

Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America

**Young Adults and Young Adult Ministries in American Orthodox  
Christian Parishes.**

by Alexei Krindatch (akrindatch@aol.com)

*“Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” 1 Timothy 4:12*

*“I’m not lost for I know where I am. But however, where I am may be lost.” A.A. Milne, Winnie-the-Pooh*

**Contents:**

Executive summary	p. 2
Introduction and the Source of Data Discussed in This Report	p. 5
Data and Findings	p. 6
A few additional thoughts	p. 37

## Executive Summary

Young adults pose an urgent and difficult challenge for American religious congregations. Orthodox parishes are not exempt from this challenge. On the one hand, young adult members are crucial for church growth and vitality. This is true both demographically (i.e., growing young families with children) and also because young adults are more likely than older church members to bring into a congregation new energy, talents, approaches and capacity to “think out of the box.” On the other hand, recent studies show<sup>1</sup> that today’s young adults are less church affiliated, have more religious “Nones,” and are less inclined to actively participate in organized religion than ever before. Young adults (defined as persons ages 18-34) comprise 23% of the total US population, but *only one in ten* American congregations has this percentage of young adults among its members. In nine of ten congregations, the presence of young adults is lower than their presence in the overall population.

The report “Young Adults and Young Adults Ministries in American Orthodox Parishes” is extracted from the 2016 national study “Orthodox Christian Parishes in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America” (the full study report will be released in the near future). The study was conducted via a national survey of 580 parishes (about 30% of all US Orthodox parishes). Five Orthodox jurisdictions had a sufficient number of participating parishes that allowed for statistically reliable conclusions: American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, GOA, OCA and Serbian Orthodox Church.

Here are some key-findings discussed in the report:

- ❖ Young adults (persons ages 18-34) constitute 12% of active Orthodox church members. This figure (12%) is only half of the presence of young adults (23%) in the US general population. In only 8% of Orthodox parishes the percentage of young adults is equal or higher than 23%;
- ❖ Among individual jurisdictions, the American Carpatho-Russian Diocese has the lowest percentage (8%) of young adults among parishioners, while the Antiochian Archdiocese has the largest presence (15%) of young adults among regularly participating members;
- ❖ Only a small minority (15%) of Orthodox parishes consider young adult ministries as one of their top priorities. There is no significant difference among individual Orthodox jurisdictions in this prioritization.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the report on “American Congregations 2015: Engaging Young Adults” prepared by the Cooperative Congregation Study Partnership: <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/Engaging-Young-Adults-Report.pdf>

- ❖ Only one-in-five Orthodox parishes (22%) evaluated their young adult ministries as "Good/Excellent," while 37% of churches judged their young adult ministries as "Poor;" Compared to other jurisdictions, the Antiochian Archdiocese has more parishes (31%) with "Good/Excellent" young adults ministries;
- ❖ Only 9% of parishes developed strategies that are geared to creating opportunities or programs specifically for young adults;
- ❖ Only one-third (35%) of parishes have designated leaders whose primary responsibility is to work with young adults (including 28% with volunteers serving as young adult leaders and 7% with part- or full-time professionals);
- ❖ Survey data show that having designated young adult leaders is *very important* for thriving young adult ministries and growth in young adult members. Parishes with designated young adult leaders are much more likely to grow in the number of young adults and report "Good/Excellent" young adult ministries than the other parishes. Remarkably, this survey data also suggest that it does not make much difference whether these leaders are volunteers or paid professionals (although this answer may change if the survey were expanded to youth leaders): what is most important is to have a person whose clear responsibility is to engage young adults;
- ❖ The five activities/programs that are offered most frequently to young adults in Orthodox parishes are: "community service activities" (offered in 57% of parishes), "fellowship groups" (offered in 52% of parishes), "web, social media sites" (offered in 46% of parishes), "engagement, premarital groups" (offered in 45% of parishes) and "scripture study groups" (offered in 44% of parishes). On the opposite end are four activities/programs that are rather rarely offered to young adults. These "rare" young adult ministries are "parenting groups/classes" (only 18% of parishes offer this ministry), "worship services specifically for young adults" (13%), "dating groups" (10%) and "singles groups" (9%);
- ❖ Offering young adults the opportunities (1) *to learn more about the Orthodox Faith* (via "scripture study groups/classes," "theology and/or contemporary issues study groups/classes," "prayer groups, spiritual retreats"); and (2) the possibility *to reach out into wider community* (via "community service activities," "mission trips") are the two most crucial areas of activities for the overall success of young adult ministries and attracting young adult church members. Conversely, offering young adults various "social" activities (such as "engagement, premarital groups," "recreational, sport groups," "marriage groups/classes," "parenting groups/classes," "dating groups," "singles groups") has a relatively small effect on attracting and engaging the young adult church members;

- ❖ If Orthodox parishes desire to improve their young adult ministries and attract more young adult members, they should pay much greater attention to "mission trips," "prayer groups, spiritual retreats" and "theology and contemporary issues study groups/classes" specifically designed for young adults;
- ❖ Out of seven characteristics describing the style of worship in an Orthodox parish, the words "joyful" and "inspirational" have the strongest relation with a parish's growth in young adult members and presence of "Good/Excellent" young adult ministries. In other words, *the parishes where worship services are "joyful" and "inspirational" are the parishes that are very likely to grow in the young adult members and have "Good/Excellent" young adult ministries.* On the opposite end are two characteristics of worship that have relatively little or no influence: worship being "reverent" or "innovative." In other words, the fact that a parish has a "reverent" or "innovative" style of worship has no impact on parish's growth in young adult members and presence of thriving young adult ministries;
- ❖ Young adults are especially attracted to the parishes that offer vibrant spiritual life and are open to and welcome new people into a parish community. The presence of various small interest groups in a parish, effective usage of social media, parish's readiness for innovation and change, mutual support and help among parishioners, involvement of a parish in a social justice work, clarity of vision for a parish's future and other characteristics also have a positive influence on attracting young adults. Yet, it is spiritual vibrancy and openness to newcomers that have special appeal for the young adults;
- ❖ The vast majority of parish clergy (71%) believe that the greatest problem in ministering to young adult members are young adults themselves, because they have little interest in participating in parish life;
- ❖ The involvement of a parish with a local OCF chapter and parish's success in serving its own young adult members go hand in hand with each other. That is, compared to other parishes, the parishes that are involved with local OCF chapters:
  - Have significantly higher presence of young adults among parishioners
  - Have experienced growth in the number of young adult parishioners in the past three years
  - Are much more likely to evaluate their young adult ministries as "Good/Excellent"
- ❖ Typically, the work of a parish with a local OCF chapter is limited to a parish priest who serves as its spiritual advisor. Less than half of the parishes that are involved with OCF either offer to OCF chapters some financial support (48%) or sponsor various OCF events (42%). And only one-in-seven (14%) of parishes that are involved with OCF have permanent boards/committees whose primary goal is to work with OCF chapters.

## Introduction and the Source of Data Discussed in This Report

Nearly one-quarter of the US general population (23%) are young adults: persons between ages 18-34. But their presence among those who participate in America's Orthodox parishes is only half that percentage (12%). According to the 2015 national "Faith Communities Today" (FACT) study,<sup>2</sup> the average percentage of young adults among members of religious congregations is only 11%. Further, the share of young adult members in American religious congregations decreased from 14% in 2008 to 11% in 2015. Furthermore, while in 2008, 8% of American religious congregations reported no young adults at all among members, in 2015, nearly one in five congregations (18%) reported no young adult presence. In summary, as a general trend, today, young adults continue to "unfriend" American congregations and drift away from organized religious life. Orthodox parishes are part of this "religious reality."

The report "Young Adults and Young Adult Ministries in American Orthodox Parishes" comes from the 2016 national study "Orthodox Christian Parishes in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America." The goal of this study was to provide a comprehensive picture of the lives of local parish communities including such aspects as membership, worship, programs, religious education, finances, usage of electronic technologies, and much more. Young adult members (defined as persons between ages 18-34) and young adult church ministries were among the key subjects examined in this study. The study was conducted via a national survey of 580 parishes (about 30% of all US Orthodox parishes). In each parish, the questionnaire was completed by a key informant: typically, the parish priest. Five Orthodox jurisdictions had a sufficient number of participating parishes that allowed for statistically reliable analysis and conclusions for each jurisdiction separately:

- Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA): 162 participating parishes (or 31% of all GOA churches)
- Orthodox Church in America (OCA): 168 participating parishes (or 30% of all OCA churches)
- Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese (AOCA): 99 participating parishes (or 40% of all AOCA churches)
- Serbian Orthodox Church: 43 participating parishes (or 35% of all Serbian Orthodox churches)
- American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese (ACROD): 37 participating parishes (or 46% of all American Carpatho-Russian churches)

---

<sup>2</sup> The national report on 2015 FACT study ("American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving") is available at: <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/American-Congregations-2015.pdf>

It should be noted that the study "Orthodox Christian Parishes in 21st Century America" was part of a much larger national US study of American religious congregations entitled "Faith Communities Today" (FACT). The FACT national survey and study was undertaken by the "Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership" (CCSP), an interfaith coalition of religious researchers representing a broad spectrum of American faith communities. Originally, the "Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas" (SCOBA) and presently the "Assembly of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in North and Central America" has been and remains one of the founding partners in the CCSP cooperative project. More about CCSP research partnership and numerous reports from CCSP various study projects can be found at: [www.faithcommunitiestoday.org](http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org).

### **Data and Findings.**

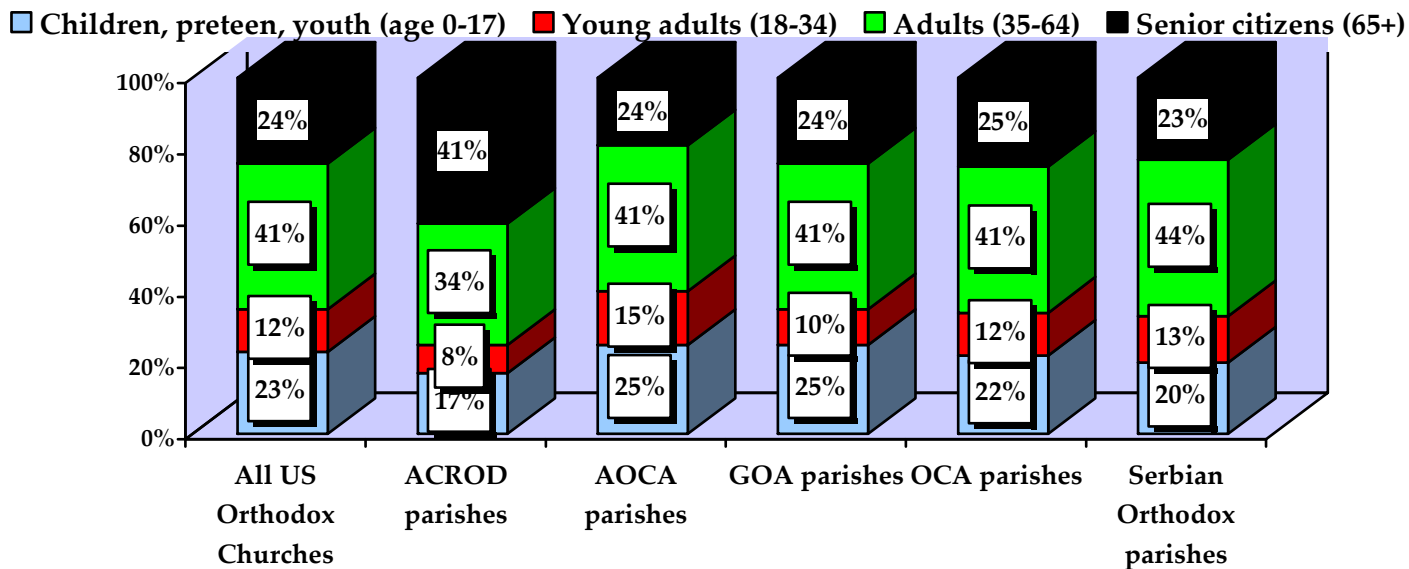
It is commonly accepted knowledge that the retention of young adults in the church is especially "challenging" task. There are a number of reasons for this (in no particular order). First, in this stage of life, many people go to college and lose connections with their home parishes. While in college, new friends (either not Orthodox or not religious at all), the load of academic work, new interests and social activities often have a higher priority for young adults than finding and joining a new Orthodox parish. Second, young adulthood is also an age when people begin their professional careers, move away from home and - in their new locations - focus primarily on professional growth and building new networks of social relations that are not necessarily associated with the Orthodox Church. Third, more and more people in America postpone marriage and starting families. That is, many young adults are single. And we know from practical experiences that generally Orthodox parishes tend to be more "family-oriented" than "singles-oriented" in terms of what they offer for their members. Fourth, the position of the Church on certain contemporary moral issues has been repeatedly raised by young adults of areas of concern. These and other factors increase the chances for young adults to become "church drop-outs." And this is why it is crucial for the parishes to develop programs and ministries that would address particular needs and interests of their young adult members.

How strong is the presence of young adults in Orthodox parishes? Fig. 1a shows that 12% (one in eight) of all regularly participating US Orthodox church members are young adults between 18-34 years old. It was noted in the introductory section that young adults comprise 23% of US general population, but the percentage of young adults among the members of American religious congregations is only half their presence in the general population: only 11%. Hence, Orthodox parishes face exactly the same problem as the other religious

congregations: that is, young adults tend to stay away from organized religion and – in the overall picture – the Orthodox parishes are not “stronger magnets” for them than the other religious congregations.

