

Singing an Old Song in a New Land: Orthodox Christian Churches in the Twenty-First Century America



Alexei Krindatch

Abstract Orthodox Christianity in America exists in cultural, religious, and social environments which are different from the “Old Lands” of Orthodoxy, where more homogeneous religious demography gave rise to presumptive religious identity. In contrast, the historically established American tradition of religious pluralism, in combination with an ever-expanding smorgasbord of religious options, force most churches to compete to retain or gain adherents. This has numerous implications for how Orthodox Church life in the U.S. is organized.

Based on a number of original studies conducted by the author from 2010 to 2018, this chapter, first, focuses on the administrative structure, geography, parish, monastery and membership data on various U.S. Orthodox Churches. Secondly, the author explains the ongoing changes in Orthodox Church membership (influx of new immigrants, growing number of American converts to Orthodoxy, increasing number of religiously mixed families). Third, the strength of ethnic culture and identity in U.S. Orthodox Churches is explored. Fourth, the author discusses the major (non-theological) differences between American Orthodox parishes and Protestant congregations. Finally, the chapter discusses the possible future developments and adaptations by U.S. Orthodox Churches to the mainstream American cultural and religious environment.

Keywords Orthodox Churches in America · Orthodox parish life · Church membership · Ethnic culture · Cultural pluralism · Religious identity

A. Krindatch (✉)
Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA, Berkeley, CA, USA
e-mail: akrindatch@aol.com; <http://www.orthodoxreality.org>;
<http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/news/research>

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020
G. Giordan, S. Zrinščak (eds.), *Global Eastern Orthodoxy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28687-3_10

193

Introduction: American Religious Context

Organized religion has flourished in America from its very onset as a country. Very different religious communities have found it possible not simply to “exist,” but to express themselves freely and creatively in a wide variety of forms. The American religious context also has a number of distinct features that make the “American experience” of Orthodox Christianity very distinct from Orthodoxy in the “Old World.”

First, the Orthodox Churches in America exist in a situation of cultural and religious pluralism, which is historically rather unusual for them. Back in the “Old World,” many national Orthodox Churches had a history of relying on the state to enforce an “Orthodox agenda.” America is very different: it is the country where the principles of religious freedom and pluralism have been historically the foundational cornerstones upon which American society was built. That is, Orthodox Christianity in the USA is not a tradition which symbolizes national unity and solidifies a particular national identity. Rather, it exists among many other equally “valid” Christian communities and non-Christian faith groups.

Second, despite ongoing discourse about growing secularization and increasing percentage of religious “Nones” (Nones on the Rise 2012), the share of population participating in organized religious life remains high. The 2010 “Religious Congregations Membership Study” (also known as “U.S. Religion Census”)¹ indicated that 48.8% of Americans are the adherents² of various local faith communities: e.g. Christian congregations, Muslim mosques, Jewish synagogues, Baha’i temples, etc. (Grammich et al. 2012). That is, nearly half of Americans do not simply say that they are “religious persons” or “believers,” but are actually involved in some local religious organizations. Further, according to earlier Religious Congregations Membership Studies, during the past decades, the percentage of religious adherents in US total population has remained fairly stable: 49% in 1952, 48.7% in 1971, 49.7% in 1980, 55.1% in 1990 and 50.2% in 2000.

Third, the American religious “landscape” and demography are uniquely diverse and mosaic. The principle of religious pluralism and freedom has always been one of the cornerstones upon which American society was built. This has created a fertile soil for the flourishing of myriads Christian groups and other faith communities. Many subsequent waves of immigration contributed to the continuing increase in American religious diversity. One of the recent developments that further supports this trend is the proliferation of various non-denominational churches (including the so-called “Megachurches”). According to the study by Hartford Institute for Religion Research: “If the nation’s all independent and nondenominational churches were combined into a single ‘denomination’ they would represent today the third largest cluster of congregations in the country, following the Roman Catholic Church and

¹ See at: <http://www.rcms2010.org>. Accessed 20 September 2018.

² The term “adherents” is meant to describe all people affiliated with and participating in the local religious communities regardless of frequency of their participation or their formal “membership status.” In effect, “adherents” allow for the most comparable count of religiously involved people across different Christian denominations and other faith groups.

the Southern Baptist Convention” (Nondenominational & Independent Congregations 2011). The increasing religious diversity of American society means also that USA is a country where people have an ever-growing abundance of “religious choices.”

Fourth, it is fully socially acceptable and increasingly common in America to choose and change one’s religion or affiliation with a particular religious organization. The 2015 US Religious Landscape Study by the Pew research center revealed a remarkable degree of “religious switching.” Even if Protestantism is treated as a single religious group (i.e., not counting switching between various Protestant denominations), then 34% of American adults currently have a religious identity different from the one in which they were raised. By comparison, in 2007, this figure was only 28%. If the three major Protestant traditions (evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism and historically black Protestantism) are analyzed separately, then the share of Americans who have switched religions in the course of their lives rises to 42% (America’s Changing Religious Landscape 2015). The implications for Orthodox Churches of this growing religious switching are simple: in America, it would be seen by many as perfectly socially acceptable for an Orthodox person to abandon the Church which is unwilling to meet changing expectations and aspirations of the new generations of her faithful.

In summary, if one would use “marketing” terminology, America could be described as a country with a fairly stable “religious market capacity” (as measured by the percentage of people who participate in the local religious communities), but with a growing number of “religious vendors” who share and divide this religious market. The Orthodox Christian Churches are part of this unique American religious reality. As the prominent sociologist Peter Berger pointed out, the conditions of an ever-expanding market of religious options force American churches to compete in retaining or gaining the adherence of the free-to-choose population. And this task has proved to be especially difficult for churches with a claim to exclusive authority and a history of relying on the state to enforce a religious monopoly, which to a large degree was the case of Orthodoxy. On the level of individual religious consciousness, religious pluralism means the shift from religion as a taken-for-granted (or inherited) reality to religion as a matter of personal voluntary and deliberate choice” (Berger 2003).

The following essay is not an academic paper which would involve the use of a particular theoretical framework, research methodology, and discussion of hypotheses that need to be proven. Our goal is different: to present a snapshot of Orthodox Christianity in twenty-first century America. And this task is not as easy as one might think. While some prominent American theologians and church leader sometimes refer to the “Orthodox Church” in the singular and even talk about the “mission of Orthodoxy” in America,³ the reality is that Orthodoxy in the United States has been and remains an internally very diverse and extended family of national Churches and their local parish communities. In this “Orthodox Church family,” some relatives are closer to each other, while some are fairly “distant cousins.” The individual histories of these Churches on American soil are distinct, their current

³ See for instance the sermon “The Mission of Orthodoxy” written by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann: <http://www.peterandpaul.net/schmemmann-missionoforthodoxy>. Accessed 20 September 2018.

“niches” in the context of the wider society are different, and their mutual relations are at times sensitive. And, yet, despite this internal diversity, the American Orthodox Churches share in common (besides theology) some trends in their developments and certain features that distinguish their parishes from other Christian congregations. On the next pages, we will discuss *some* of these distinct features. In short, our hope is that this article will help readers (both in the USA and abroad) to better recognize the very distinct Orthodox “colors” within the bright and increasingly mosaic American religious landscape.

One additional preliminary note should be made. Most of the statistical and survey data used in this article is drawn from original studies conducted by the author in his professional capacity during the past 10 years. The article is intentionally based on descriptive statistics so that all discussed subjects, observations and findings will be easily accessible and understandable for a broad audience of readers.

Orthodox Christian Churches in the USA in the Twenty-First Century: An Overview⁴

In 1794, a group of eight Orthodox monks, from the Valaam and Konevits Monasteries in the Russian north, arrived on the island of Kodiak in Alaska. Sent to what was then Russian America, the monks built a church dedicated to Christ’s Holy Resurrection and a wooden monastery near the Kodiak harbor. The arrival of this religious mission marked the beginnings of organized Orthodox Church life in America.⁵ In the course of following decades and centuries, many national Orthodox Christian Churches that have faithful in the United States have organized their own jurisdictions⁶ in North America.⁷ The first dispersed and autonomous “ethnically based” parishes founded by Orthodox immigrants from various countries were later eventually united into centrally administrated dioceses subordinated to the “Mother

⁴This article is limited to Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches (also known as “Byzantine” Churches) and does not include information on the Oriental Orthodox Churches (such as Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian and Malankara-Indian Churches).

⁵Unlike institutional Church, individual Orthodox Christians appear to have been present in America since the early seventeenth century. The records of the Virginia Company, for instance, note that a certain “Martin the Armenian” came out to the Jamestown colony in 1618. Better documented at this point is the story of Virginia aristocrat Philip Ludwell III, who converted to Orthodoxy at the Russian church in London in 1738 himself, his daughters and son-in-law. Well known is also the story of New Smyrna, a colony of several hundred Greeks that British entrepreneur Andrew Turnbull established near St. Augustine, Florida, in 1768. Disease and brutal working conditions at New Smyrna led to its abandonment within a decade.

⁶The word “jurisdiction” is commonly used within the American Orthodox community – instead of the Protestant term “denomination” – to describe a national Orthodox Church body.

