

# Fast Questions and Fast Answers about the Realities of Orthodox Parish Life in America

By Alexei Krindatch ([akrindatch@aol.com](mailto:akrindatch@aol.com), [www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org)), National Coordinator

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**Question 1. How does Orthodox parish life in America differ from that of the Old World?**

One of the most prominent differences is the much greater autonomy of local parishes in America. This, in turn, leads to great diversity in the ways that American Orthodox parishes organize their religious and social lives, something seldom seen in the “mother countries” of Orthodoxy. Some American parishes limit themselves to worship 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 practices. Some cherish their ethnic identity and make a conscious effort to preserve their ethnic heritage, while the others strive to be “pan-Orthodox” and “all-American” parishes. Some parishes consider social and religious outreach to the local community among their top priorities, while others are more internally focused, having little to do with their neighborhoods and those who are of different faiths. The governance models and how decisions about the life of a parish are made also vary greatly from parish to parish.

Fr. Nicholas Ferencz, Orthodox scholar and priest in the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese, describes this diversity in American Orthodox parishes as “modified congregationalism,” which typifies the structure of Orthodox parishes in America.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the significant autonomy of a local parish community has always been present in American Orthodox Churches to a much greater extent than in the Old World. This distinct feature of American Orthodoxy has its roots in the ways that American parishes have been and continue to be founded. Generally, most parishes in the U.S. have not been created by the Church hierarchy. Instead, it is typically a group of lay people who organize a local worshipping community and then approach a bishop or jurisdiction for reception and acquiring a formal status of a parish or mission parish.

In many parts of the U.S., the “congregationalism” and autonomy of Orthodox parishes are intensified by the significant geographic distances between them, and their relatively infrequent communications with diocesan centers. In more populous regions, however, the isolation of parishes from each other may not be geographical, but psychological, as many parishes remain primarily “ethno-centric” and focused

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Ferencz. *American Orthodoxy and Parish Congregationalism*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press. 2015. p. vii.

on the spiritual needs of their own ethnic flock. The result is that "pastors and laypeople alike live in little separate islands, with little inter-parish communication most of the time."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Fr. Ferencz contends that "Orthodox theology and practice in regard to the definition and structure of the Church are widely, perhaps, wildly, divergent in America."<sup>3</sup> In a nutshell, compared to their Old World counterparts, individual parishes in the U.S. have always had relative flexibility and freedom in making decisions about the patterns of their social and religious lives, and about either embracing certain rules and traditions or avoiding them.

One should keep in mind that these variations in local parish life have had a significant influence on the laity's perception of the Orthodox Church at large. Indeed, most ordinary parishioners experience church life only locally: their overall perception of the Orthodox Church is primarily based on "how things are done" in their home parishes. A relatively small proportion of church members have exposure to either inter-Orthodox cooperation (thereby becoming familiar with parishes of various jurisdictions) or to the work of the Orthodox Church on a diocesan or national level.

In this mini-report, we will examine various parish characteristics and features that combine to create a unique experience of life and worship in each local Orthodox Christian community.

### ***Question 2. How large is a typical American Orthodox parish?***

The answer to this question depends on:

- a. How the term "typical" is understood
- b. The jurisdiction to which a parish belongs

a. In the 2010 U.S. Religion Census<sup>4</sup> (Orthodox Churches participated in this Census), each Orthodox parish and mission was asked, "How many individual persons total are associated with the life of your parish, including adults and children, regular and occasional attendees, paid stewards and persons who do not contribute financially?" In essence, the answer to this question estimates the number of adherents in each parish: i.e., the number of persons involved - at least occasionally - in the life of a local parish

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.usreligioncensus.org/>

community. At the time of the 2010 U.S. Religious Census, for all 1,868 parishes of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops combined, the total number of persons participating in Orthodox church life was 797,500.

If the term “typical” is understood as “average,” then dividing 797,500 by 1,868 yields 426 persons as a size of a “typical” American Orthodox parish. However, in reality, this figure is misleading, because a significant number of our Orthodox parishioners are concentrated in a relatively few truly big parishes, whereas most parishes are small in size. As a result, the “average” value is skewed because of this disproportionate concentration of our church members in a relatively few parishes.