**Fig. 1a Not Many Young Adults Among the Members of Orthodox Parishes**

"Of your regular participants, please estimate the percentage of the following age categories:"

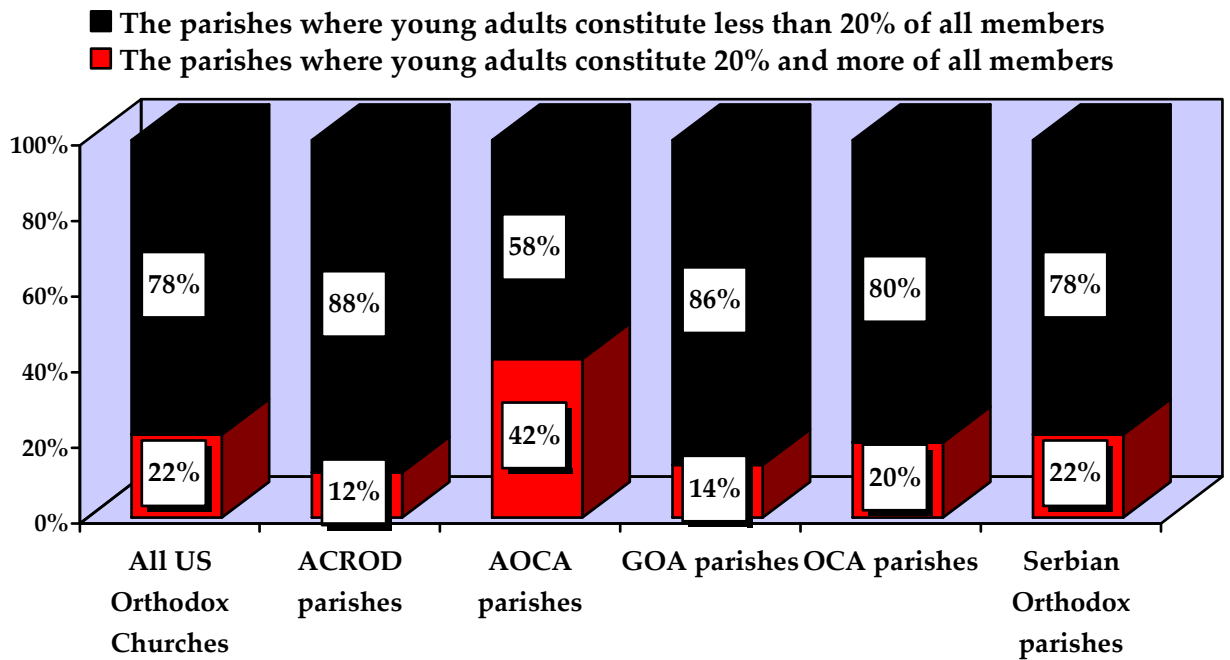


Another way to compare individual Orthodox jurisdictions is by the strength of the presence of young adults in their parishes. In order to do this:

- ❖ From the entire sample of the parishes, we separated the parishes that have a well-above-average percentage of young adult church members. The parishes *with at least 20%* of young adults among parishioners were considered as parishes with high participation of young adults;
- ❖ We compared jurisdictions by the share of these parishes with at least 20% of young adults among parishioners.

Fig. 1b shows that slightly more than one-fifth (22%) of US Orthodox parishes are the parishes with a strong presence of young adult church members (i.e. these are the parishes with at least 20% of young adults among parishioners).

**Fig. 1b Percentage of Parishes With the Strong Presence of the Young Adult Members**

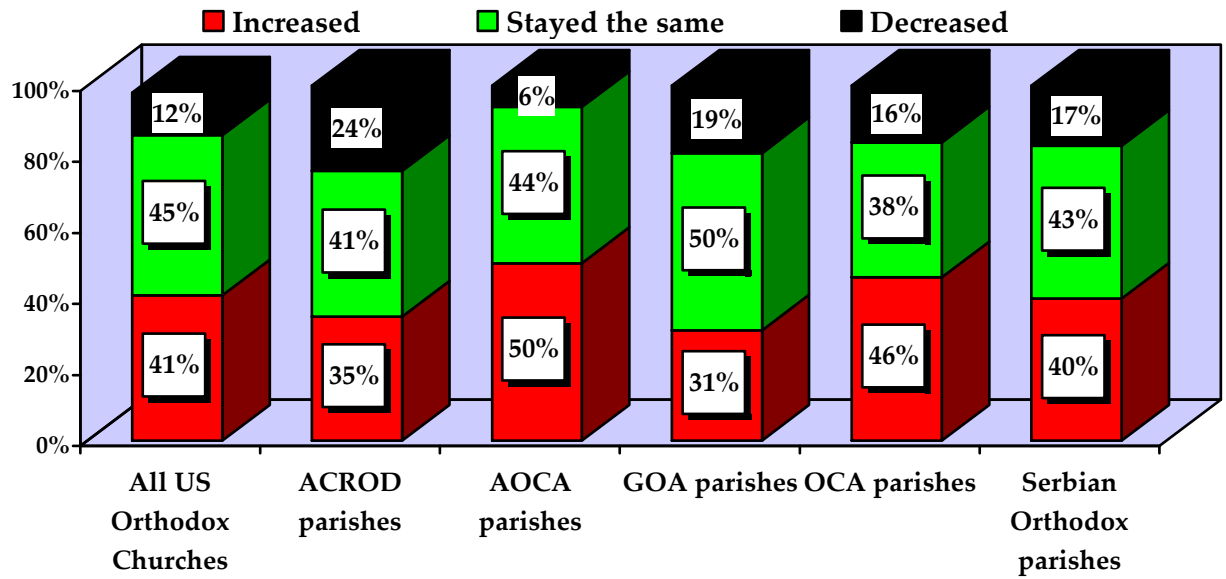


The somewhat good news for US Orthodox parishes is that 41% of them reported an increase in the percentage of young adults in the past three years, while only 12% of the parishes indicated that the number of their young adult parishioners has diminished. Further, Fig. 2 shows that in all individual jurisdictions participating in the study, the parishes with an increase in young adult members outnumber the parishes where the number of young adults has declined.



**Fig. 2 Change in the Number of Young Adult Parishioners in the Past Three Years**

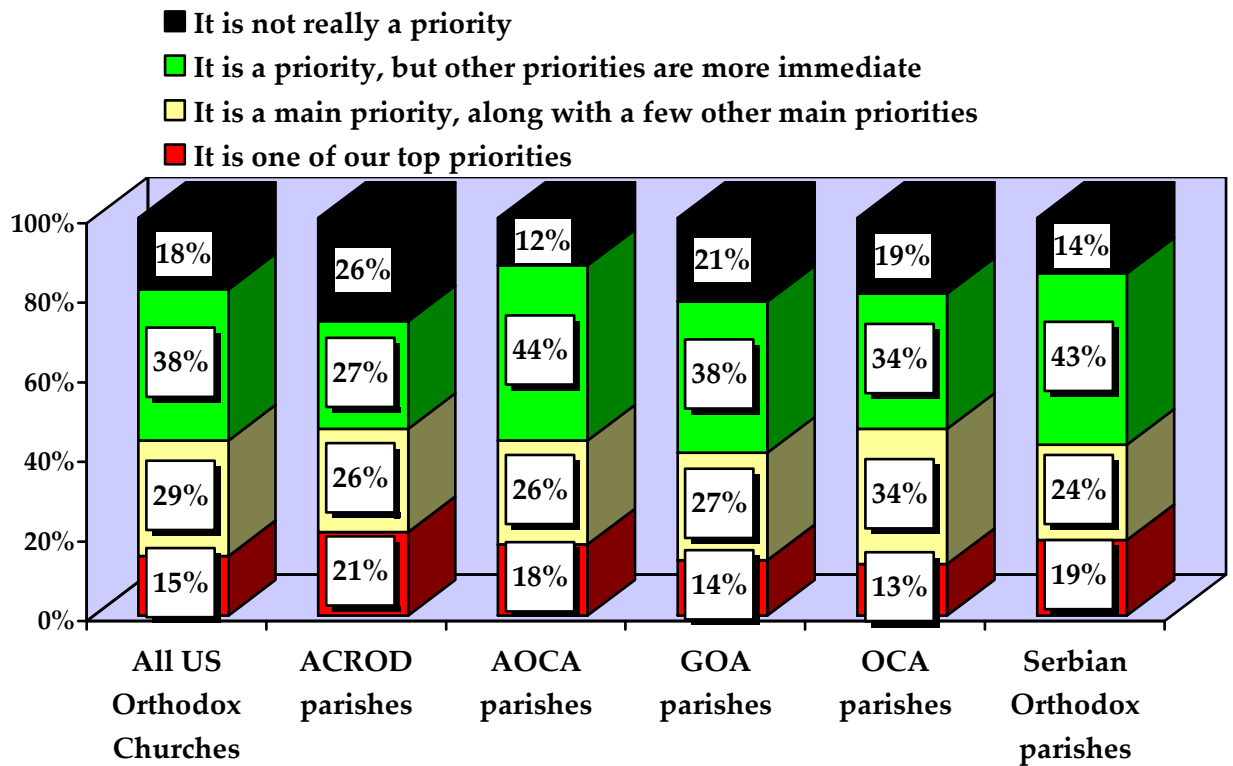
"Has the number of young adults participating in your parish increased or decreased in the past three years?"



However, this increase in the number of young adults reported by 41% of US Orthodox parishes can be hardly attributed to intentional efforts to attract more young adults and to make their parish communities more "young adult friendly." Fig. 3a indicates that only a small minority - 15% - of Orthodox parishes consider young adult ministries as being one of their top priorities and that all individual Orthodox jurisdictions are fairly similar in this regard.

**Fig. 3a Not Much Priority is Given to Young Adult Ministries in Orthodox Parishes:**

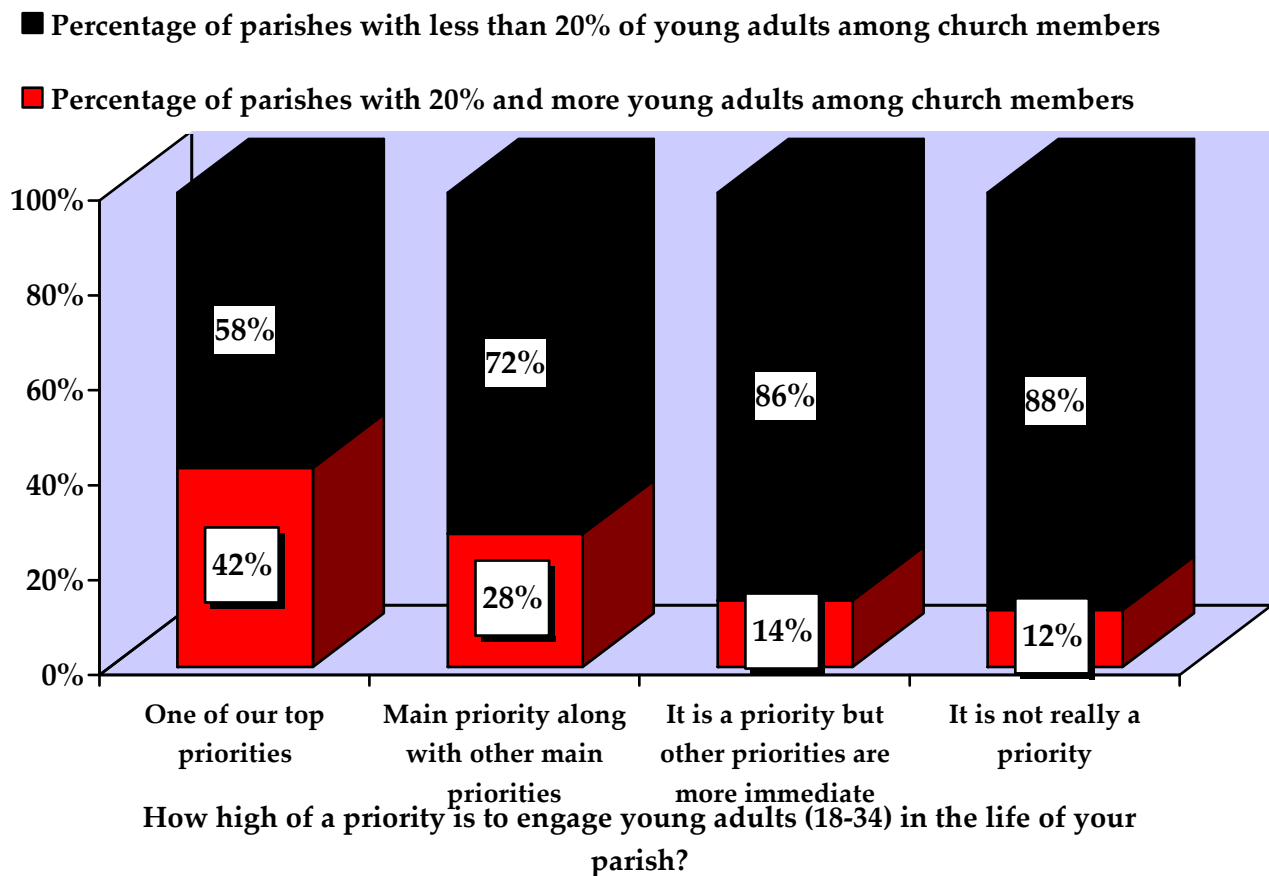
"How high of a priority is to engage young adults (18-34) in the life of your parish?"



Does the intentional emphasis of a parish on engaging young adults make a difference in the actual presence of the young adult members in such parish? The answer to this question is: "It definitely does." Fig. 3b shows that the parishes that consider engaging young adults as their top priority are much more likely to be the parishes where the young adults constitute 20% and more of all members.

**Fig. 3b Want More Young Adults? Prioritize their Engagement into a Parish!**  
**Parish's Emphasis on Engaging Young Adults Versus Actual Presence of Young Adults**

"How high of a priority is to engage young adults (18-34) in the life of your parish?"



How do the parishes self-evaluate their young adult ministries and programs? The questionnaire asked: "Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministry?" The respondents (parish clergy) were given seven options to respond. The figures in parentheses show percentages of responses to each option:

- "It is thriving (7%);"
- "We are doing okay, which is pretty good these days (15%);"
- "We have made some progress, but have a long way to go (31%);"
- "We have tried a few things, but with relatively little success (9%);"
- "We know we need to get something going, but haven't really figured what or how (16%);"

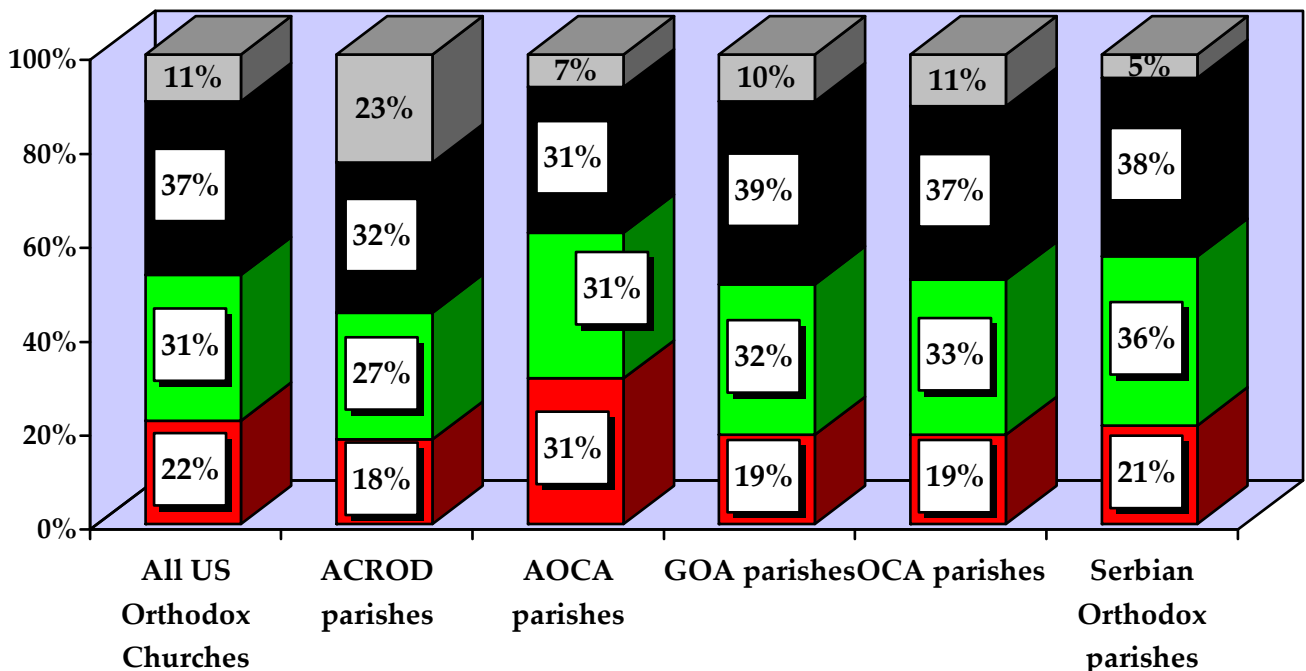
- "Not much, if anything, is going on and there is little urgency or interest to do more (11%);"
- "Not much, if anything, is going on and given how few young adults are in our area there is little or nothing we could realistically do (11%)."