⁷For a short yet sufficient overview of historical development of the Orthodox Christianity in the USA, we recommend the chapter on “Orthodox Christianity in America: One Faith Many Stories” in (Krindatch 2011).

Churches” in an Old World. The original goal of American Orthodox Churches was clear: to minister to the religious needs of these diverse immigrant ethnic communities: the Greeks, Russians, Serbians, Romanians, Bulgarians, etc. There is no doubt that the ethnically based Orthodox jurisdictions have brought a big measure of order and unity for the newly arrived immigrants who otherwise would have remained fragmented and enfeebled in an “American melting pot.”

Today, most of the Orthodox Churches – or “jurisdictions”- in the United States are still linked to their “Mother Churches” in the Old World: some being directly subordinated and some being more autonomous.⁸ Table 1 shows how complex is the composition and administrative structure of Eastern Orthodox Christianity⁹ in America and how strong is the presence of each national Orthodox Church body.

In summary, Table 1 shows that today at least 800,000 adherents of various Orthodox jurisdictions in America participate in the lives of 1900 local Orthodox parishes and 80 monastic communities. These figures suggest that Eastern Christianity has become firmly rooted in American diverse religious landscape. And yet Orthodox Christians in the United States still sometimes refer to their faith and Church as the “best-kept secret in America”¹⁰ implying that in many ways, Orthodox Christianity – its history, beliefs, and practices – remains generally unknown to mainstream America.

In part this may be due to the uneven geography of American Orthodoxy. Orthodox churches – with their distinct domes and other architectural features – are common enough in many Northeastern and Midwestern industrial cities, in rural areas and small towns of Pennsylvania, and in the villages of Alaska, but they are less often seen in the Southern and Western (California being an exception) states. Statistically, 45% (almost half!) of all US Orthodox Christians are concentrated in five states: New York (14% of all Orthodox adherents), California (10%), Illinois (8%), Pennsylvania (7%) and Massachusetts (6%) (Krindatch 2011).

Occasional publications and appearances in local mass-media may call attention to the pageantry of Orthodox Holy Week (which often falls some weeks after western Christians have celebrated it) or to customs associated with Christmas (which for many Orthodox Christians falls 13 days after the western observance). But these token acknowledgements mostly tend to reinforce the impression that Orthodoxy is

⁸Except the Orthodox Church in America which is autocephalous (fully independent) US based Church.

⁹The data in Table 1 and further in this article refer only to the Orthodox Churches that are part of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA (www.assemblyofbishops.org). In addition to them, there is a number of Orthodox Churches of irregular status. They adhere to Orthodox theology and liturgical practice, but because of various reasons the other Orthodox Churches do not recognize their validity and qualify them as “non-canonical” Churches (e.g. Macedonian Orthodox Church, Holy Orthodox Church in North America, etc.).

¹⁰This expression originates from the sermon delivered in 1987 by the late Metropolitan Philip (Saliba) of Antiochian Archdiocese on the occasion of the reception of the Evangelical Orthodox Church into Antiochian Archdiocese. Metropolitan Philip declared: “We thank God that those faithful people have found their true faith which once and for all was delivered to the saints. This faith which remains the best kept secret in America because of our laziness. Because we have been busy taking care of our little ethnic ghettos.”

Table 1 Eastern Orthodox Churches in the United States

Orthodox Church jurisdictions and their websites	Status and relation to “Mother” Churches abroad	Administrative center on US territory ^a	Number of parishes and mission parishes ^b	Number of monasteries for men and women ^c	Estimated number of adherents ^d
Albanian Orthodox Diocese of America	Autonomous church body within the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople	Jamaica Plain, MA	2	0	700
American Carpatho- Russian Orthodox Diocese www.acrod.org	Autonomous Church within the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople	Johnstown, PA	75	0	10,400
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese www.antiochian.org	Autonomous (self-ruled) church body within the Patriarchate of Antioch	Englewood, NJ	251	1 for men 2 for women 1 “dual” monastery	74,600
Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese www.bulgariandiocese.org	Part of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church	New York, NY	28	1 for men	2,600
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America www.goarch.org	Eparchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople	New York, NY	535	8 for men 11 for women	483,700
Georgian Apostolic Church in North America	Diocese of the Patriarchate of Georgia.	Fearterville-Trevoise, PA	15	1 for men 1 for women	920
Orthodox Church in America. www.oca.org	Until 1970, part (“Metropolia”) of the Russian Orthodox Church. Since 1970, an autocephalous (fully independent) US based Church.	Syosset, NY	534	7 for men 13 for women	84,900
Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church www.mospatusa.com	A group of individual parishes (not a diocese) subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church (Patriarchate Moscow)	New York, NY	33	1 for men	12,400

Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of the United States of America www.mitropolia.us	Part of the Romanian Orthodox Church	Chicago, IL	30	1 for men 1 for women	11,200
Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia www.synod.com/synod/indexeng.htm	Autonomous Church within the Russian Orthodox Church (Patriarchate Moscow)	New York, NY	199	12 for men 6 for women	27,700
Serbian Orthodox Dioceses in North America www.easterndiocese.org www.newgracanica.org www.westserbdio.org	Three dioceses on the US territory are part of and are directly subordinated to the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses	Warren, NJ Grayslake, IL Alhambra, CA	121	6 for men 7 for women	68,800
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA www.uocofusa.org	Autonomous Church within the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople	Bound Brook, NJ	84	0	22,400

^aSome of US Orthodox Churches have centralized national church administrations and headquarters, whereas some consist of several dioceses each of which is subordinated directly to the “Mother” churches abroad

^bNumber of parishes as indicated in the online directories of the respective Orthodox Church jurisdictions

^cThe data on US Orthodox monasteries were obtained and updated in 2015–2017 studies. Published in (Krindatch 2016). These data are also available online at: <http://assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/news/scoba/AtlasOfMonasteriesSecondEditionBookmarkedOptimumSize.pdf>

^dThe most recent accurate data on number of Orthodox Church adherents were obtained in 2010 Religious Congregation Membership Study (www.rcms2010.org). Published in (Krindatch 2011) and (Grammich et al. 2012)

“exotic” and closely linked to certain ethnic cultures: Greek, Russian, Serbian, Romanian, etc. In other words, the main source of confusion concerning Orthodox Christianity in America is that it is often perceived not as a single faith community, but as collection of ethnic groups, each with its own cultures and traditions, united together by little more than a shared name “Orthodox.” True, some US Orthodox parishes or even entire national jurisdictions remain “ethnically-based” (more about this in the next chapter), but the “full reality” is much more complex.

On the one hand, the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s resulted in the new wave of the Orthodox immigrants to America from such countries as Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, etc. (Alperin and Batalova 2018). This new Orthodox immigration contributed to reawakening of ethnic sentiments in many old Orthodox parishes and to creation of the new parish communities with strong ethnic culture and identity.

On the other hand, however, during past decades the “newcomers” to Orthodox parishes in America were not only newly arrived immigrants. Throughout its entire history in America, the Orthodox Church has attracted many men and women from other religious backgrounds to convert to Orthodoxy.

The American converts came to Orthodoxy in a variety of ways. Most joined the Orthodox Church as individuals (either after a period of individual religious searching or through the marriage with the “cradle Orthodox”), but some have entered as part of a religious group. An “iconic” example of the latter case is a conversion of more than two thousand members of Protestant “Evangelical Orthodox Church” who joined Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese in 1987 (Michalopoulos and Ham 2003). Regardless of background, most converts are well read, articulate, and enthusiastic about their new faith. Their growing presence has made Orthodoxy in America more diverse than ever, but also less cohesive. Many converts have a strong sense of mission and religious outreach (especially, former Evangelical Protestants), which at times makes them “disappointed” with cradle Orthodox who may view Orthodoxy simply as an aspect of their ethnic culture and limit their religious involvement to occasional attendance of worship services. Some converts, being upset by modernization developments in their former denominations (especially Episcopalians and Roman Catholics) and impressed by the strong adherence of Orthodoxy to established traditions and practices, try to be as “Orthodox” as possible. Their religious zeal and rigid observance of all Church requirements is seen by many cradle Orthodox in America as rather odd.

One way or the other, today, the converts to Orthodoxy form a sizeable part of the membership in American Orthodox Churches. According to 2008 “Orthodox Church Today” national study, 29% of lay members of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America – the largest of all American Orthodox jurisdictions – were raised in the other (non-Orthodox) religious traditions. In the Orthodox Church in America (the second largest Orthodox jurisdiction), a dominant majority (51%) of church members are adult converts to Orthodoxy (Krindatch 2008). These figures are consistent with the findings from 2010 national “Faith Communities Today”

(FACT) study.¹¹ FACT data for Orthodox Churches indicated that 27% of the members of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese are converts to Orthodoxy. In the case of the Orthodox Church in America and Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese (the third largest Orthodox jurisdiction) the percentage of converts among church members was estimated as 49% and 51% respectively.

Another trend which further complicates the demography and culture of American Orthodox Churches is growing proportion of inter-married families – i.e. couples where one of the spouses is Orthodox and another is not. In the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, for instance, the official registry records show that in 1963 only 22% of marriages were mixed inter-Christian marriages, but in 2016, as many as 61% of marriages were between Orthodox and non-Orthodox¹² (Registry Statistics 2016).