Here is a simple example explaining this situation. For instance, think about eleven parish communities which have 400, 400, 40, 30, 35, 25, 20, 20, 10, 10, and 10 parishioners, with a total of 1000 members. Dividing 1000 by 11 yields an average of 91 parishioners in a “typical” parish. But clearly the figure of 91 cannot be seen as the size of a “typical parish” in this example, because out of eleven parishes, nine have far fewer than 91 adherents. Switching from this simplified example to real numbers, Table 1 offers an overview of the distribution of American Orthodox Church adherents between smaller and larger parishes. One can see that the largest Orthodox parishes (only 10% of the total) account for more than half (53%) of all U.S. Orthodox adherents. Conversely, those small communities with fewer than 100 adherents constitute 39% of all American parishes, but serve only 5% of all Orthodox Church adherents.

**Table 1. Distribution of the Orthodox Church Adherents between Smaller and Larger Parishes**

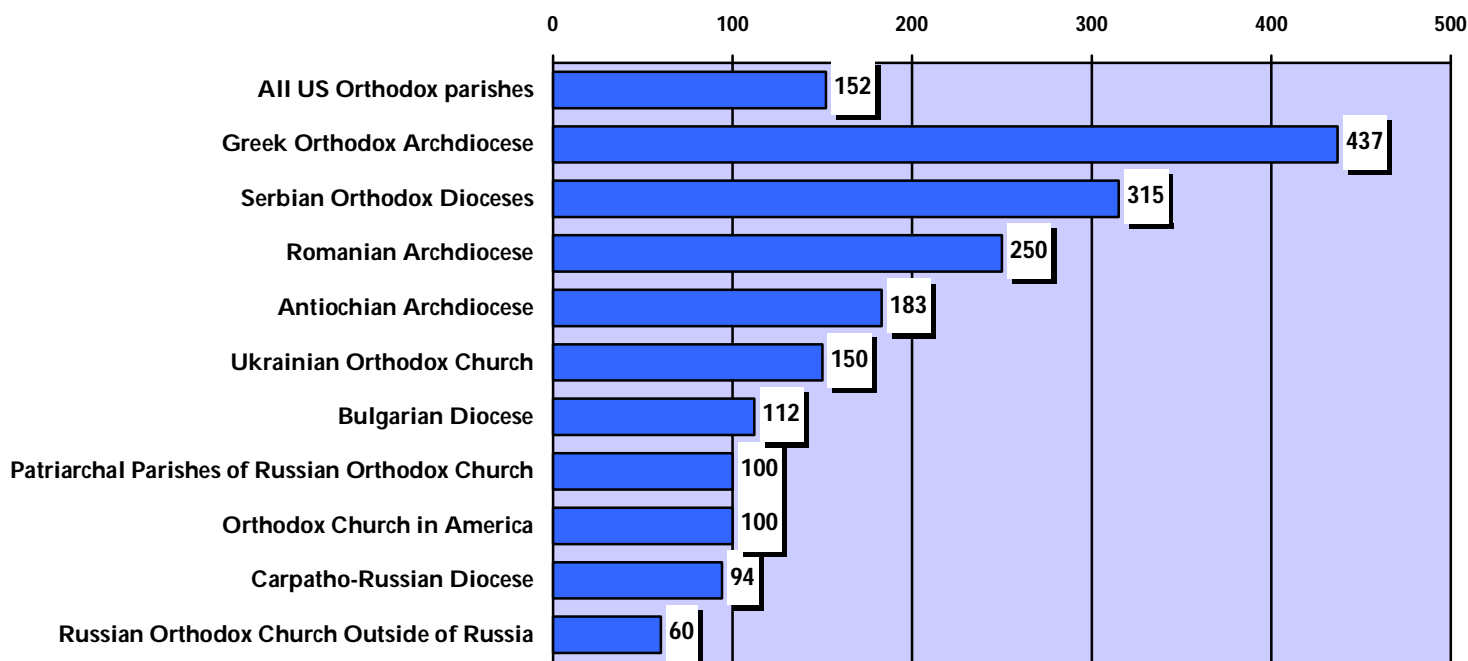
Size category of a parish	Number of U.S. Orthodox parishes that belong to each size category	Percentage of the parishes in each size category in the total of all U.S. Orthodox parishes	Total number of adherents in the parishes of each size category	Percentage of adherents in the parishes of each size category in the total of all U.S. Orthodox adherents
Parishes up to 100 adherents	724	39%	41,753	5%
Parishes with 101-1000 adherents	956	51%	329,502	42%
Parishes with more than 1000 adherents	188	10%	426,245	53%
All U.S. parishes	1,868	100%	797,500	100%

Therefore, to answer the question, “How large is a typical American Orthodox parish?” the statistical measure called the “median” is better than the “average” (or “mean”). If you list all the parish sizes in order, from the smallest to the largest, the median parish is the parish that you find in the middle of the list. In our example above, with the membership in eleven hypothetical parishes, the median value (the number in the middle) is 25. There are eleven numbers in this sequence and “25” is the sixth, or middle, number.<sup>5</sup> Effectively, the “median” separates the whole sample of parishes into two parts, with half of them being smaller and half of them being larger than the median. That is, half of the parishes in our made-up example have fewer and half of them have more than 25 parishioners.