For simplification of analysis, the first and second groups of responses were combined in a single category of parishes with "Good/Excellent young adult ministries." The fourth, fifth and sixth groups of responses were combined in a single category of parishes with "Poor young adult ministries." See Fig. 4a

**Fig. 4a Self-Evaluation of Young Adult Ministries and Programs by Orthodox Parishes:**

"Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministry?"

- There is little we could realistically do given how few young adults are in our area
- Poor
- We made some progress, but have long way to go
- Good/Excellent

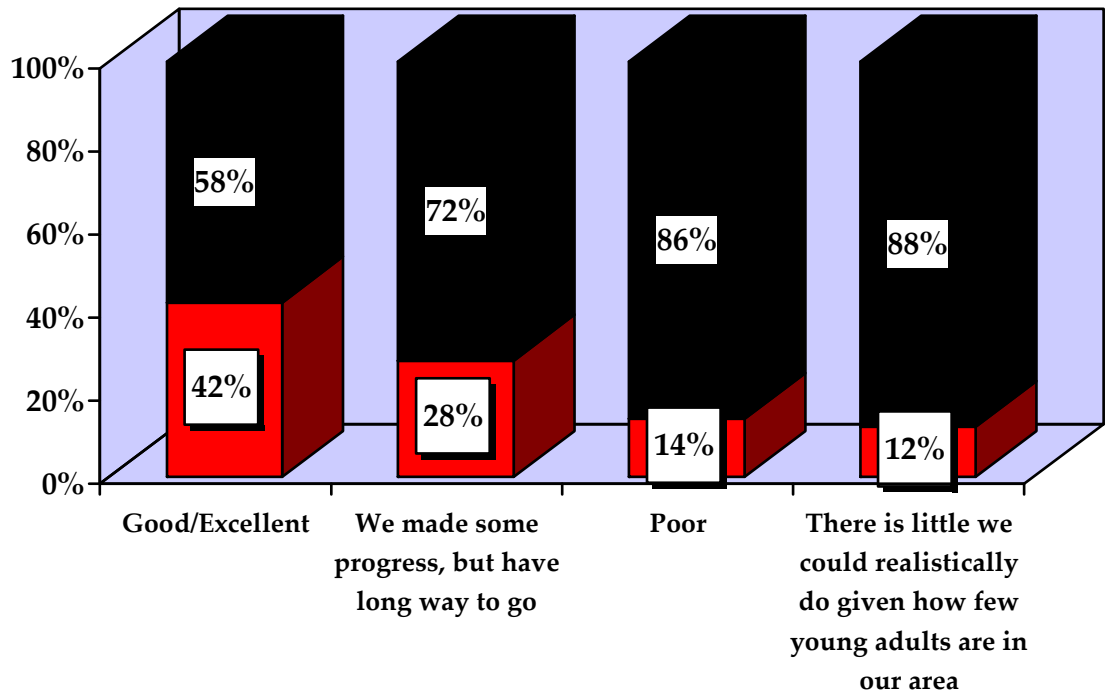


Three major observations can be made from Fig. 4a. First, only about one-in-five US Orthodox parishes (22%) have "Good/Excellent" young adult ministries, while many more church communities (37%) cater poorly to the needs of young adults and do not make any progress in this respect. Second, only a small percentage (11%) of US Orthodox parishes have a perceived "excuse" for not having young adult ministries, because of the absence of the young adults living in their area.

Does the quality of the young adult ministries make a difference in the actual presence of the young adult members in a parish? The answer to this question is: "It definitely does." Fig. 4b shows that the parishes that evaluated their young adult ministries as "Good/Excellent" are much more likely to be the parishes where the young adults constitute 20% and more of all members.

**Fig. 4b Want More Young Adults in a Parish? Offer Them High Quality Young Adult Ministries!**  
**Parish's Quality of the Young Adult Ministries Versus Actual Presence of Young Adults**

■ Percentage of parishes with less than 20% of young adults among church members  
 ■ Percentage of parishes with 20% and more young adults among church members



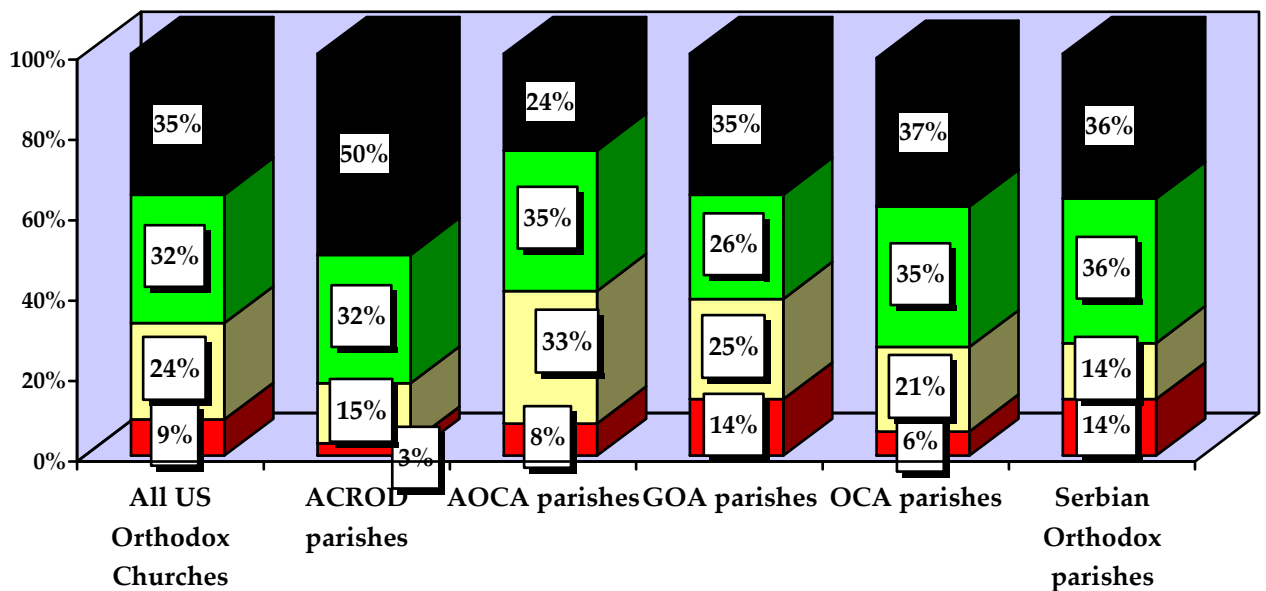
Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministry?

Do parishes develop any intentional strategies for better engaging young adults? Fig. 5a shows that two-thirds of US Orthodox parishes either do not have any strategy for engaging young adults (35% of parishes) or they simply try to involve young adult members in the general life of the parish (32% of parishes). Only 9% of parishes developed strategies that are geared to creating opportunities and programs specifically for young adults.

**Fig. 5a Very Few Orthodox Parishes Have Intentional Strategies for Engaging Young Adults:**

"Which of the following best describes your parish's strategy for engaging young adults (18-34)?"

- We don't really have an intentional strategy
- Strategy is more geared to involving young adults in the general life of the parish
- Strategy is a pretty even balance of both general involvement and special opportunities/programs for young adults
- Strategy is geared to creating special opportunities/programs specifically for young adults



Having designated leaders whose primary responsibility is working with young adults is a very important factor for congregations that desire to have a thriving young adult ministry. Fig. 5b indicates that only one-third (35%) of parishes have such leaders with 28% of the parishes with volunteers serving as young adult leaders and only a very small number (7%) of the parishes which have part- or full-time paid young adult leaders.<sup>3</sup>

**Fig. 5b Not Many Orthodox Parishes Have Designated Leaders for Work with Young Adults:**

"Does your parish have a leader whose specific responsibility is engaging young adults (18-34)?"

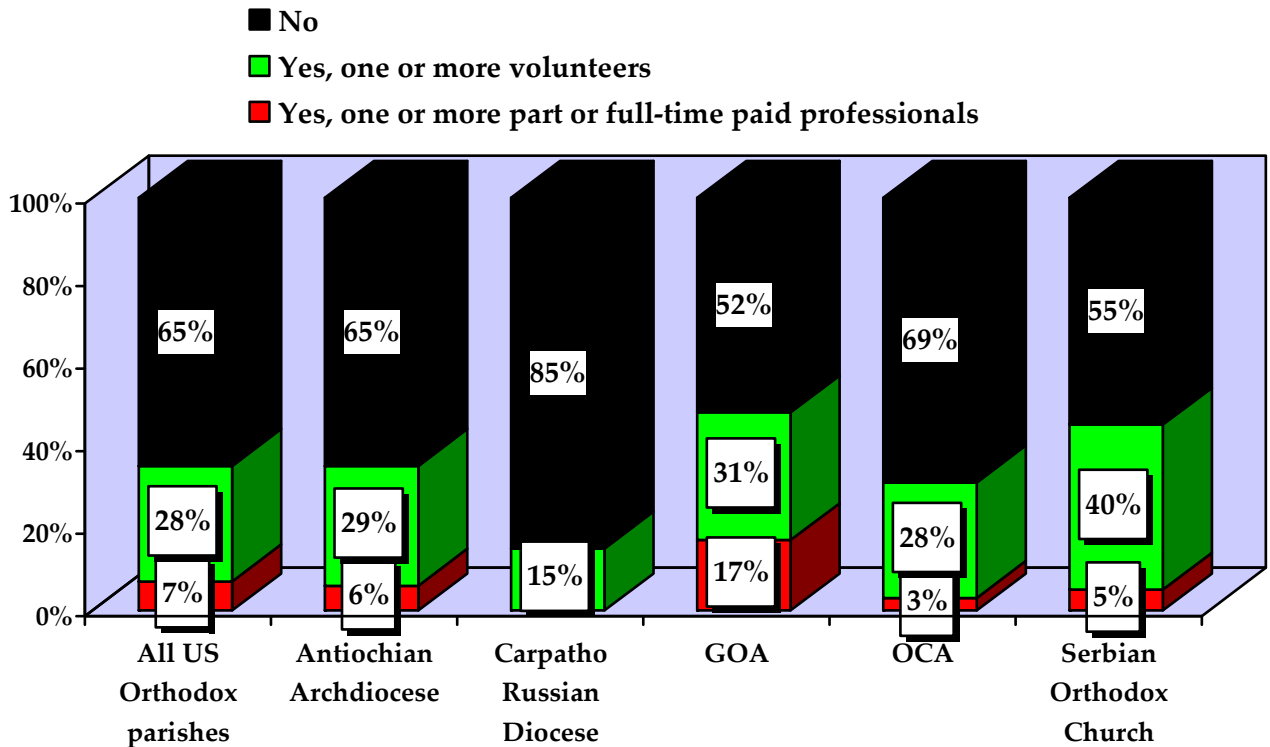


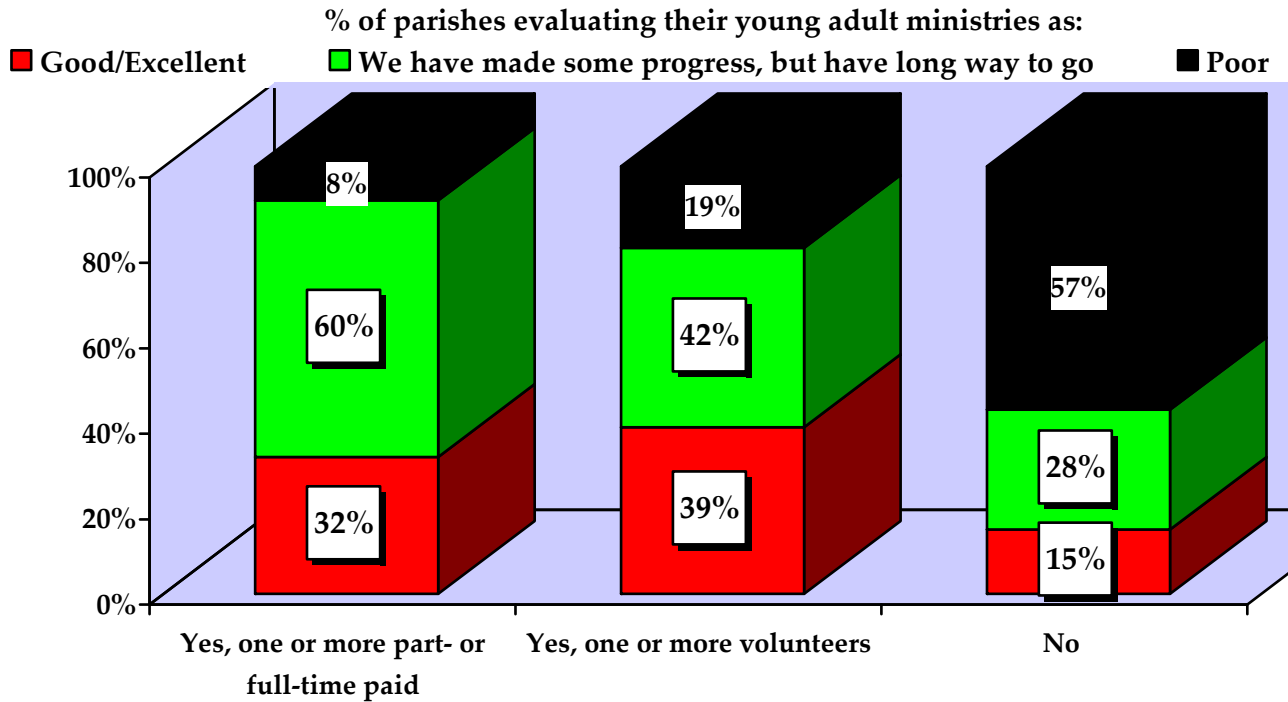
Fig. 5c and 5d demonstrate why having designated young adult leaders is so important for thriving young adult ministries and growth in young adult members. One can see that the parishes with designated young adult leaders (either volunteering or part- or full-time paid) are much more likely to grow in the number of young adults and report "Good/Excellent" young adult ministries than the other parishes. Remarkably, according to the clergy surveyed, it does not make much difference whether these leaders are volunteers or paid professionals. As Fig. 5c and 5d show, clergy in parishes that have volunteer young adult leaders and clergy in the parishes with paid professionals are equally likely to report an increase in their young adult parishioners and thriving young adult ministries. Thus, survey data suggest that it does not make much difference whether these leaders are volunteers or paid professionals: (although this answer may change if the

<sup>3</sup> Including parishes that have assistant clergy whose responsibility is to work with young adults

survey were expanded to youth leaders) what is most important is to have a person whose clear responsibility is to engage young adults.