To be sure, intermarried couples have increasing presence and impact on all Christian denominations in the United States (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation 2008). Yet, in the case of Orthodoxy this trend is more complex and challenging for the local Orthodox parishes, because of the strict rules surrounding intermarriage in the Orthodox Church¹³ and because of many requirements in Church life.

Indeed, in many cases, the non-Orthodox spouses are actively involved and volunteer their time and resources for the Orthodox parish. However, the presence of the intermarried couples in an Orthodox parish poses an inevitable question of how much effort this parish should put to “convey” the Orthodox Tradition and Doctrine to the non-Orthodox spouse in order to assure that he/she has a better understanding of what the Orthodox faith is about, thus, feeling reasonably comfortable with his/her involvement into the parish. Non-Orthodox cannot receive Holy Communion and other sacraments in the Orthodox Church. While this rule is generally understood and accepted, it also discourages parishioners to bring to the church their non-Orthodox spouses or their non-Orthodox family members. The issue of who can serve as a sponsor in baptisms also poses a challenge, because today only members of the Orthodox Church can be “god-fathers” or “god-mothers” for Orthodox baptisms, while the non-Orthodox part of the family is not “eligible” for these roles. The intermarried couples face wide range of issues dealing with religious upbringing and religious choices of their children. The differences in “Western” (Gregorian) and “Eastern” (Julian) Church calendars combined with the strict requirements of the Orthodox Church for fasting during certain periods and during Great Lent can

¹¹ For detailed information on 2010 Faith Communities Today study see: <http://faithcommunities-today.org/fact-2010>

¹² It should also be noted that the real percentage of intermarriages should even be higher than 61%, because of unknown number of the GOA members who marry in non-Orthodox Christian Churches, thus, being not counted by the GOA registry.

¹³ In essence, an Orthodox Christian may marry a non-Orthodox and remain a Church member in a good stance only if two conditions are observed: (a) The non-Orthodox partner has been baptized in a Christian Church which baptizes in the name of Holy Trinity. That is, if an Orthodox Christian would marry a Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Mormon, Unitarian or simply not baptized person, he/she would excommunicate him/herself from the Church; (b) The marriage must be performed by the Orthodox priest and with the Orthodox Sacrament of Matrimony.

also be frustrating and disturbing for the “normal” family and social life in the mixed households. The list of the issues and challenges that the Orthodox – non-Orthodox couples and their parishes are facing is long.

As national Orthodox jurisdictions and individual parishes struggle with the challenges of ministering to new immigrants and US-born cradle Orthodox, integrating converts into church life and dealing with religiously mixed families, they continue to face the old question: how, indeed, “ethnic” are American Orthodox Churches at the beginning of the third millennium?

How “Ethnic” Are American Orthodox Christian Churches at the Beginning of the Third Millennium?

The question to what extent the American Orthodox Churches can still be seen as “ethnically based” religious communities remains open. Further, this subject continues to be hotly debated by Orthodox Church leadership and by the “rank and file” clergy and laity. That is for good reason. Indeed, the inquiry in this question leads to many sensitive issues which have significant implications for church life such as the usage of English versus “ethnic” languages in church, the presence and role of converts, the openness of Orthodox parishes to the ethnically and culturally “others,” the preference of younger generation of faithful for either cherishing their ethnic heritage and identity or for “blending” with mainstream America – the list of these “big” questions is endless.

The membership of the Orthodox Christian Churches in the United States consists of four distinct demographic groups:

- US-born descendants (second, third, fourth, fifth generations) of the original Greek, Slavic or Arab immigrants;
- Newly arrived immigrants who emigrated to United States from Eastern Europe or Middle East in recent decades;
- American converts to Orthodox Christianity – the former Protestants or Roman Catholics or persons without any religious upbringing;
- The children of American converts: the persons who were born and raised in the Orthodox Church, but have no Orthodox “ethnic” heritage themselves.

The presence of these four groups varies significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and from parish to parish. As a result, there exists great diversity among local Orthodox communities in terms of how strong various ethnic elements in their religious and social lives are expressed.

The US Orthodox parish survey conducted in 2011 under the auspices of Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and Central America (Krindatch 2012) provides several insights into the subject of ethnic identity and culture in US Orthodox Christian Churches.

In this survey, each Orthodox parish which belongs to the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops was asked to respond four questions:

- Please, estimate the percentage of the English language used in your parish on a typical Sunday as the *language of the Divine Liturgy* (from 0% – “no English used” to 100% – “exclusively English used”);
- Please, estimate the percentage of the English language used in your parish on a typical Sunday as the *language of sermon(s)* (from 0% – “no English used” to 100% – “exclusively English used”);
- Please, estimate the percentage of the English language used in your parish on a typical Sunday as the *language in which church choir or chanters sing* (from 0% – “no English used” to 100% – “exclusively English used”);
- Do you *agree or disagree* with the statement “Our parish has a strong ethnic culture and identity that we are trying to preserve?” Please, select one answer: “Strongly agree,” “Rather agree,” “Neutral/Unsure,” “Rather disagree,” “Strongly disagree.”

98.6% of all US Orthodox parishes which are part of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops responded to the survey, thus, making survey findings sound and reliable. Figure 1 on the next page furnishes information on the usage of the English language in worship services in the parishes of the various Orthodox jurisdictions. One should keep in mind that the data in Fig. 1 reflect US national “average” picture for each jurisdiction. Clearly, within each jurisdiction, there are significant variations in the usage of various languages among individual parishes. Nevertheless, several important observations can be made.

First, overall in the entire American Orthodox community – for all Orthodox jurisdictions combined – English is much more widely used in the church than the other languages. US nationwide, average proportion of English used as language of liturgy is 73%. In the case of language of sermon, the national average of the usage of English is even higher: 81%.

Second, in terms of the usage of English versus non-English languages, all Orthodox jurisdictions in America can be divided in three categories. The first group includes three Churches which use almost exclusively English as the language of liturgy and sermon. These churches are: American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese and Orthodox Church in America (OCA).

The second group includes jurisdictions where English dominates in worship services, but other languages also have a strong presence. This is the case of the Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, Bulgarian Diocese and Greek Orthodox Archdiocese.

Finally, the third group consists of five jurisdictions where various non-English languages remain at least as important as English or even dominate as languages of liturgy and sermon. These are Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, Serbian Orthodox Dioceses, Albanian Diocese and Romanian Archdiocese.

Third, Fig. 1 indicates a fairly consistent pattern: in all jurisdictions (Romanian Archdiocese being the only exception) English is more widely used as the language of the sermon than as the language of liturgy. This makes sense, because in the formal liturgy parish can still use a language which is not understood or spoken by the some of church members, but delivering homilies on various subjects would make no sense without clear communication between clergy and people present in the church.