Again, switching from this simplified example to the real 1,868 U.S. Orthodox parishes, the “median” American parish has 152 adherents. That is, half the U.S. parishes have more than 152 and half have fewer than 152 persons involved in their life.

b. The size of a “typical” American Orthodox parish varies greatly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. For each American Orthodox jurisdiction, Fig. 1 shows the size of its median parish.

**Fig. 1 Median Size (Number of Adherents) of the Parishes of the Various American Orthodox Jurisdictions**



<sup>5</sup> To find the middle number for an even number of parishes, you would find the two parishes in the middle of the ordered list and calculate the value that is halfway between them.

Fig. 2 shows that the largest “typical” parishes are in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. The median size of GOA parishes is 437 persons. The smallest “typical” parishes are in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. The median size of ROCOR parishes is just 60 persons.

It was noted previously that the largest 10% of American Orthodox parishes serve as many as 53% of all U.S. Orthodox Church adherents. At the same time, the degree of concentration of church members in these largest parishes varies significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Table 2 shows that the two American Orthodox jurisdictions with the highest concentration of parishioners in their 10% largest parishes are the Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. 62% and 59% of their adherents respectively attend church in just 10% of these jurisdictions’ parishes. On the opposite extreme is the Carpatho-Russian Diocese, the jurisdiction with the lowest concentration of parishioners in the largest parishes. Only 33% of Carpatho-Russian parishioners are associated with the largest 10% of Carpatho-Russian parishes.

**Table 2 Percentage of Church Adherents Attending in Top 10% Largest Parishes**

Jurisdiction	Percentage of adherents of each Orthodox jurisdiction attending in each jurisdiction’s top 10% largest parishes
Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church	62%
Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia	59%
Serbian Orthodox Dioceses	44%
Antiochian Archdiocese	43%
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America	41%
Ukrainian Orthodox Church	41%
Orthodox Church in America	39%
Romanian Archdiocese	37%
Bulgarian Diocese	35%
Carpatho-Russian Diocese	33%

**Question 3. How strong is the presence of the following categories of parishioners in US Orthodox Churches: US-born “cradle” Orthodox, immigrants (those born outside of US), and converts to the Orthodox faith?**

The membership of present-day Orthodox Christian Churches in the United States consists of three very distinct demographic groups:

- US-born descendants (second, third, fourth, fifth generations) of the original Greek, Slavic or Arab immigrants;
- Immigrants – persons who were born outside of the United States and eventually immigrated to America;
- American converts to Orthodox Christianity.

In addition, the growing number of children of American converts could be seen as a separate category. Indeed, they are persons born and raised in the Orthodox Church, but without Orthodox “ethnic” heritage or identity. The presence of these distinct groups of parishioners varies significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and – within each jurisdiction - from parish to parish.

At this point, there is no comprehensive statistical data on the percentage of these categories of parishioners among the members of various American Orthodox jurisdictions. However, the information from three national studies of Orthodox Church life in America allows for reliable estimates for several Orthodox jurisdictions:

1. In a 2010 national survey of U.S. Orthodox parishes, the clergy of three participating jurisdictions (Antiochian Archdiocese, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and Orthodox Church in America)<sup>6</sup> were asked to estimate the percentage of the cradle Orthodox parishioners in their parishes.
2. In the 2010 national study, “The Orthodox Family in America at Home and in Church,”<sup>7</sup> priests in Greek Orthodox parishes were asked to estimate the percentages of converts to Orthodoxy and immigrants (persons born outside of the United States) among their parishioners.