**Fig. 5c Having Designated Young Adult Leaders Is Very Important for Parish's Young Adult Ministries**

"Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministries?"

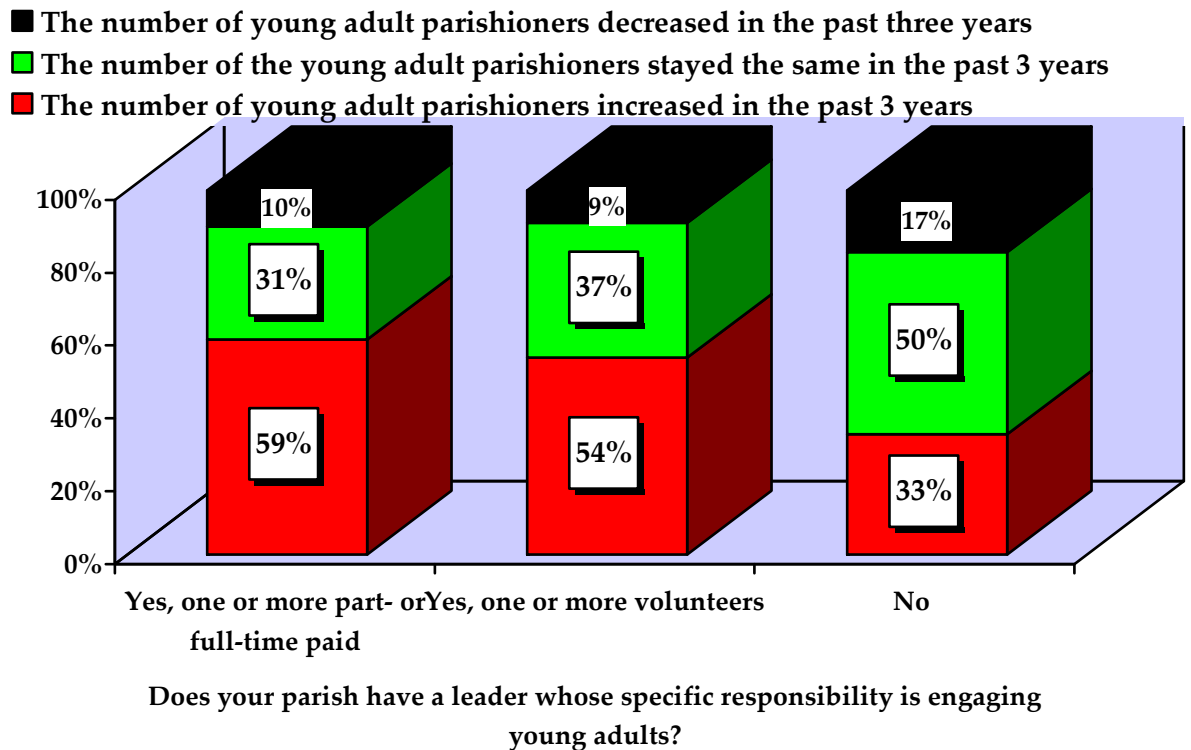


Does your parish have a leader whose specific responsibility is engaging young adults?



**Fig. 5D Having Designated Young Adult Leaders in a Parish Is Very Important for Growth in Young Adults Members**

"Has the number of young adults participating in your parish increased or decreased in the past three years?"

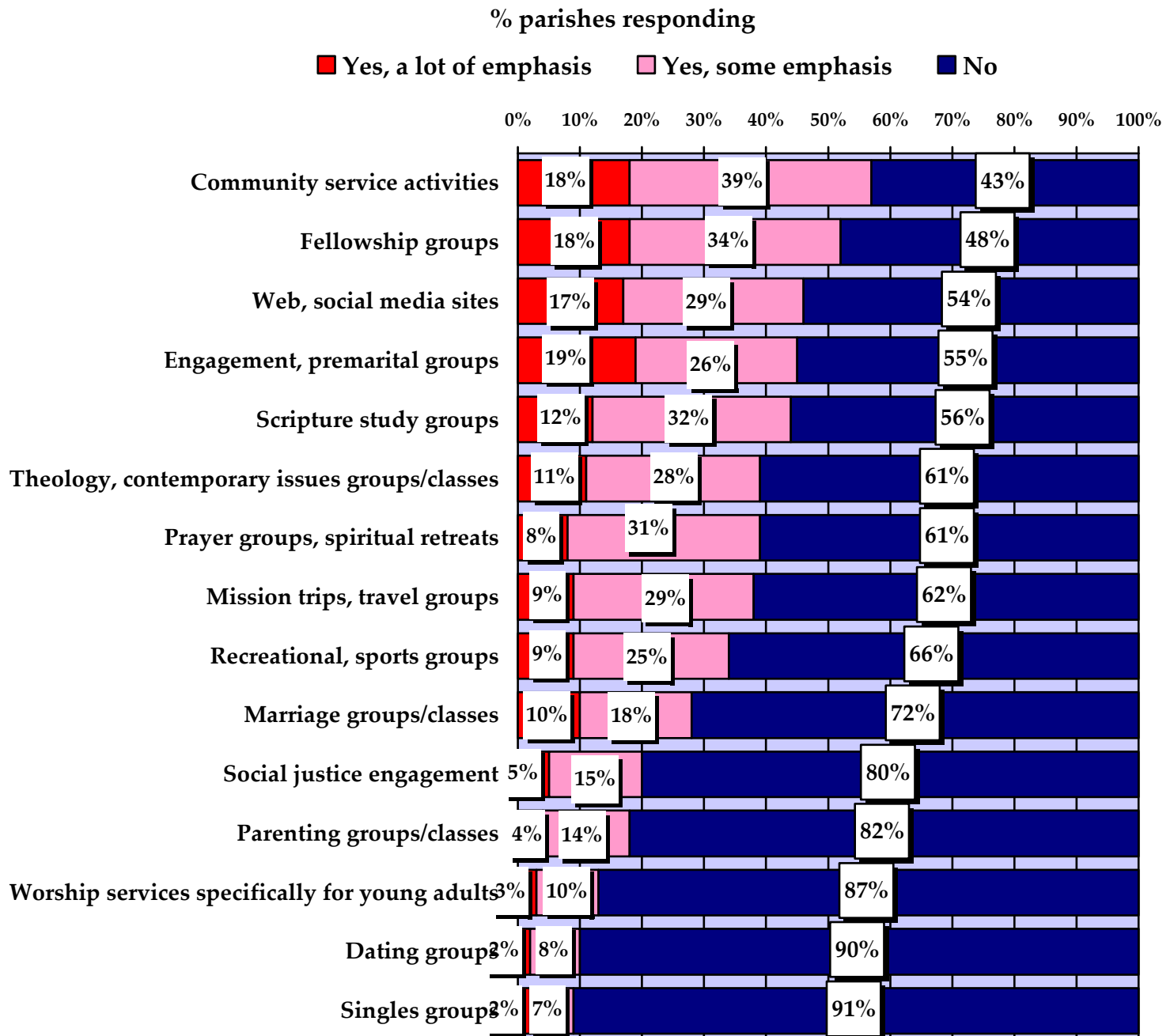


The next question is: if a parish offers some ministries or activities specifically for their young adult members, what are exactly these ministries or activities? The survey asked: "Does your parish have any of the following groups, programs or activities that are specifically intended for young adults? If yes, how much emphasis is given to each?" The parishes were given a list of fifteen programs/activities/ministries and with regard to each they can respond:

- "No;"
- "Yes, some emphasis;"
- "Yes, a lot of emphasis;"

Fig. 6 on the next page shows the answer to this question for the parishes of all jurisdictions combined.

**Fig. 6 What the Parishes Do and What They Don't Do for their Young Adult Members:**  
**“Does your parish have any of the following groups, programs or activities that are specifically intended for young adults? If yes, how much emphasis is given to each?”**



The five top activities/programs/services that are offered specifically to young adults in more than 40% of American Orthodox parishes are: "Community service activities" (offered in 57% parishes), "Fellowship groups" (offered in 52% parishes), "Web, social media sites" (offered in 46% parishes), Engagement, premarital groups (offered in 45% parishes) and "Scripture study groups" (offered in 44% parishes).

On the opposite end are the four activities and programs that are offered to young adults rather rarely: in no more than 20% of US Orthodox parishes. These "rare" young adult ministries are "Social justice engagement" (only 20% offer this ministry), "Parenting groups/classes" (18%), "Worship services specifically for young adults" (13%), "Dating groups" (10%) and "Singles groups" (9%).

There are some significant differences among the parishes of five individual jurisdictions in what they offer to their young adult members. In summary, compared to other jurisdictions:

- ❖ The parishes of Antiochian Archdiocese offer more often to their young adults:
  - Fellowship groups
  - Pre-marital groups/classes
  - Parenting groups/classes
- ❖ The parishes of American Carpatho-Russian Diocese offer more often to their young adults:
  - Worship services specifically for young adults
  - Prayer groups, spiritual retreats
  - Dating groups
  - Mission trips, travel groups
- ❖ The parishes of Greek-Orthodox Archdiocese offer more often to their young adults:
  - Worship services specifically for young adults
  - Fellowship groups
  - Pre-marital groups/classes
  - Parenting groups/classes
  - Web, social media sites
- ❖ The parishes of Orthodox Church in America offer more often to their young adults:
  - Scripture study groups/classes
- ❖ The parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Church offer more often to their young adults:
  - Scripture study groups/classes
  - Prayer groups, spiritual retreats
  - Dating groups
  - Recreational, sports groups
  - Mission trips, travel groups

So far we have discussed what Orthodox parishes offer and what they do not offer to their young adult members. But the more crucial question is: "Which of these programs and activities are most essential for the thriving young adult ministries? Which of these programs and activities are most likely to attract young adults?"

In order to respond this question a two-step analysis was performed. First, we constructed the "Index of Success of Young Adult Ministry" or ISYAM (its description follows). Second, we examined the statistical relationship between this index and the emphasis that the Orthodox parishes place on various young adult ministries presented in Fig. 6.

The ISYAM was constructed out of responses to two questions that were analyzed previously:

- ❖ The first question used to construct ISYAM was "Has the number of young adults participating in your parish increased or decreased in the past three years?" If a parish responded "Decreased," this answer was coded as 1. If a parish responded "Stayed the same," this answer was coded as 2. If a parish responded "Increased," this answer was coded as 3.
- ❖ The second question used to construct ISYAM was "Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministry?" If a parish responded "Poor," this answer was coded as 1. If a parish responded "We made some progress, but have long way to go," this answer was coded as 2. If a parish responded "Good/Excellent," this answer was coded as 3. The parishes that responded "There is little that we realistically could do, because of very few young adults in our area" were excluded from further analysis.

For each parish, the coded responses to question 1 were added to coded responses to question 2. The resulting sum was divided by two. The obtained figure served as ISYAM. For example, if a parish reported increase in young adults within past three years (coded answer "3") and described its young adult ministries as "We made some progress, but have long way to go" (coded answer "2"), then the ISYAM was equal:  $(2+3) / 2 = 2.5$  The ISYAM can vary from 1 to 3. The higher its value is, the more successful an Orthodox parish is in its young adult ministries and attracting new young adult members into a parish. The analysis of the statistical relation between ISYAM and the parish's emphasis on each of 15 young adult services/programs/activities identified six services/programs/activities that are especially important for the overall success of the young adult ministries.

Listed in descending order of their importance, the six programs and activities that are especially important for the overall success of the young adult ministries and attracting more young adult parishioners are:

- ❖ Fellowship groups
- ❖ Theology and contemporary issues study groups/classes
- ❖ Scripture study groups/classes
- ❖ Prayer groups, spiritual retreats
- ❖ Community service activities
- ❖ Mission trips, travel groups

In simple terms, the parishes with a strong emphasis on these six areas of the young adult activities and programs are much likely to be the parishes with thriving young adult ministries and growing number of young adult parishioners.

Remarkably, except for "fellowship groups," all other programs/activities that are most important for thriving young adult ministries are related to two areas of Christian life: "Learning more about and deepening one's faith ("Scripture study groups/classes," "Theology and/or contemporary issues study groups/classes," "Prayer groups, spiritual retreats") and "Outreach into wider community" ("Community service activities," "Mission trips, travel groups").

*In other words, survey data indicate that the opportunity to learn more about the Orthodox Faith and possibility to reach out into the wider community are two areas that are truly crucial for the overall success of the young adult ministries and attracting young adult church members.* Differently, various "social activities" ("engagement, premarital groups," "recreational, sport groups," "marriage groups/classes," "parenting groups/classes," "dating groups," "singles groups") are relatively less important for attracting and engaging young adults into a parish.

Out of the six most important areas of young adult ministries, only three were reported by a significant number of parishes as something that they have in place and offer to their young adults: "Fellowship groups," "Scripture study groups/classes," and "Community service activities" (see Fig. 6). The lesson is simple: if Orthodox parishes desire to improve their young adult ministries, they definitely should pay greater attention to "Mission trips," "Prayer groups, spiritual retreats" and "Theology and/or contemporary issues study groups/classes" specifically designed for and offered to their young adult members.

Sacramental worship is very central to the life of any Orthodox parish. Although Orthodox Liturgy allows for significantly less "experimentation" and "innovation" than Protestant services each Orthodox parish has its own "style" of how Liturgy and other services are celebrated. The duration of and language used in worship services, the vibrancy and relevance of sermons, the engagement of children and youths into altar service, the quality of the choir or chanters, the implementation of congregational singing, the inclusion of certain "optional" elements into the service, the understanding by parishioners of "what happens" during each part of the service rather than being simply "absentmindedly present in the church" and many other nuances make a huge difference in the quality of Orthodox worship experience in each local parish.

It would be feasible to assume that both the overall quality of services as well as certain "styles" and "forms" of worship may have significant influence on parish's success in developing young adult ministries and attracting more young adult members.