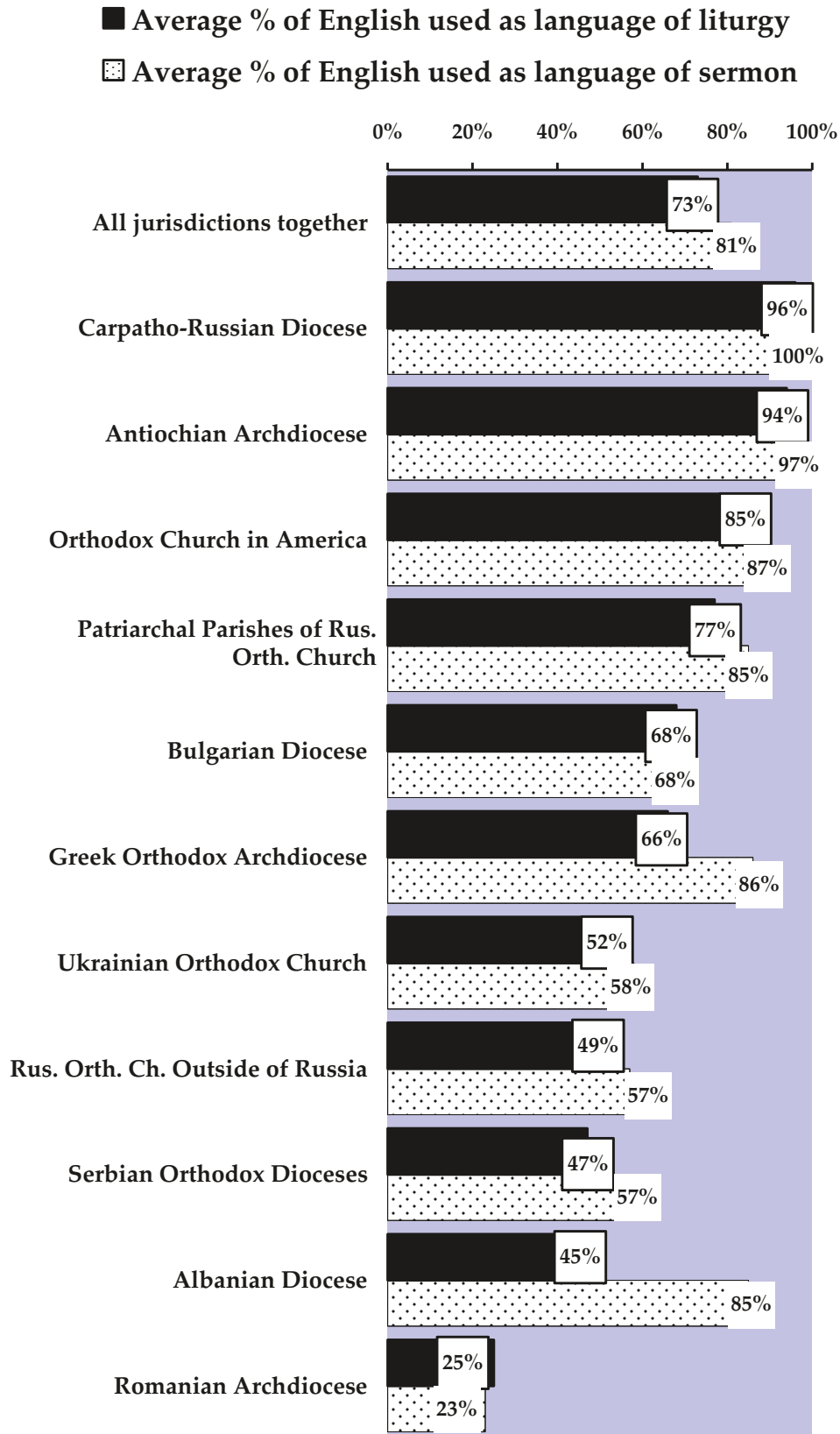


Fig. 1 Average percentage (%) of usage of English language in the parishes of various Orthodox jurisdictions

Fourth, as noted, in almost all US Orthodox Churches, English is more frequently used as the language of sermon than as the language of liturgy, but in two jurisdictions this gap is especially wide: in Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (66% average usage of English in liturgy versus as much as 87% average usage of English in sermon) and in Albanian Diocese (45% and 85%). What this wide gap suggests is that compared to the other jurisdictions, the Albanian Diocese and Greek Orthodox Archdiocese are more attached to the idea of keeping “traditional ethnic” languages in liturgy as long as possible even if actual language of communication with church members – i.e. the language of the sermon – is English.

In summary, survey data indicate that in terms of the languages used in worship services, the majority of parishes in most American Orthodox jurisdictions can be described today as predominantly “English speaking.” The exception from this rule are five jurisdictions where various non-English languages remain either as important as English or even dominate in the local church life: Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, Serbian Orthodox Dioceses, Albanian Diocese and Romanian Archdiocese.

The fact that English language dominates in American Orthodox church life – as the language of liturgy and sermon – may prompt a premature conclusion that today solid majority of US Orthodox parishes can be described as “all American” congregations. However, the responses of the parishes to the last question in the survey show that this is not the case. In essence, the question “Do you agree or disagree with the statement ‘Our parish has a strong ethnic heritage and identity that we are trying to preserve?’” asked parishes about how they view themselves in terms of being or being not “ethnically based” and about how important to them their “ethnic roots” are.

Figure 2 shows that relative majority (45%) of all US Orthodox parishes agreed with the statement “Our parish has strong ethnic heritage that we are trying to preserve.” Only 39% of parishes rejected this statement and 16% responded “neutral or unsure.”

Further, in seven out of eleven jurisdictions, a strong absolute majority of parishes agreed with the statement about “having strong ethnic heritage and identity.” These jurisdictions are: Albanian Diocese (100% agreement with the statement), Romanian Archdiocese (87%), Serbian Orthodox Dioceses (82%), Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (63%), Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (63%), Ukrainian Orthodox Church (61%) and Bulgarian Diocese (58%). By contrast, in only three jurisdictions (Orthodox Church in America, Antiochian Archdiocese and Carpatho-Russian Diocese), absolute majority of parishes rejected statement about “having strong ethnic heritage and identity.” Finally, one jurisdiction – Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church – presents an interesting case, when dominant majority of parishes responded that they are “neutral or unsure.”

To conclude, survey data tell us that dominance of English language in most of US Orthodox jurisdictions does not mean that local Orthodox parishes are in a hurry to abandon their ethnic roots and heritage. A rather strong sense of ethnic identity is still present in American Orthodox Christian Churches.

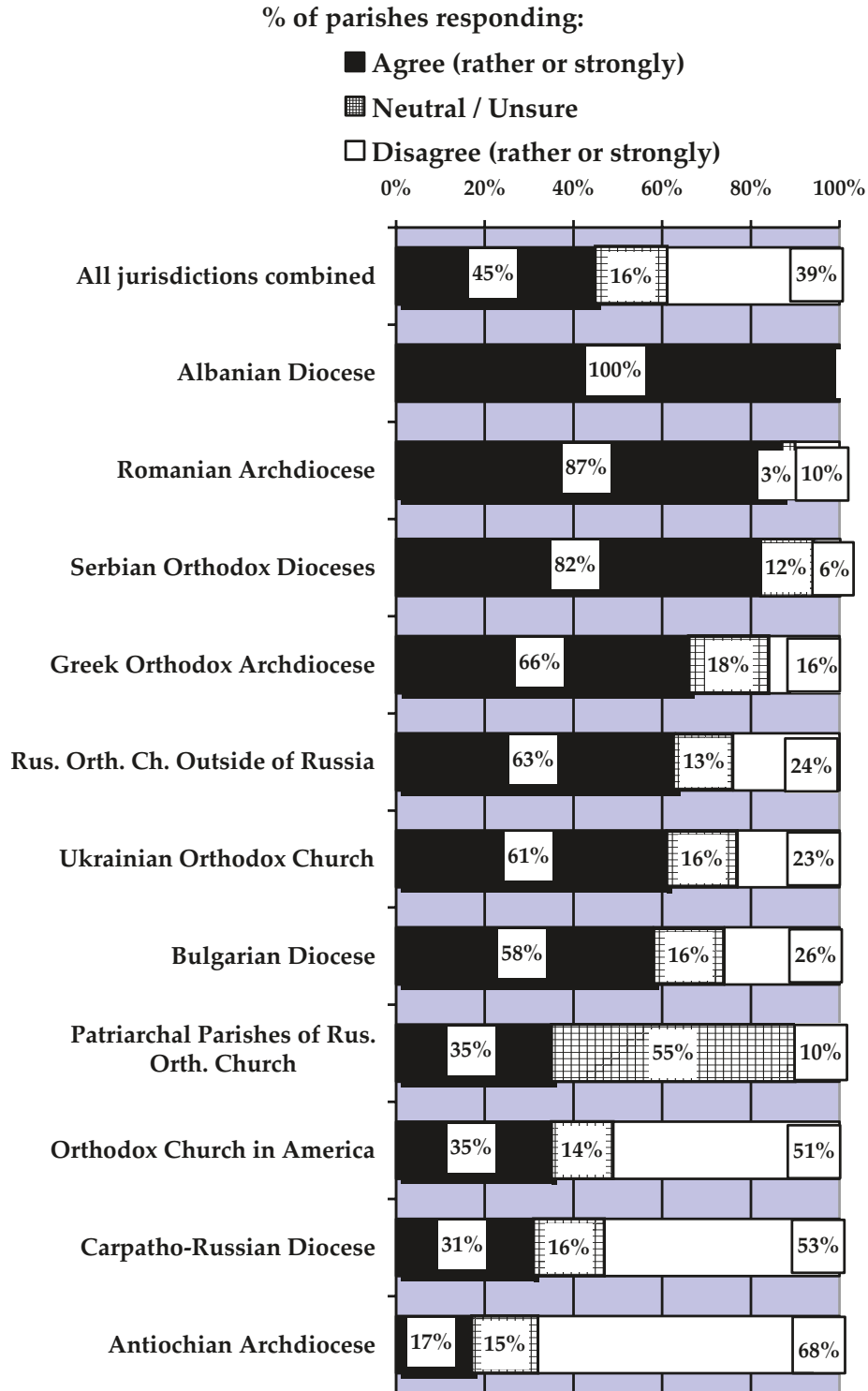


Fig. 2 Strength of ethnic identity in the parishes of various Orthodox jurisdictions: “Do you agree or disagree with the statement ‘Our parish has a strong ethnic culture and identity that we are trying to preserve’?”

Ten Facts About US Orthodox Parishes That Make Them “Different” from American Protestant Congregations

A prominent US sociologist of religion, Nancy Ammerman, wrote: “By creating religious congregations – in cities and on the frontier – Americans embodied the cultural and religious values they cherished in ongoing institutions, structures that gave those values and traditions a place to thrive” (Ammerman 1997). That is, in many ways, the American religious congregations are much more than simply places of worship. Rather, congregations are voluntarily associations of people who share not only their religious beliefs, but also certain cultural and social values and attitudes. And they are also associations of people who not only pray together, but engage in many other activities: both within and beyond their congregations. How the life of a congregation – its programs, ministries, governance, finances – is organized and what congregation does beyond worship services vary greatly from one faith community to another. On the following pages, we will provide just a glimpse into some notable differences (besides liturgical life and theology) between American Orthodox Christian parishes, on the one hand, and the Mainline and Evangelical Protestant congregations, on the other hand.

