across ages, jurisdictions, and programs that appropriately support formation of our youth. Our methods of teaching need to become cutting edge and at the same time bring with them the timeless wisdom of the Church.
4. Promote the spiritual growth of the Church overall, and foster opportunities for youth to learn from the witness of Orthodoxy in the lives of others.
5. Regularly experience the active involvement of our bishops in the daily lives of our churches.

Broader Recommendations for Moving Forward

Ultimately, the Church in America needs to gather her Bishops, Priests, and Lay Leaders on the Archdiocesan and Diocesan levels, and the Parents, Educators, Youth Workers, and Young People to dive into the depths of Orthodoxy and articulate anew—based on the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, the Divine Services, the Holy Fathers and Mothers throughout history as well as this present day—a deliberate path forward in genuinely developing a current, effective, Orthodox approach to Youth Formation, that will address the unique needs and circumstances of Orthodoxy in America. This dialogue and direction should help educate youth workers and present concrete material on how to deeply and broadly form the identity of our young people as Children of the Light working on their salvation here in North America in the twenty-first century.

The Committee for Youth believes that new and more tools and approaches to Orthodox Spiritual Formation are crucially needed if we are to succeed in Christ’s call to effectively pass on the message of salvation to our youth, and to help them enter into life with Christ.

³ John Chrysostom, “Homily II: Eutropius having been found outside the Church had been taken Captive,” Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 264.

⁴ Gal. 5:22