The survey asked clergy to describe worship services in their parishes in terms of seven characteristics. "How well do the following describe your parish's regular Sunday worship service?"

- ❖ Reverent
- ❖ Filled with a sense of God's presence
- ❖ Thought-provoking
- ❖ Nurturing people's faith
- ❖ Innovative
- ❖ Inspirational
- ❖ Joyful

With regard to each characteristic the clergy could say that it describes the worship services in their parishes "very well," "quite well," "somewhat," "slightly" or "not at all."

Fig. 7 shows percentages of clergy who think that each of these characteristics describe worship services in their parishes "very well" or "quite well"

**Fig. 7** “How well do the following describe your parish’s regular Sunday worship service?”

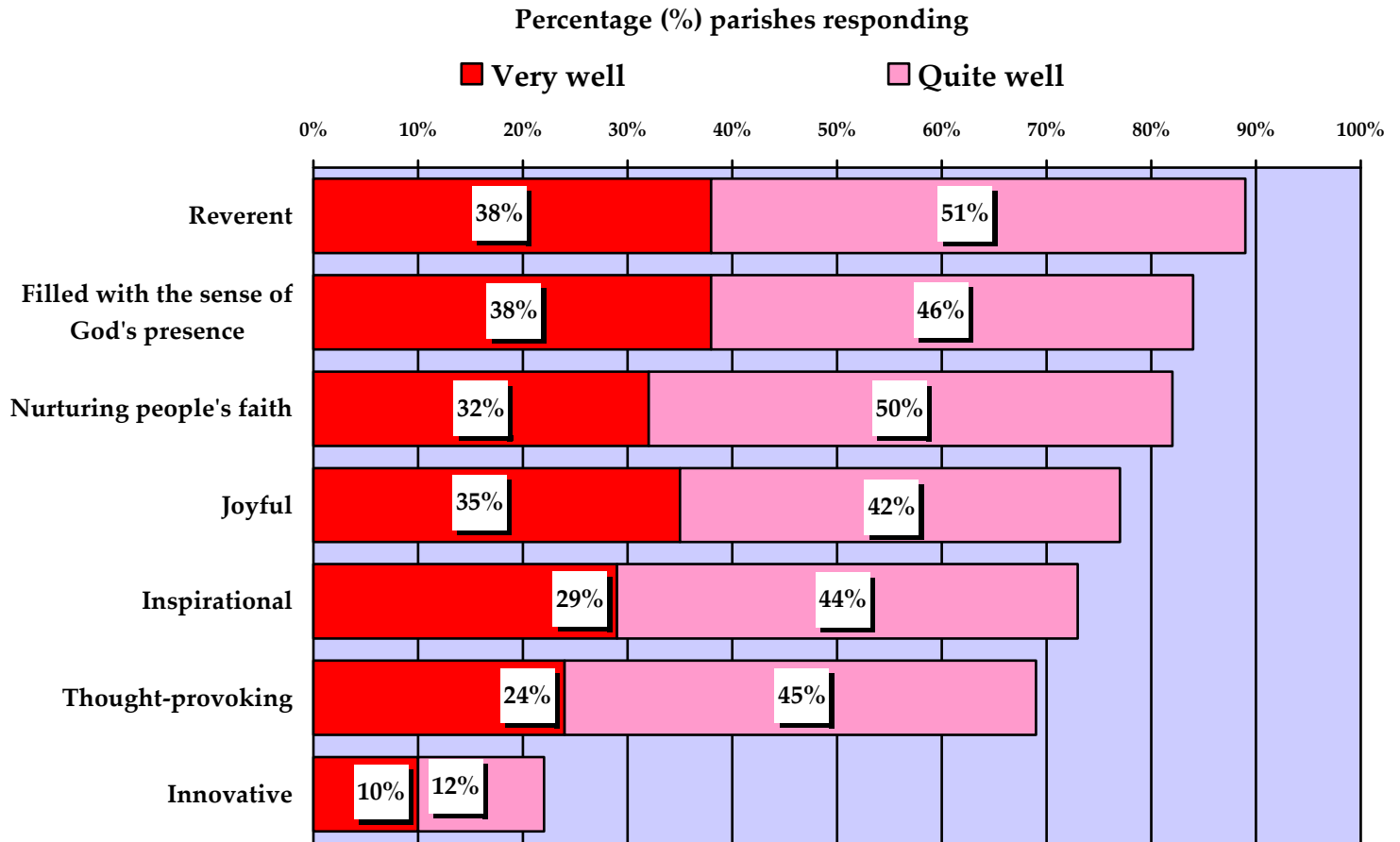


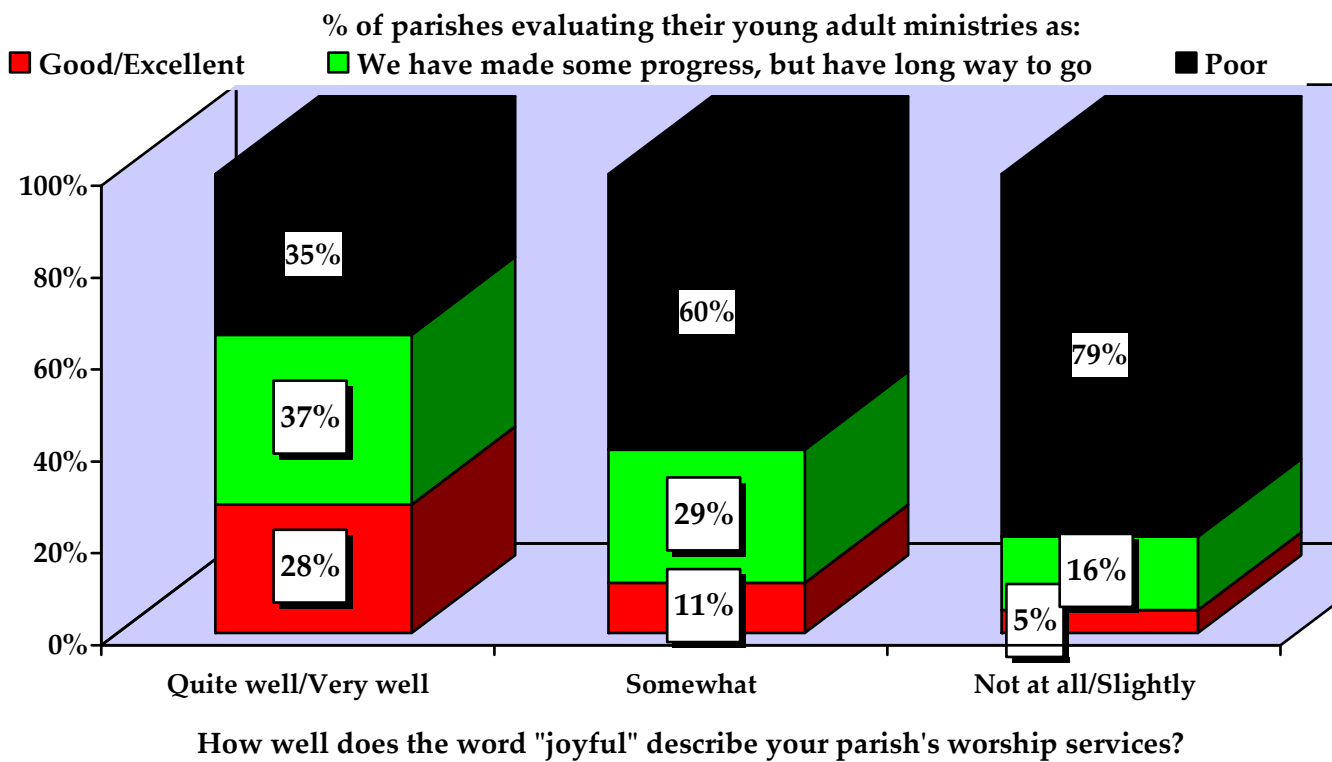
Fig. 7 shows that "Reverent" and "Filled with the sense of God's presence" were the words most frequently chosen by the clergy as describing "quite/very well" worship in their parishes: 89% and 84% respondents agreed that these characteristics describe accurately their worship services. At the same time, the clergy were significantly less likely to say that "Joyful," "Inspirational" and "Thought-Provoking" are good definitions for the worship services in their parishes: only 77%, 73% and 69% respondents agreed that these characteristics describe accurately their worship services. That is, the three characteristics of worship that would require a more creative approach on the part of the clergy are less common in US Orthodox parishes than the characteristics that are more associated simply with following established liturgical practices ("Reverent" and "Filled with the sense of God's presence."). The clergy were also far less likely to say that their worship services are "innovative" (only 22% of clergy think so) which is not surprising, because of the emphasis of the Orthodox Church on preserving traditional forms of worship and because "innovation" in worship might not be something that would be seen as positive by some t parish priests.

The most crucial question is: which of these seven characteristics of worship are most important for the success in the parish’s young adult ministries and attracting new young adult members into a parish? In order to answer this question, we examined the statistical relationship between the agreement of clergy with each of seven characteristics as describing correctly worship services in their parishes AND the fact that a parish a) grows in young adult members and b) reports “Good/Excellent” young adult ministries.

The most important finding was that out of seven characteristics of worship, the words “joyful” and “inspirational” have the strongest relation with parish’s growth in young adult members and presence of “Good/Excellent” young adult ministries. Fig. 7A-7D demonstrate this finding

**Fig. 7A Parishes with “Joyful” Worship Services Are Likely to Have Thriving Young Adult Ministries**

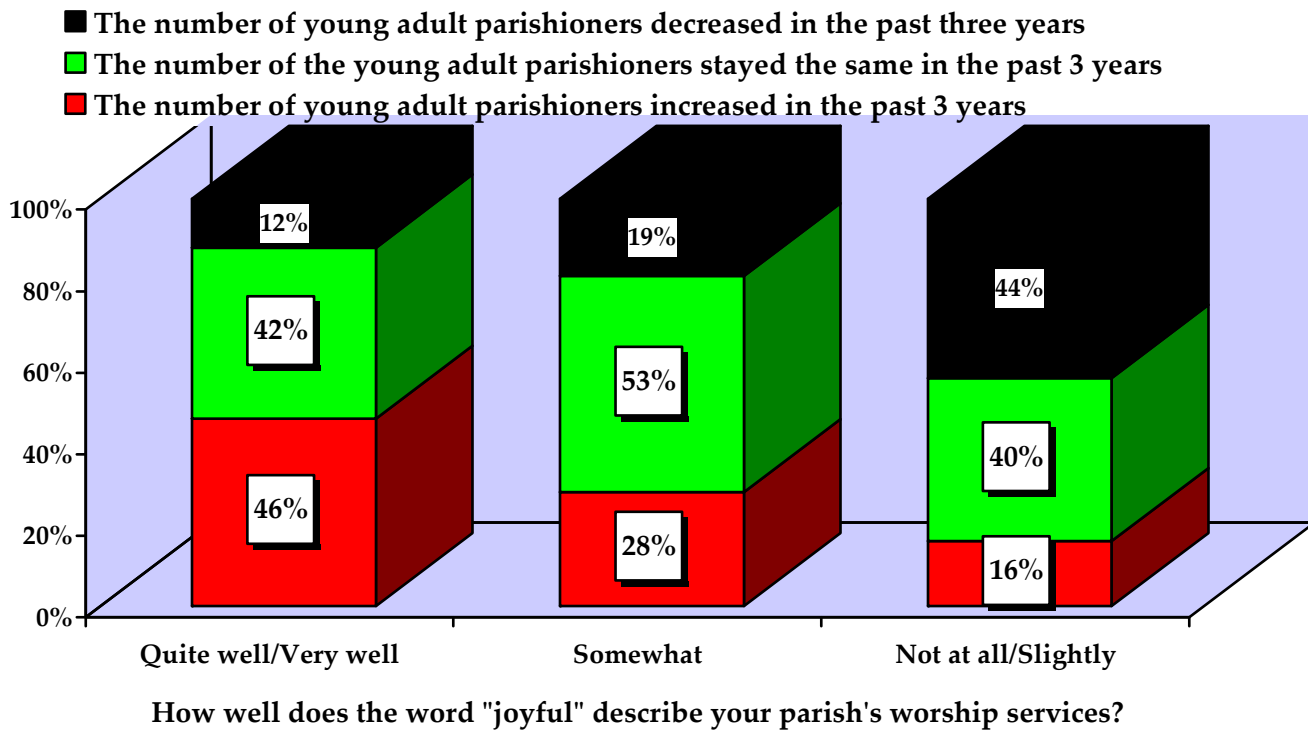
“Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministries?”





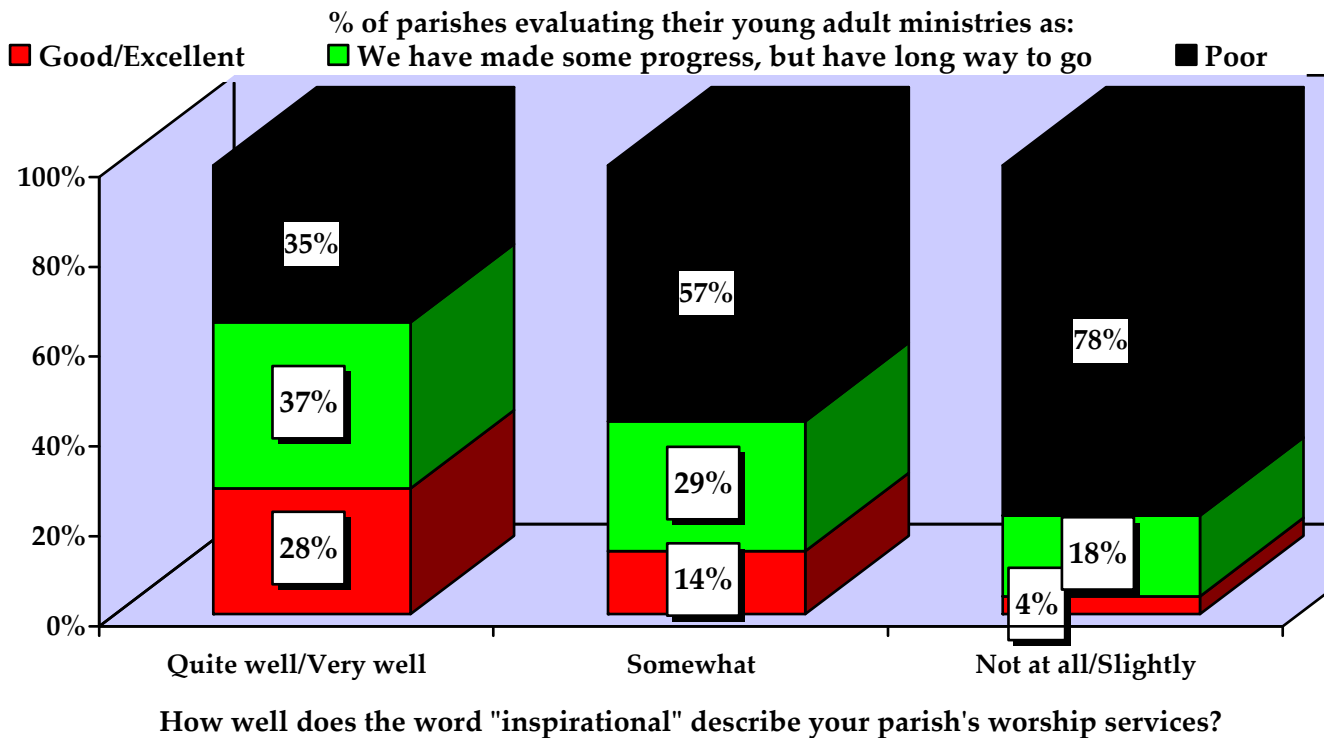
**Fig. 7B Parishes with “Joyful” Worship Services Are Likely to Grow in Young Adult Members**

"Has the number of young adults participating in your parish increased or decreased in the past three years?"