Granted, as American religious diversity continues to grow, the USA cannot be defined anymore as the “Protestant” or even “Christian” nation. Nevertheless, according to 2015 US Religious Landscape Study, nearly half (46.5%) of all Americans define themselves as the Protestants of various kinds. If we exclude from the count the persons who do not have any particular religion, then “Protestants” comprise an absolute majority (60%) of American believers (America’s Changing Religious Landscape 2015). In a sense, comparing American Orthodox parishes with Protestant congregations is like comparing US Orthodox Churches with the “core” of American religion.

The data presented on the following pages were obtained in 2015 national survey and study of American religious congregations “Faith Communities Today” (Roosen 2015). 580 Orthodox parishes (30% of all US Orthodox parishes) participated in 2015 FACT study. It should be noted that the following ten facts about the “differences” between American Orthodox parishes and Protestant congregations highlight only those characteristics where there is an obvious gap between Orthodox parishes and both Mainline and Evangelical Protestant churches.

Fact 1: About Location Compared to American Protestant congregations, US Orthodox parishes can be described as much more “urban” and “suburban.” Figure 3 shows that 59% of American Orthodox parishes are situated either in or near cities with population of 50,000+ in comparison with only 44% of Mainline and 32% of Evangelical Protestant congregations. On the contrary, only 14% of US Orthodox churches are in rural areas and towns with population of less than 10,000 in comparison with 45% Mainline and 48% Evangelical Protestant congregations.

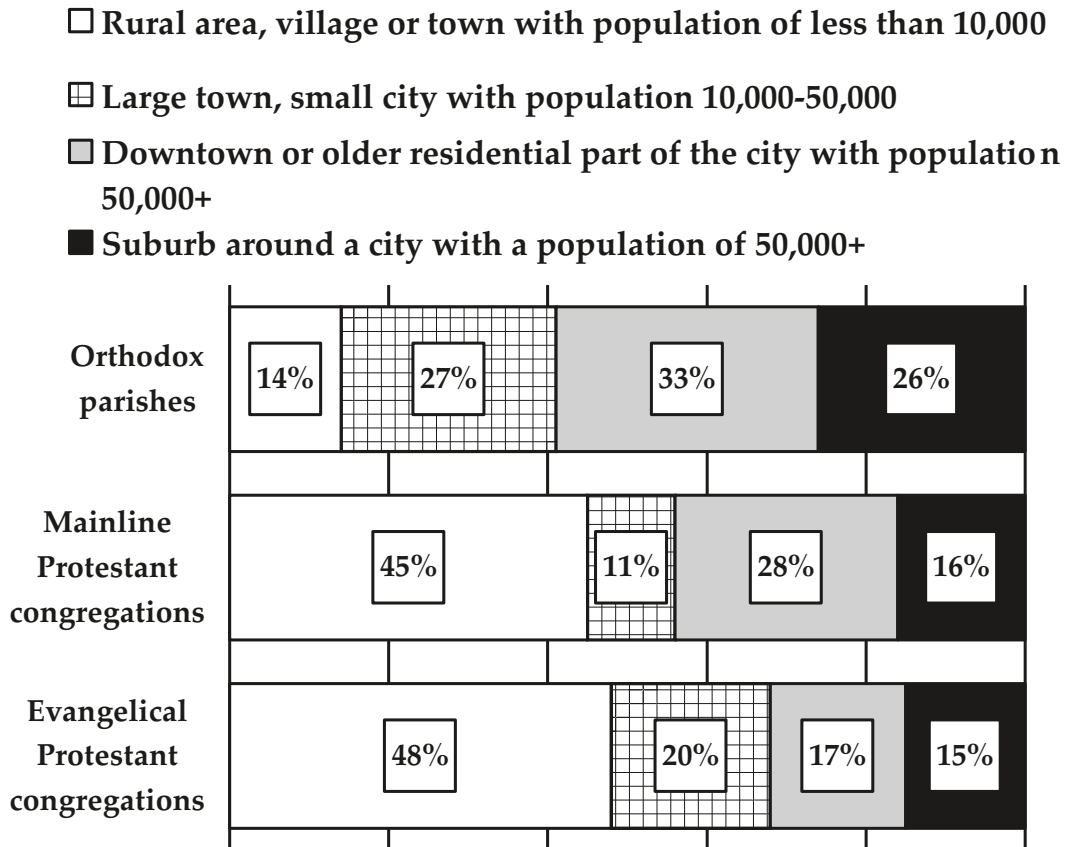


Fig. 3 “How would you describe the location of your Church?”

Fact 2: About Conflicts and Disagreements Among the Church Members US Orthodox parishes are more prone to internal conflicts and disagreements than Mainline and Evangelical Protestant congregations. Answering question “During the past 5 years has your parish/congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts?”, nearly three-quarters (73%) of Orthodox parishes reported “yes” in comparison with only 63% of Mainline and 57% of Evangelical Protestant congregations.

Fact 3: About the Style of Worship The liturgical worship in US Orthodox parishes is best described with the word “reverent,” while worship services in Mainline and Evangelical Protestant congregations tend to be more “joyful,” “innovative” and “thought-provoking.” Figure 4 shows, when asked to describe their Sunday worship services many more Orthodox parishes (88%) than Mainline (77%) and Evangelical (65%) congregations have chosen the word “reverent” as describing their Sunday worship “Quite well” or “Very well.” Differently, more Mainline and Evangelical congregations than Orthodox parishes reported that their worship services are “innovative,” “joyful” or “thought provoking.”

Fact 4: About Involvement of the Church Members in the Life of a Parish/ Congregation Compared to Mainline and Evangelical Protestants, the members of American Orthodox Churches are less involved in the lives of their parishes beyond

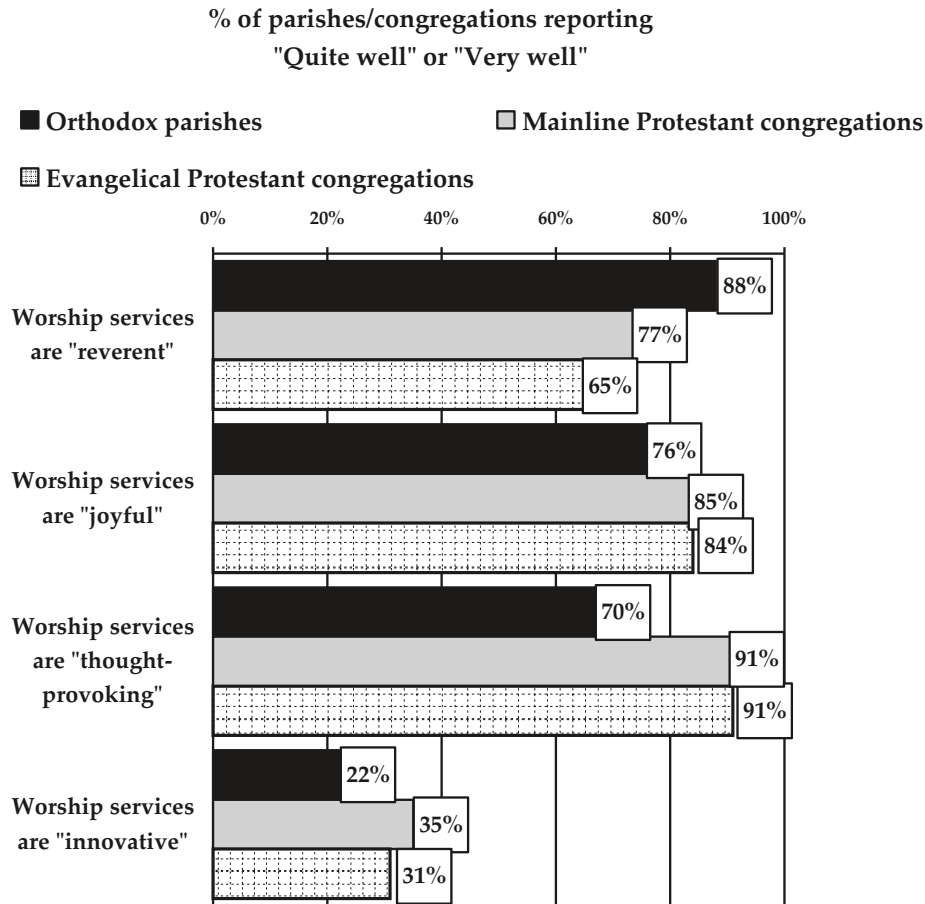


Fig. 4 “How well do the following words describe your parish’s/congregation’s regular Sunday worship service?”

worship services. When asked “Overall, to what extent are your members involved in parish’s/congregation’s various programs, committees and projects outside of worship?”, only 45% of the Orthodox parishes reported “Quite a bit/A lot” in comparison with 56% of the Mainline and 53% of the Evangelical Protestant congregations.

Fact 5: About What Parishes/Congregations Do Beyond Worship Services When it comes to the life of a congregation outside of worship services, Orthodox parishes engage less than Protestant congregations in various activities and programs. Compared to Protestant congregations, Orthodox parishes are especially “passive” in developing “prayer groups and spiritual retreats” and “community service activities.” See Fig. 5.

Fact 6: About Ecumenical and Interfaith Involvement Compared to Protestant congregations, Orthodox parishes are much less involved in communication and cooperation with “religiously other” (non-Orthodox) groups. This is true not only for joint worship services, but also for the joint “educational or fellowship activities” and “community service activities.” See Fig. 6.