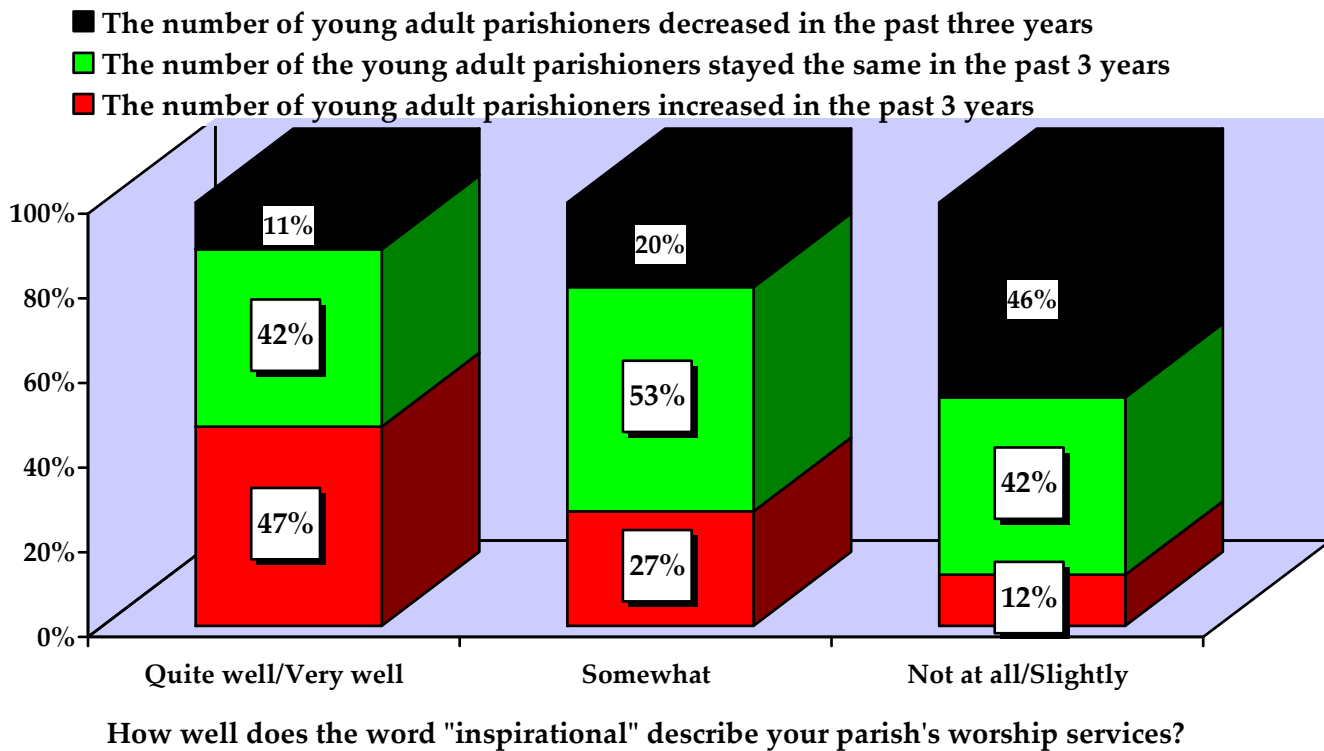
**Fig. 7C Parishes with “Inspirational” Worship Services Are Likely to Have Thriving Young Adult Ministries**

"Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministries?"



**Fig. 7D Parishes with “Inspirational” Worship Services Are Likely to Grow in Young Adult Members**

"Has the number of young adults participating in your parish increased or decreased in the past three years?"



In simple terms, *the parishes where worship services are "joyful" and "inspirational" are the parishes that are very likely to grow in young adult members and have "Good/Excellent" young adult ministries.* On the opposite end are two characteristics of worship that have relatively little or no influence on young adults: worship being "reverent" and "innovative." In other words, the fact that a parish has a "reverent" or "innovative" style of worship has little influence on the fact that a parish would be growing in young adult church members and have thriving young adult ministries.

“Worship services,” “ministries,” “programs” are all the words that describe particular elements in the life of a parish. While all these elements are important, there are also many other characteristics and features that distinguish one parish from another. In other words, Orthodox parishes organize their religious and social lives in very different ways. Some of them limit themselves to liturgical services, while others develop a wide range of social and educational activities. Some church communities embrace innovation and change, while others emphasize their adherence to established traditions. Some cherish their ethnic identity and make a conscious effort to preserve their ethnic heritage, while others strive to be “pan-Orthodox” and/or “All-American” parishes. Some parishes consider social and religious outreach into the local community among their top priorities, while others are more “insular” and have fewer interactions with their neighborhoods and the “religious others,” etc. Each of these numerous characteristics and features can be seen as a part of parish’s distinct identity. Combined, they create a unique local Orthodox Christian community.

The survey asked “Do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about your parish?” The clergy were given nine statements describing various aspects of parish life. With regard to each statement, the respondents could say that they: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neutral/not sure,” “disagree,” “strongly disagree.” Fig. 8 on the next page shows the percentage of the study participants who either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with each statement.

**Fig. 8 Self-Perception of Orthodox Parishes**

**“Do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about your parish?”**

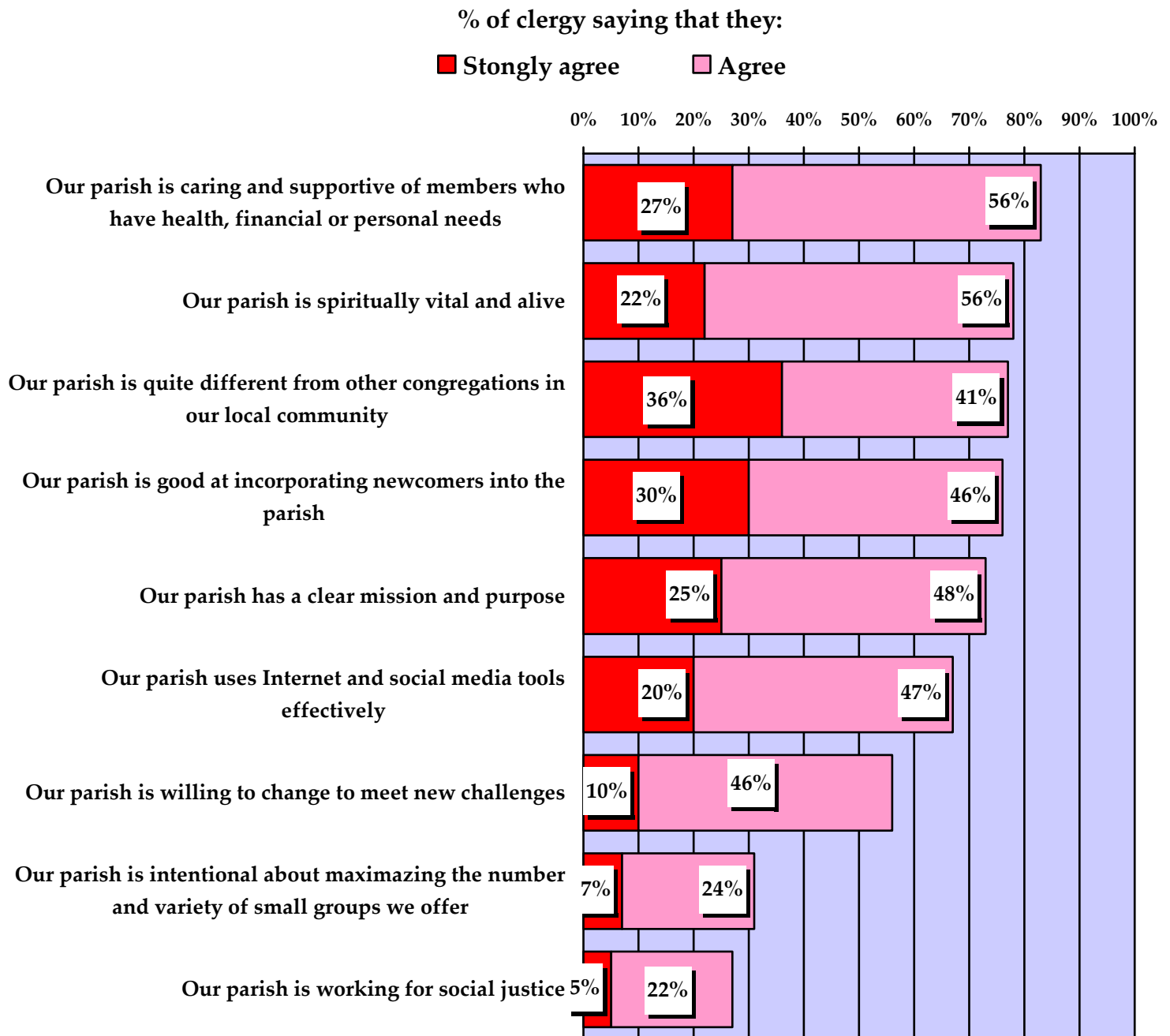


Fig. 8 shows that overall Orthodox priests have a fairly positive view on their parishes. In particular, more than three-quarters of them believe that:

- ❖ Their parishes are loving communities that care about members who have personal problems and needs;
- ❖ Their parishes are spiritually vibrant Christian communities;

- ❖ Their parishes are communities with strong and clear identities that distinguish them from the other religious congregations in their neighborhoods;
- ❖ Their parishes are welcoming places that integrate easily new members into a parish community.

All parish features presented in Fig. 8 are positive characteristics. The question is, however: out of these nine parish features, which are most important for attracting young adults into a parish and creating thriving young adult ministries? In order to answer this question, we examined the statistical relationship between the agreement of clergy with each of nine statements as describing accurately their parishes AND the fact that a parish a) grows in young adult members and b) reports “Good/Excellent” young adult ministries.

Out of nine parish features, two have by far the strongest connection with parish’s growth in young adult members and presence of “Good/Excellent” young adult ministries: being “spiritually vital and alive” and “good at incorporating new members.” In simple terms, young adults are first of all attracted to parish communities that offer vibrant spiritual life and, at the same time, are open to and welcome new people. As might also be expected, the presence of small interest groups within a parish, effective usage of social media, the parish’s readiness for innovation and change, mutual support and help among parishioners, involvement of a parish in social justice work, clarity of vision for a parish’s future – all other characteristics have also positive influence on attracting young adults. Yet, it is spiritual vibrancy and openness to newcomers that are especially important for young adult church members.

What else can help the parishes to improve their ministry with and attract more young adults? The questionnaire asked "How important do you believe each of the following would be for helping your parish improve its ministry with young adults?" See Fig. 9 on the next page.

**Fig. 9 So, What Is Exactly the Problem with Your Parish’s Young Adult Ministries?**

**“How important each of the following would be for helping your parish improve its ministry with young adults?”**

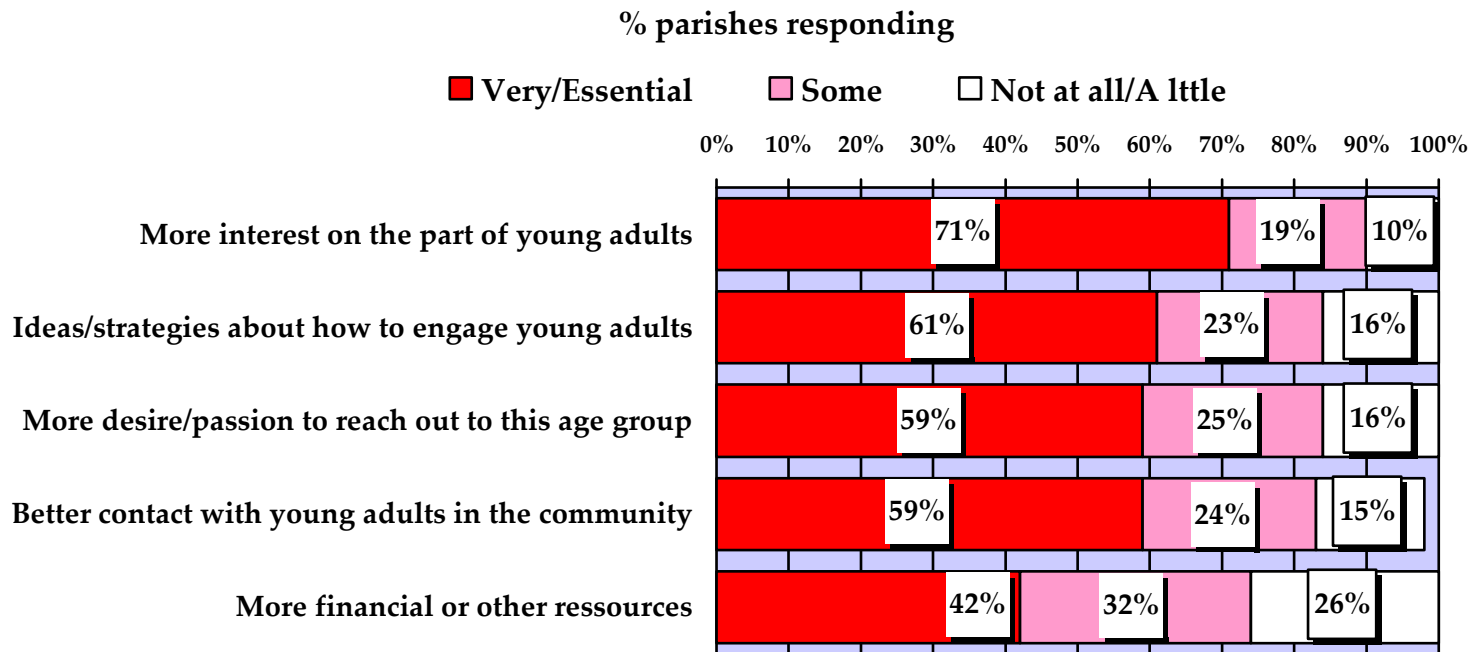


Fig. 9 shows that - from the perspective of parish clergy - the greatest problem in ministering to young adult members are the young adults themselves, because they appear to them to have little interest in participating in parish life. Indeed, 71% of the respondents said that "more interest on the part of young adults" is "Very important/Essential" for improving their parishes' ministry with young adults. That is, parish clergy are more inclined to "blame" the young adults for not participating in a parish rather than think about lack of a certain action on the part of a parish such as "Ideas/strategies about how to engage young adults," "More desire/passion to reach out to this age group," and "Better contact with young adults in the community." Remarkably, less than half of parishes (42%) think that the major problem in ministering to young adults is insufficient "financial or other resources."

Clearly, there could be many other factors that could help parishes improve their ministries with young adults. Therefore, the questionnaire had an open-end question asking for any "other factors" that would improve the quality of young adult ministries. Relatively few respondents answered this question. Below are some answers that can be insightful and helpful for other parishes:

- ❖ "A young priest is needed to communicate better with young adults."
- ❖ "Defining a leader among young adults is important."
- ❖ "A dedicated staff person to direct the ministry: paid youth staff would help."

- ❖ "Priests and parents need to do everything possible when sending their kids to college to hand them off to a local parish community and plug them in to an OCF."
- ❖ "We need help from the parents to facilitate and support Young Adult ministry events. This would be key in our church. If the parents think this is something worth doing, you are more likely to have the young adults think the same."
- ❖ "We need to combine efforts with other Orthodox Churches in our region on working with young adults."
- ❖ "What young people want is to be included in the life of the parish--not as 'young adults,' but as Christians."

The question of young adult ministries in Orthodox parishes is closely related to the subject of Orthodox Christian Fellowship - the national campus ministry of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops. Indeed, both issues deal with the same age category of church members. In 2013-2014, the Assembly conducted a comprehensive study of the OCF chapters in US colleges and universities. Both Orthodox students (i.e. OCF members) and Orthodox clergy (i.e. OCF spiritual advisors) took part in this study. Divided in two parts, the full report from this study is available on Assembly's website at:

<http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/docs/research/OCF2-Study-Report.pdf>

Among many subjects examined in this study was the question about relations between OCF chapters and the nearby local Orthodox parishes (e.g., most OCF spiritual advisors also serve as full-time priests in local Orthodox parishes, many Orthodox parishes offer their support to the nearby OCF chapters or provide students with a place to meet, etc.).

Two questions in the "Orthodox Christian Parishes in 21st Century America" study looked at the involvement of the Orthodox parishes in the lives of nearby OCF chapters. The first question asked: "Is your parish involved with any local OCF (Orthodox Christian Fellowship) chapter?" See Fig. 10.

**Fig. 10 Involvement of US Orthodox Parishes with the OCF (Orthodox Christian Fellowship) Chapters**

"Is your parish involved with any local OCF chapter?"

■ No

□ No, but our parish maintains communications with former teen parishioners who attend colleges "away from the home"

■ Yes

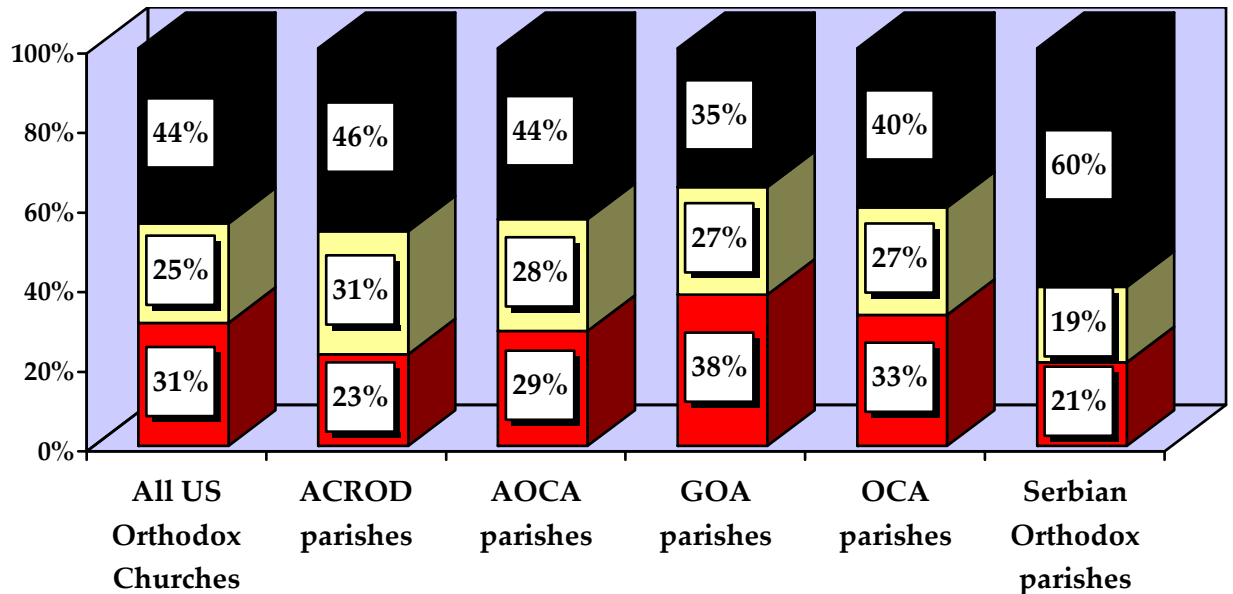


Fig. 10 shows that only three-in-ten (31%) Orthodox parishes have some relations with local OCF chapters. Is the figure of 31% US Orthodox parishes being involved with local OCF chapters satisfactory or not? In order to answer this question accurately we would need to map the parishes participating in our study and compare their locations with locations of OCF chapters. But we do not have such data in this survey.

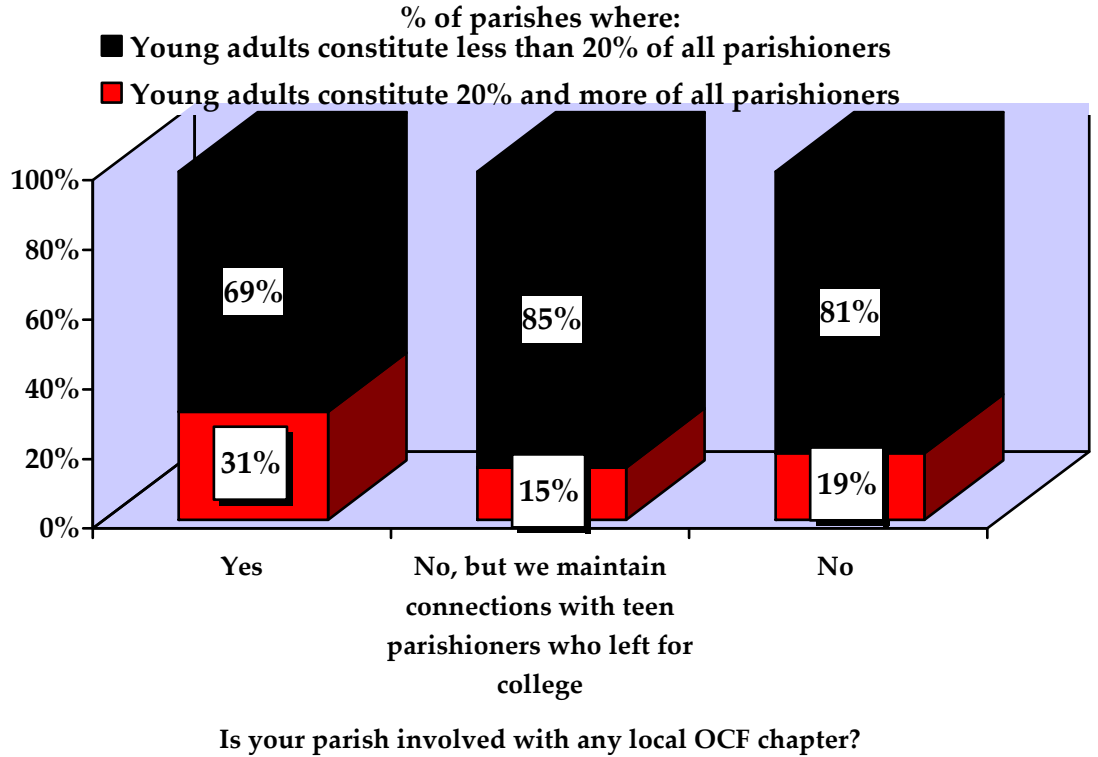
The survey data show that an involvement of a parish with a local OCF chapter and parish's success in serving its own young adult members go hand in hand with each other. That is, compared to the other parishes, the parishes that ARE involved with the local OCF chapters:

- A. Have significantly higher presence of young adults among current parishioners
- B. Have experienced growth in the number of young adult parishioners in the past three years
- C. Are much more likely to evaluate their young adult ministries as "Good/Excellent"

Fig. 11 A-C demonstrate these statements.

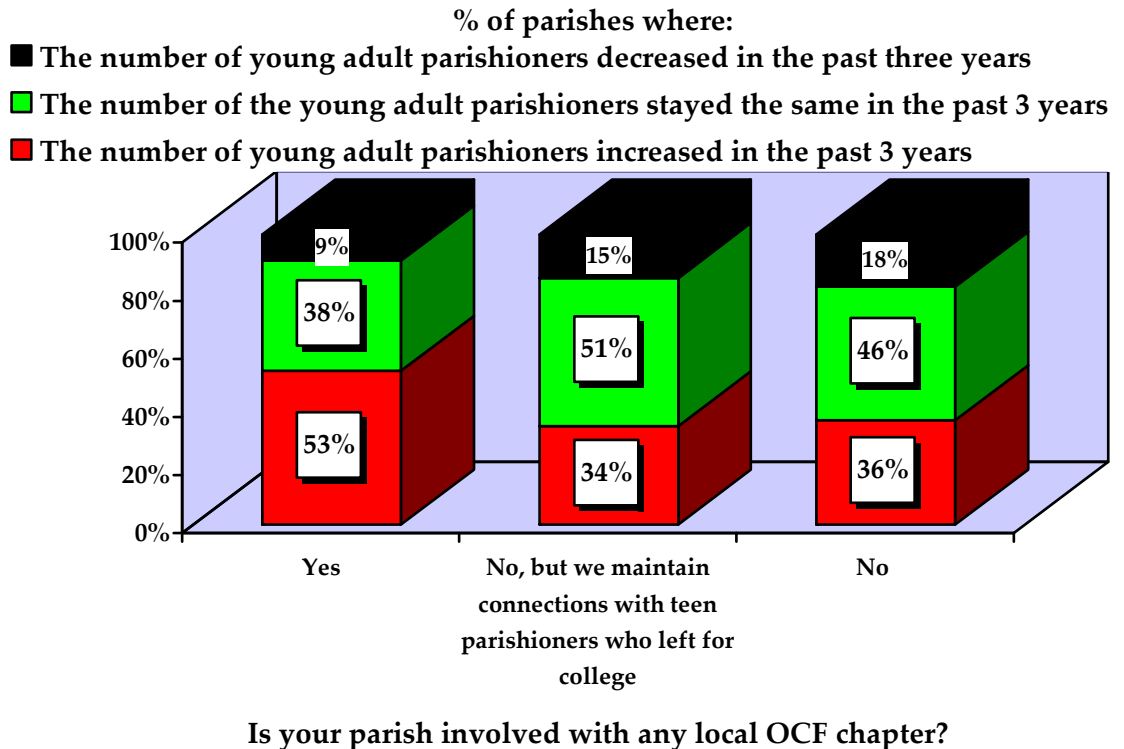


**Fig. 11a Parish's Involvement with Local OCF Chapters Means Also More Young Adult Parishioners**



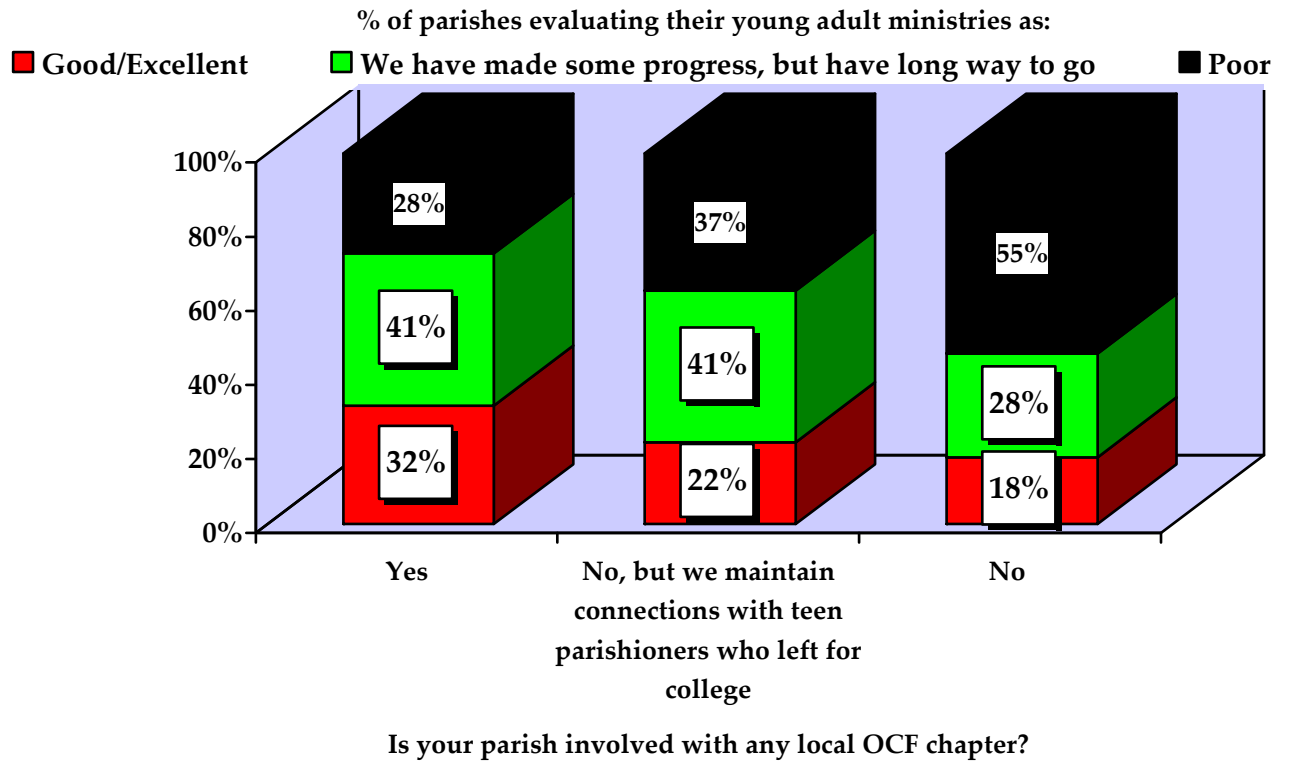
**Fig. 11b Parish's Involvement with Local OCF Chapters Attracts More Young Adults into a Parish**

"Has the number of young adults participating in your parish increased or decreased in the past three years?"