**% of parishes/congregations reporting that the following
activities and programs receive
"A lot of emphasis" or are "A specialty of ours."**

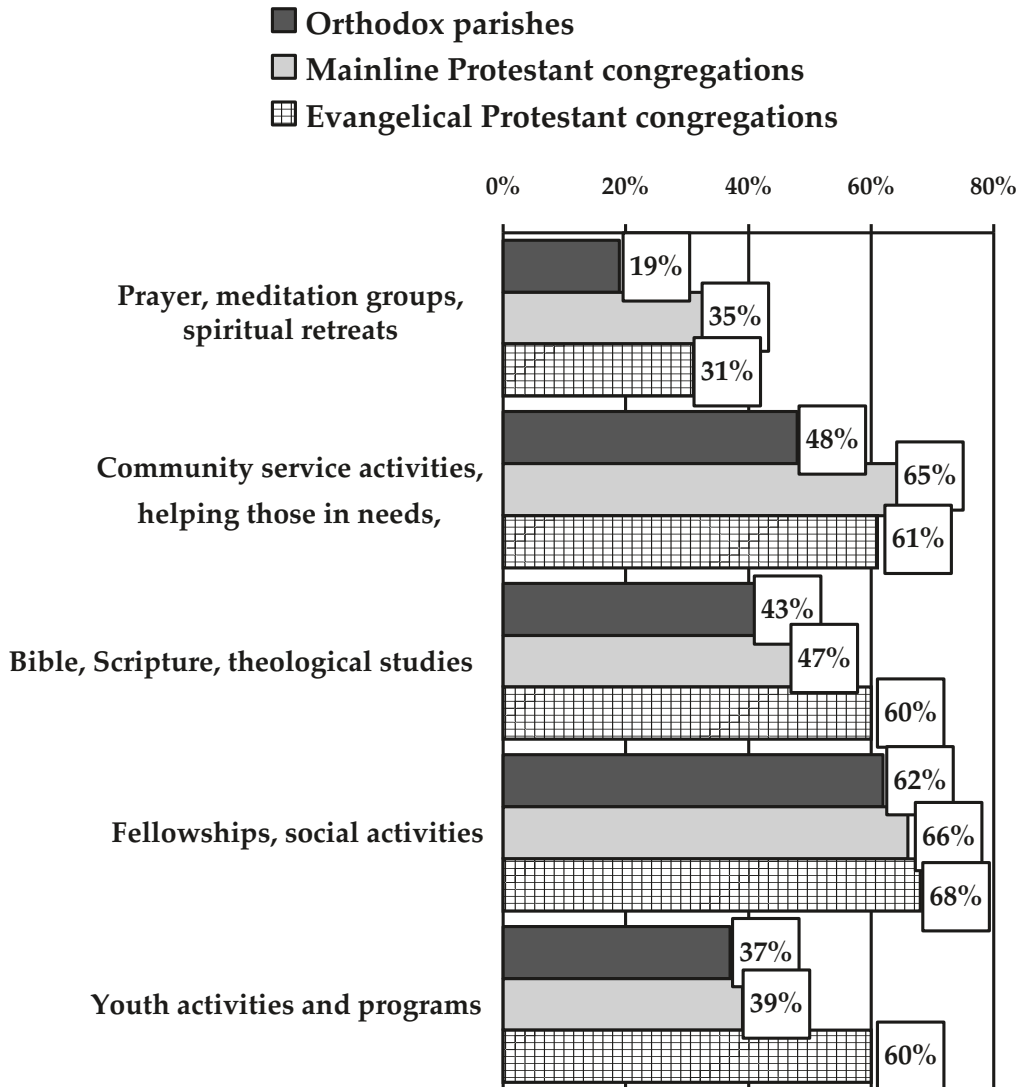


Fig. 5 “Does your parish/congregation have any of the following programs or activities? If ‘yes,’ how much emphasis is given to each activity?”

Fact 7: About Continuing Faith Formation of Church Members American Orthodox parishes and Protestant congregations have different priorities in their religious education programs. Compared to Protestant congregations, Orthodox parishes pay more attention to “relating Orthodox Faith’s beliefs and practices to each

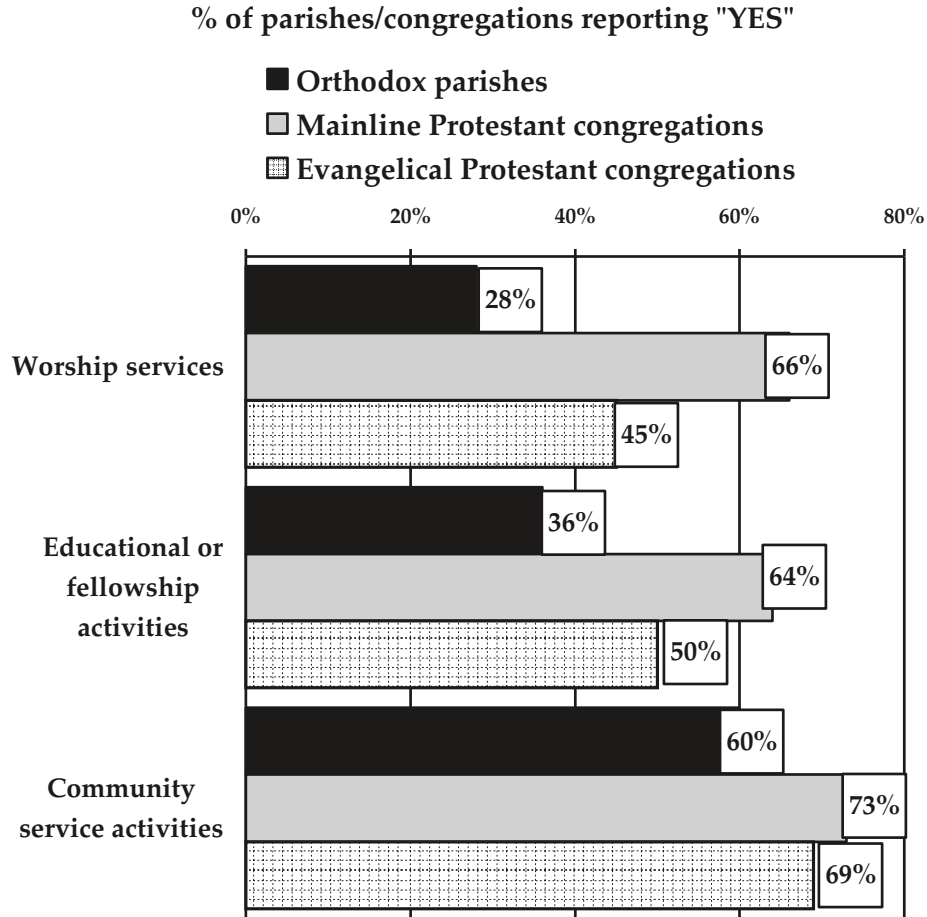


Fig. 6 “During the past 12 months, has your parish been involved in any of the following ecumenical or interfaith activities?”

age level.” Differently, compared to Orthodox parishes, Mainline and Evangelical Protestant congregations place greater emphasis on “teaching their members about love and justice toward others” and on “engaging church members in nurture and fellowship.” See Fig. 7.

Fact 8: About Differences in “What Matters” in the Life of a Parish/ Congregation Orthodox parishes have a much stronger sense of their distinct religious identity than Protestant congregations. More than three-quarters (77%) of American Orthodox parishes agreed with the statement “Our congregation is quite different from other congregations in our community” compared to only 44% of Mainline and 58% of Evangelical Protestant congregations. At the same time, compared to Protestant congregations, Orthodox parishes appear to be less caring about their own members and less concerned with social justice advocacy. Figure 8 shows

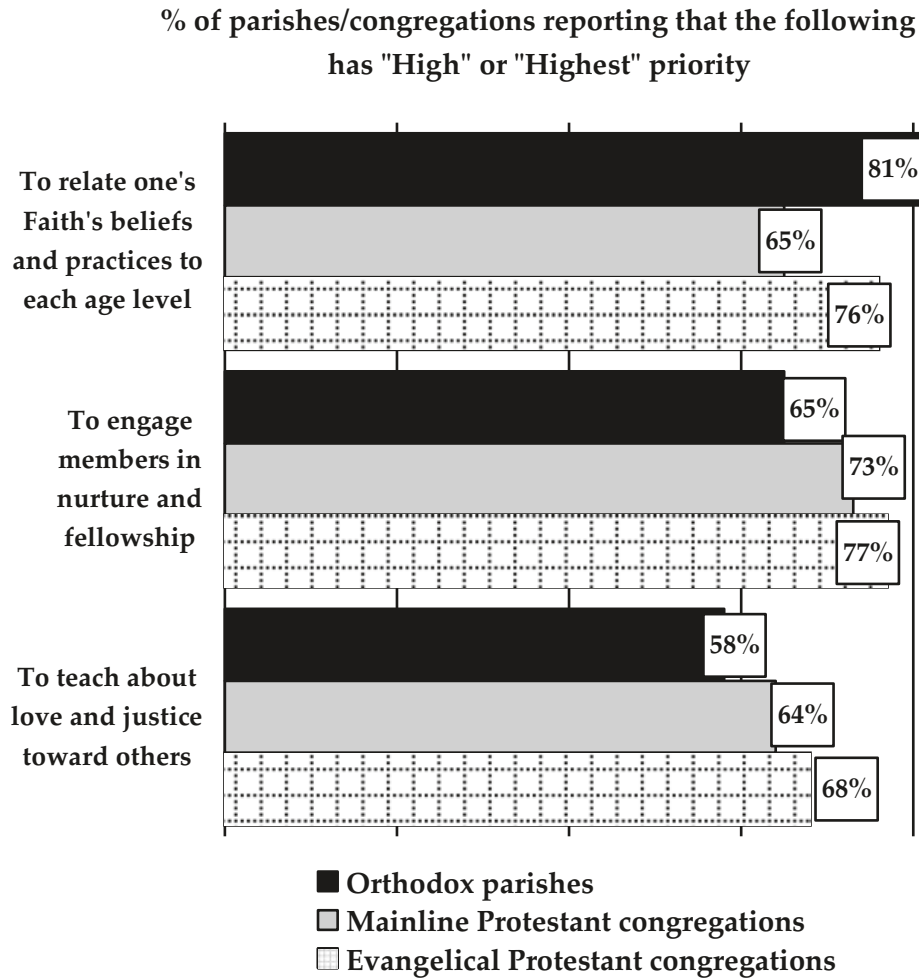


Fig. 7 “How high or low a priority is each of the following in your religious education programs?”

that fewer Orthodox parishes than Protestant congregations agreed with the statements “Our congregations is caring of members who have health, financial and personal needs” and with the statement “Our congregation is working for social justice.”

Fact 9: About Attitudes of the Clergy Towards the Use of Internet Technologies in Religious Life The American Orthodox priests are greater supporters of the use of the modern Internet technologies in church life than their fellow Protestant clergy. When asked “Which of the following best expresses your opinion about the use of Internet technologies (email, social media, texting, etc.) in parish life?”, 67% of Orthodox clergy have chosen the answer “In today’s world, parishes must

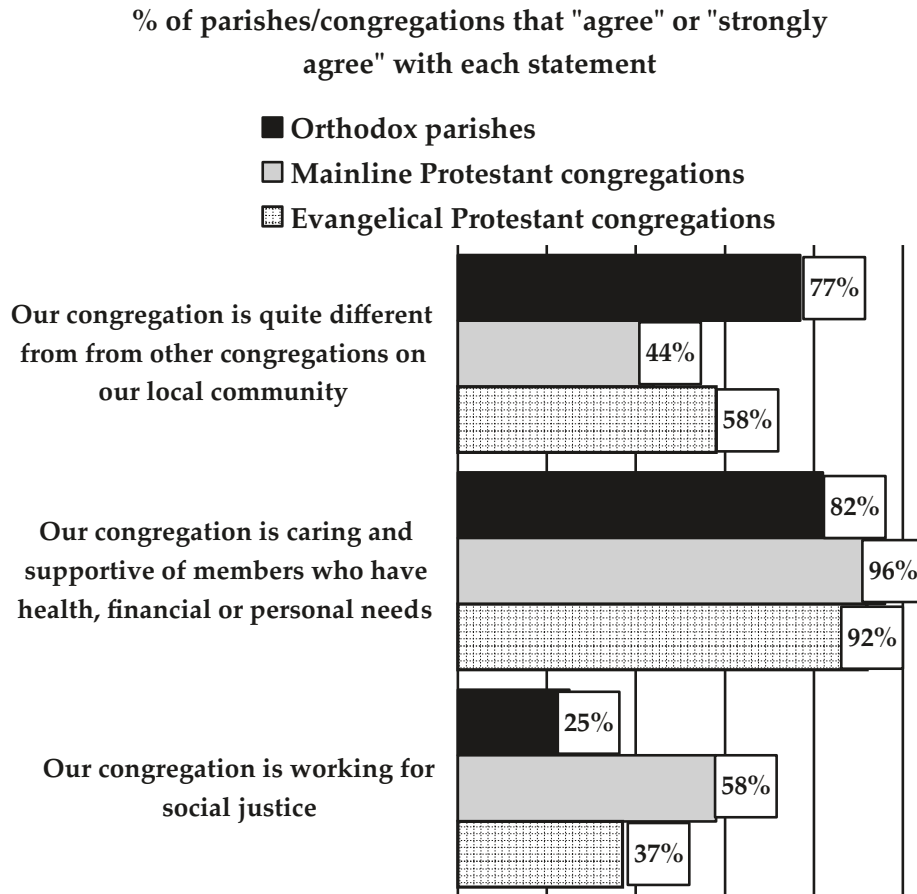


Fig. 8 “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish/congregation?”

use modern communication technologies as widely and as well as possible.” Only 58% of the Mainline Protestant pastors and 57% of the Evangelical Protestant ministers have chosen the same answer. Similarly, many more Orthodox priests than the Mainline Protestant pastors or Evangelical Protestant ministers think that “Our congregations uses Internet and social media effectively.” See Fig. 9.

Fact 10: About Spiritual Vitality and the Sense of Mission and Purpose A smaller percentage of Orthodox parishes than Protestant congregations evaluate themselves as being “spiritually vital and alive.” Similarly, fewer Orthodox parishes than Protestant congregations have a clear sense of the parish’s purpose and mission. See Fig. 10.

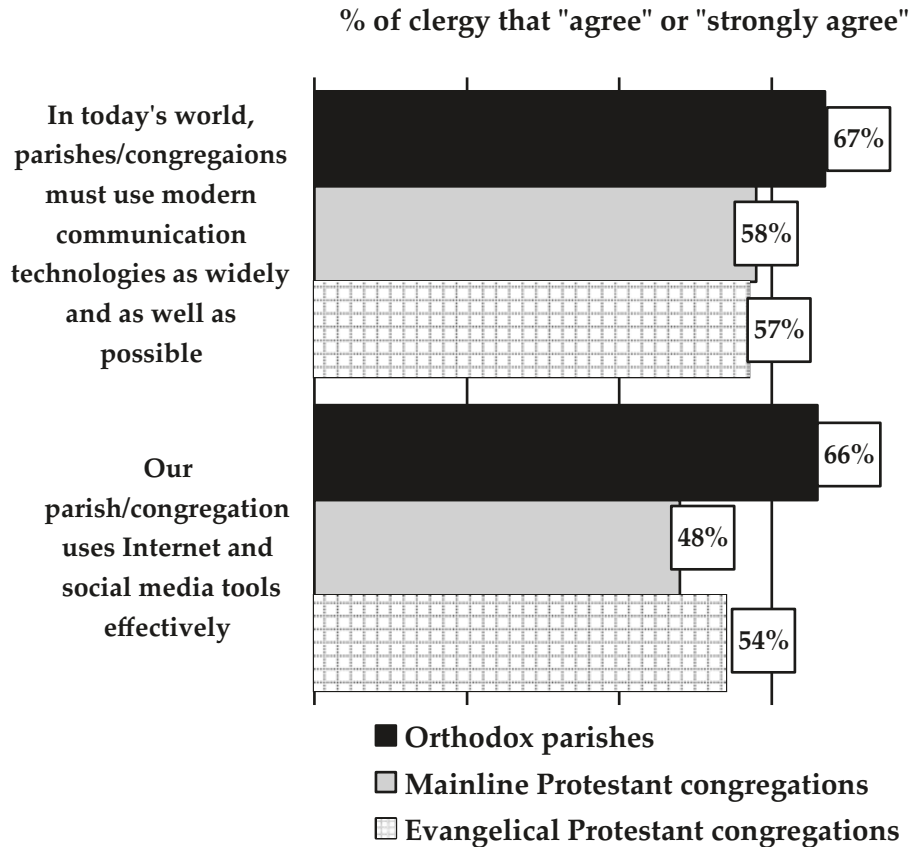


Fig. 9 Opinions of clergy about use of internet technologies in their parishes and congregations

Some Final Thoughts and Questions for the Future

A close reading of Orthodox history demonstrates a remarkable flexibility and adaptability in the life of the Church (Taft 2006). Yet, Orthodox Christianity praises adherence to tradition and emphasizes continuity and stability in Church life. Generally, changes and innovations in the Orthodox Church are accepted rather grudgingly: only if proven absolutely necessary and properly approved by Church hierarchy. This distinct feature of Orthodox Christianity is seen by many as its major strength, but, under certain circumstances, it can pose a major challenge or even threat for the Church's future. Today and more than ever, there are two difficult questions that the Church needs to answer:

- How to keep a proper balance between a supposedly once-and-forever established tradition and dynamically changing social realities?
- How to adapt the Orthodox universal traditions and rules to the various local circumstances in which the Orthodox Church and her parish communities function?

Further, in the American religious and cultural context, these questions are especially urgent. That is for three reasons.