**Fig. 11c Parish's Involvement with OCF Chapters Helps to Improve Parish's Young Adult Ministries**

"Which of the following best describes your parish's young adult ministries?"



Clearly, it is equally likely that:

- ❖ A parish's involvement with OCF may have positive influence on young adults' presence among parishioners and the quality of the parish's young adult ministries AND VICE VERSA
- ❖ A strong presence of young adult parishioners and good young adult ministries could result in parish's involvement with the OCF chapter

The bottom line is: the survey data indicate clearly that a parish's success in serving its young adult parishioners and parish's involvement with local OCF chapters go hand in hand with each other.

"Involvement of a parish with a local OCF chapter" is a broad term. But what do the parishes actually do for and how do they help the OCF chapters? If a parish responded "yes" to the general question about involvement with OCF, the survey followed with the question about specific forms of support offered to OCF chapters. Fig. 12 shows the percentages of the parishes that answered "yes" on the general question about involvement with OCF and then indicated their participation in specific OCF related activities.

**Fig. 12 Of All US Orthodox Parishes Involved With Local OCF Chapters, the Percentage (%) of Parishes Which Do Each of the Following**

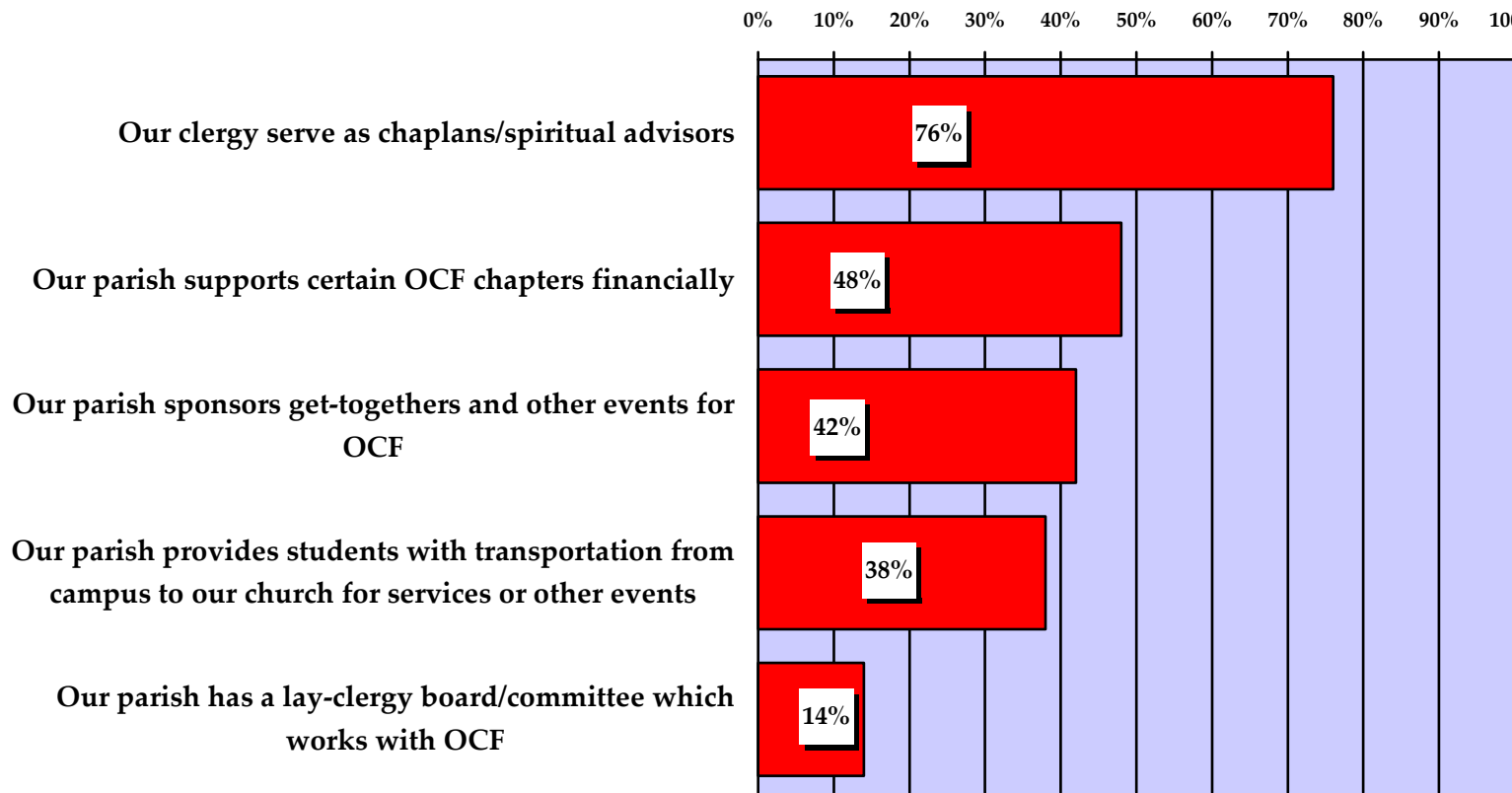
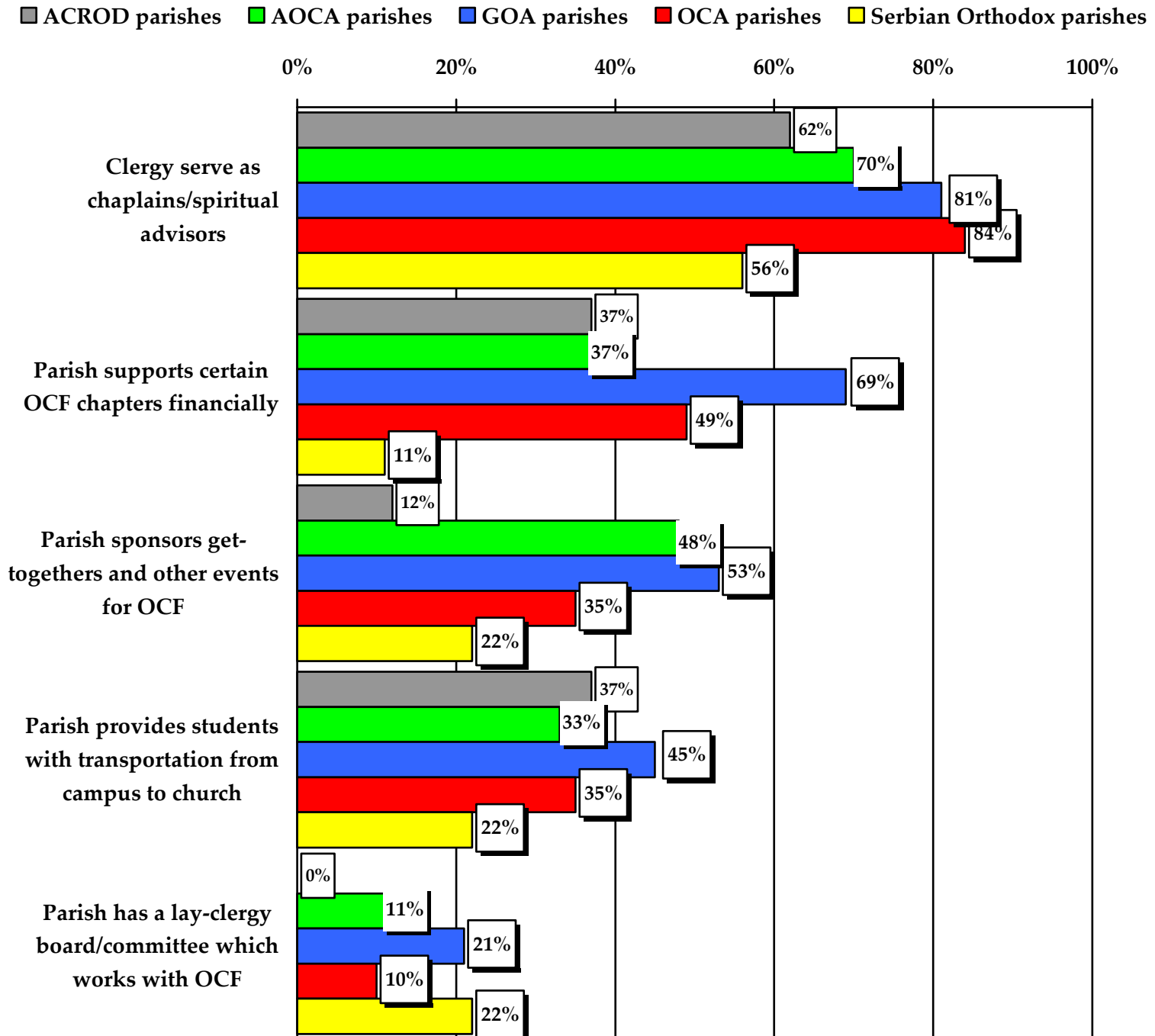


Fig. 12 shows that by far the most widespread form of involvement of the parishes with OCF (76%) is their clergy serving as spiritual advisors. Less than half of the parishes involved with OCF offer to OCF chapters some financial support (48%) or sponsor various OCF events (42%). And only one-in-seven (14%) of parishes involved with OCF take their involvement truly seriously and have permanent boards/committees that work with OCF chapters.

There are certain variations between the parishes of five individual jurisdictions in forms and, most importantly, degree of their involvement with the local OCF chapters. Fig. 13 on the next page shows that all jurisdictions are similar in a way that having clergy serving as spiritual advisors/chaplains in OCF chapters is the most common form of involvement with OCF, whereas establishing permanent lay-clergy boards/committees working with Orthodox students is the least common form. But the jurisdictions differ significantly from each other by the degree of their involvement in each form of work with OCF: i.e., by the percentage of parishes that participate in each area of activities presented in Fig. 13.

**Fig. 13 Differences between Antiochian, American Carpatho-Russian, GOA, OCA and Serbian Orthodox Parishes in their Involvement with the Local OCF Chapters**

Of all parishes reporting that they are "involved with the local OCF chapters," percentage (%) of parishes which do each of the following



Clearly, the involvement of Orthodox parishes with OCF chapters is not limited to five areas indicated in Fig. 12 and 13. Therefore the questionnaire also asked about "any other forms of cooperation with OCF." Only a few parishes provided some additional information on their work with OCF. Three of these answers were

interesting in a sense that they described something that could be considered and implemented by other parishes. One parish indicated that its OCF chapter has a designated "Orthodox Christian Resident House on campus." Another parish noted that besides working with Eastern Orthodox students, it also helps with "Oriental Indian Orthodox College Ministry." Finally, one parish mentioned that when OCF students attend this parish's services they always receive "special welcome and recognition."

### **A Few Additional Thoughts**

There are many reasons why US religious congregations in general and Orthodox parishes in particular are witnessing a low level of young adults' participation in organized religious life. Some of these reasons are rooted in the broader socio-cultural factors including the overall secularization of society, increased distrust of historical "established" institutions, high degree of geographic mobility at this stage of life, the fluctuating nature of a local community, changing forms of personal relationships resulting from the rise of technology and social media, overarching impacts of globalization, etc. Many of these factors may be beyond the complete control of the local (parish), regional (diocese) or national church leadership.

Yet, there are many factors that are within control of the Church and that the Church could and should seriously consider. For example, this report indicated that nearly three-quarters of parish priests believe that the lack of interest on the part of young adults themselves is a major obstacle for improving their young adult ministries. This finding deserves more attention and examination. The underlying assumption regarding young adults (i.e., that they are "hopelessly" uninterested in church life) may be a serious contributing factor discouraging many parishes from developing an intentional strategy for young adults or placing greater priority on their young adult ministries. It could also be creating an excuse for a parish or a self-fulfilling prophecy or cycle. Since young adults are perceived to be disinterested in parish life, parishes don't minister to them or create opportunities to involve them, which only increases the lack of interest by young adults. Further, in order for parishes to become more "appealing" for young adults (and young people in general), it may require significant changes in their governance structures, practices, attitudes and activities. If there is no openness to change, or a lack of willingness to meet new challenges, then attracting young adults will be a battle that will be lost before it begins.

Furthermore, some changes and adjustments may also be needed on the level of the national Church if she is truly concerned with retention of her young adult members. For instance, a number of “difficult” issues exists that could be very important for young adults to be openly addressed and discussed but that are “downplayed” by the institutional Church. They include but are not limited to issues of sexuality, inter-Faith marriages (i.e., marriages with non Christians), giving laity more power in church administration, various contemporary social causes and more opportunities to share in ministry with ordained clergy, etc. The same applies to the certain types of activities that are “pushed” today to the periphery of Church life, but may have significant appeal for young adults such as greater involvement of the parishes in social justice advocacy and stronger cooperation with the non-Orthodox religious congregations.

In any case, the bottom line is simple and straightforward: the Orthodox Church in the United States can no longer expect that young adults will simply show up at the doors of the parishes. Instead, both local parish communities and the Church at large must make it a priority to go beyond their “current walls” and “current practices” in order to engage young adults and utilize their passions, talents and aspirations for re-energizing local Orthodox Christian communities.

The last and, perhaps, most important question is: where do we go from here? Two thoughts may lead toward a rapprochement between young adults and Orthodox parishes.

First, clearly, there is no “silver bullet” and no uniform solution that can transform Orthodox parishes into communities where young adults are not only “welcomed” into existing structures, but also empowered to participate in improving these structures in ways that are meaningful for them. At the same time, there are some key practices and certain characteristics of parishes that can make a big difference in retaining current and attracting new young adult church members. Some of these practices and characteristics were discussed in this report. There are other empirical studies and data regarding youth and young adults that should also be considered. Now it is up to the parishes to be willing to consider and perhaps follow the most successful practices and aspire to acquire these effective characteristics.

Second, as noted in the introduction, this short report is based on selected data from a much larger national study "Orthodox Christian Parishes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century America." While this report provides some initial insights into the question of young adult ministries in Orthodox parishes from the perspective of the clergy, this crucial subject deserves a separate and much more comprehensive study of American Orthodox young adults themselves. Further, all information that was discussed on previous pages came from the parish priests whose perspectives and opinions about young adults and young adult ministries may not reflect accurately the opinions and feelings of young adults themselves or the perspectives of the laity in general.

It is our hope that the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Christian Bishops will consider a national inter-jurisdictional study of Orthodox young adults in America - a study that will also lay grounds for an honest and heartfelt dialogue between Church leadership and young adults. The most effective and efficient way to begin this would be to immediately start this dialogue with current young adult leaders.