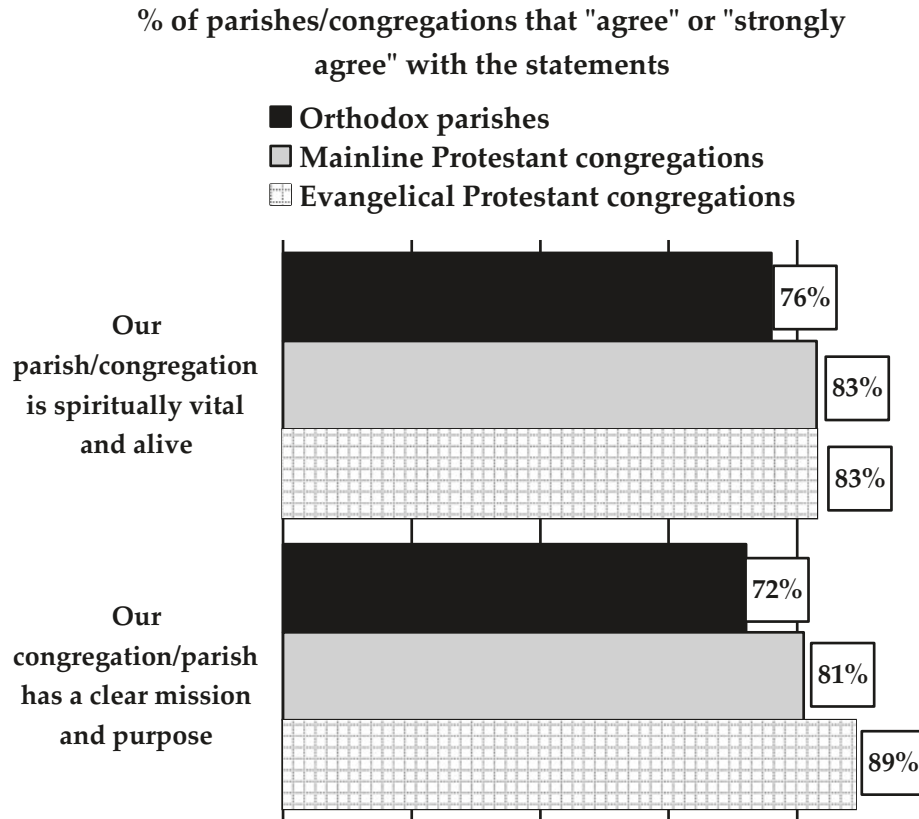


Fig. 10 Spiritual vitality of the congregations and their sense of mission and purpose

First, Orthodox Christians in America are a religious minority. Being a minority and in order to avoid social marginalization, the Orthodox community has in many ways to adapt to the mainstream American culture. Accordingly, the Church leadership cannot simply pretend that, for instance, such issues as sharing laity with clergy in ministry or the ordination of women or same-sex marriage among Orthodox Christians are not present. In the past, the strong ethnic identity and the sense of close-knit community – both culturally and religiously distinct from the wider American society – allowed Orthodox Churches to maintain established patterns of church life and to expect taken-for-granted obedience of their faithful. Today, with the strength of ethno-cultural values and sentiments having declined, the Orthodox Churches cannot count anymore on the “unconditional” loyalty of their members.

Second, an unquestionable hierarchical authority and a highly centralized church administration are fundamental for the Orthodox Church. For a number of historical reasons, however, the factor of “congregationalism” (i.e. significant local autonomy) has been always present in American Orthodox parishes to a much greater extent than in the “Old Lands of Orthodoxy.” According to Fr. Tomas Hopko, “Orthodox parishes and dioceses in North America today are *voluntary associations* of like-minded Orthodox Christians organized for purposes *determined by their members.*” The reality is that “a parish belongs to the diocese of its choice, most often *on its own*

terms. In some cases in North America, parishes considering themselves Orthodox have not belonged to any diocese at all, or have belonged only nominally to insure a minimal measure of legitimacy for their ecclesiastical status” (Hopko 2003). The “congregationalism” – as a distinct feature of American Orthodox parishes – has its roots in the ways many parishes were founded. Generally, most parishes in the US were not and are not created by the hierarchy of the Church. Rather, it is typically a founding group of lay people who organize a community, then approach a bishop and petition for reception into a particular jurisdiction. In many parts of the US, the significant local autonomy of the parishes is further augmented by significant geographic distances and by the scant communications between them and their diocesan centers. Overall, in the US, the individual parishes have relative flexibility and freedom in making decisions locally about patterns of their lives and about either embracing certain innovations or avoiding any changes in the Church.

Third, theologically, all Orthodox Churches in US see themselves as one faith community and part of one universal Orthodox Church. The reality, however, is that – so far – Orthodox community was unable to speak with one voice vis-à-vis American society at large. Indeed, Orthodoxy in America has always had multiple faces due to the existence of many Orthodox jurisdictions divided along ethnic lines. The growing presence of converts from other religious traditions among both Orthodox laity and clergy made the local expressions of Orthodox Christianity in America even more “mosaic.” Moreover, as Aristotle Papanikolau pointed out, the inability to adapt to the situation of American cultural pluralism has led to further fragmentation of American Orthodoxy. That is, “indeterminacies, internal strains and conflicts are evident in Orthodoxy in America in the sheer diverse number of interpretations of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian through the eclectic appropriations of traditional Orthodox Christian beliefs, rituals and symbols by those who choose to maintain some affiliation with Orthodox identity. Indeed, within the Orthodox churches in America you have diverse interpretations and appropriations of the traditions that lead to diverse theologies that span the spectrum of the extremes of the so-called ‘Culture Wars.’” (Papanikolau 2003).

To conclude, today as in the past, the American Orthodox Churches face the challenge of adapting to the American context and reaching out in witness and mission, without sacrificing their core beliefs and practices and their cultural and spiritual heritage. How they will respond to this challenge remains to be seen. In American pluralistic society, Orthodox Christianity also has to compete with many other religious and secular choices easily available in the US’ vast cultural marketplace. Under these circumstances, the future of American Orthodox churches depends on the sensitivity to their public image and their “conversational skills” with mainstream America, and, at the same time, on the firm adherence to their particularity, their fundamental beliefs and their unique message.

References

- Alperin, E., & Batalova, J. (2018). *European immigrants in the United States* (Report). Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/european-immigrants-united-states#RegionsCountries>. Accessed 26 Aug 2018.
- America's Changing Religious Landscape. (2015). *Report*. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. Accessed 09 Oct 2017.
- Ammerman, N. (1997). *Congregation and community*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Berger, P. (2003). Orthodoxy and pluralistic challenge. In A. Vrame (Ed.), *The Orthodox parish in America* (pp. 33–43). Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- Grammich, C., Hadaway, K., Houseal, R., Jones, D., Krindatch, A., Stanley, R., & Taylor, R. (2012). *2010 U.S. religious census: Religious congregations & membership study*. Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.
- Hopko, T. (2003). The Orthodox parish in America. In A. Vrame (Ed.), *The Orthodox parish in America* (pp. 1–11). Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- Krindatch, A. (2008). *The Orthodox Church today* (Report). Patriarch Berkeley: Athenagoras Orthodox Institute. <http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/research/OrthChurchFullReport.pdf>. Accessed 09 Oct 2017.
- Krindatch, A. (2012). *Usage of English language, ethnic identity, and ethnic culture in American Orthodox Christian Churches* (Report). Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA. <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/docs/research/3.%20Usage%20Of%20English%20Language%20Ethnic%20Identity.pdf>. Accessed 20 Sept 2018.
- Krindatch, A. (Ed.). (2011). *Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Churches*. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- Krindatch, A. (Ed.). (2016). *Atlas of American Orthodox Christian monasteries* (2nd ed.). Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- Michalopoulos, G., & Ham, H. (2003). *The American Orthodox Church. A history of its beginnings*. Salisbury: Regina Orthodox Press.
- Nondenominational & Independent Congregations. (2011). *Report*. Hartford Institute for Religion Research. <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cong/nondenom.html>. Accessed 09 Oct 2017.
- Nones on the Rise. (2012). *Report*. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>. Accessed 26 Aug 2018.
- Papanikolaou, A. (2003, November 15). *The one becomes the many: Orthodox Christianity and American pluralism*. Paper presented at the seminar “Orthodox Christianity and American public life: The challenges and opportunities of religious pluralism in the 21st century” sponsored by the Institute of Religion and World Affairs at Boston University, Boston.
- Registry Statistics. (2016). *Resource document*. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. <https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/4582646/registry-2016-stats.pdf/b0f71f2e-7ff1-4d4a-906a-5001264fd5b2>. Accessed 09 Oct 2017.
- Roozen, D. (2015). *American congregations: Thriving and surviving* (Report). Hartford: Hartford Institute for Religion Research. <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/American-Congregations-2015.pdf>. Accessed 09 Oct 2017.
- Taft, R. (2006). *Through their own eyes. Liturgy as the Byzantines saw it*. Berkeley: InterOrthodox Press.
- U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation. (2008). *Report*. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2008/02/25/us-religious-landscape-survey-religious-affiliation>. Accessed 09 Oct 2017.

Alexei Krindatch is a Sociologist of Religion and a leading expert on Orthodox Christian Churches in America. He is the Research Coordinator for the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA (www.assemblyofbishops.org). Along with numerous articles, he has authored three books: *Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Monasteries* (2017), *Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Churches* (2011), and *Geography of Religion in Russia* (1997). A native of Moscow, Russia, he presently lives and works in Berkeley, California. Many of his studies on Orthodox Christianity in America can be viewed and downloaded at <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/news/research> www.orthodoxreality.org