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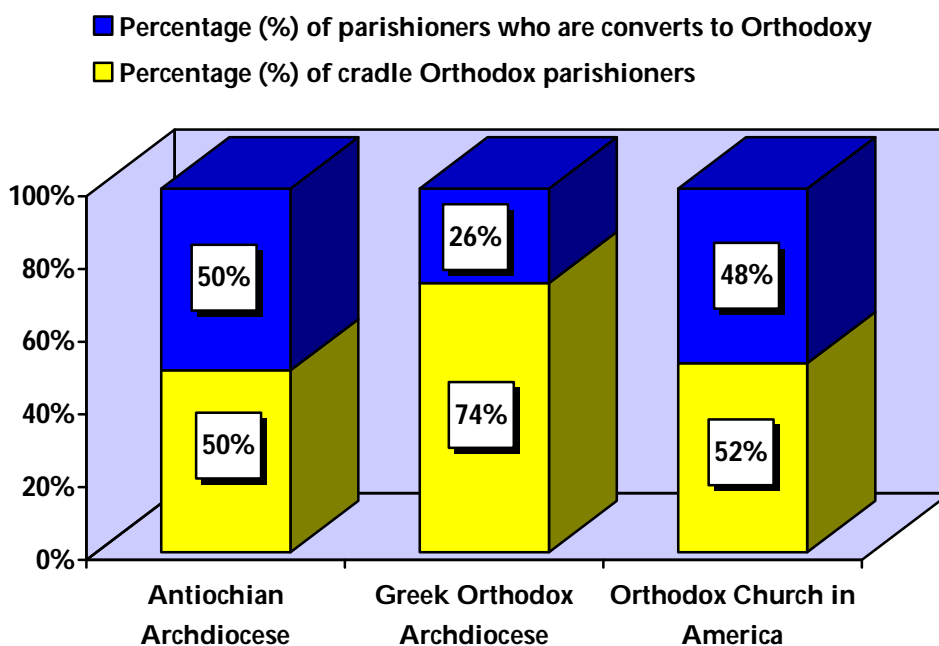
<sup>6</sup> This Orthodox parish survey was part of a much larger survey of US religious congregations titled “Faith Communities Today.” 160 GOA, 123 OCA and 85 Antiochian parishes participated in this study. For more information on 2010 “Faith Communities Today Study” see: <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-reports-2010/>

<sup>7</sup> 100 GOA parishes representing all GOA Metropolises participated in this study. The full study report is available at: <https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/2618758/Orthodox+Family+Study/31375914-b639-4030-8af8-a1e428630303>

3. In the 2015 national study, "Exploring Orthodox Generosity: Giving in U.S. Orthodox Parishes,"<sup>8</sup> parish priests from various jurisdictions were asked to estimate the percentages of converts to Orthodoxy and immigrants (i.e. persons born outside of the United States who are mostly cradle Orthodox) among their parishioners. In this study, four jurisdictions had a sufficient number of participating clergy to allow for reliable observations and conclusions: the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, American Carpatho-Russian Diocese, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, and Orthodox Church in America.

Fig. 2a, 2b and 2c present the findings from these three studies.

**Fig. 2a Percentage of Cradle Orthodox and Converts to Orthodoxy among the Members of Three Jurisdictions (based on 2010 survey of U.S. Orthodox parishes)**

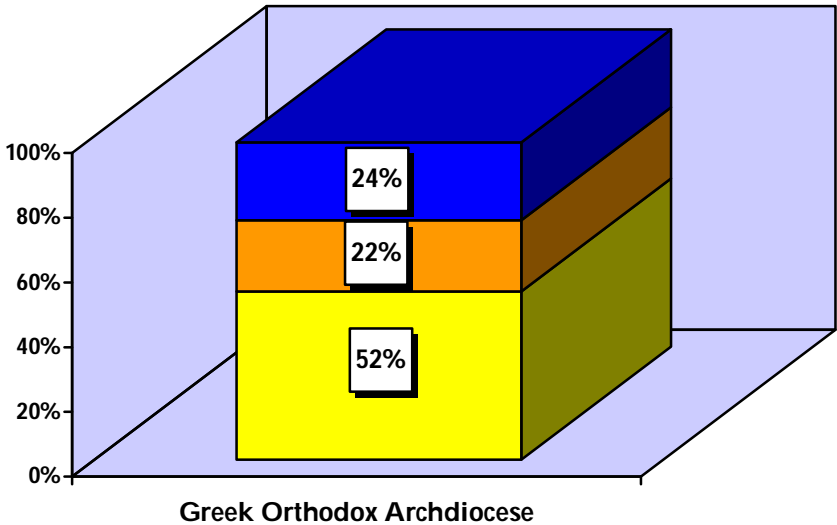


<sup>8</sup> The study was conducted by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA. 136 OCA, 108 GOA, 68 Antiochian and 55 Carpatho-Russian parishes participated in this study. The full study report is available at: <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/docs/research/OrthodoxGenerosity.pdf>



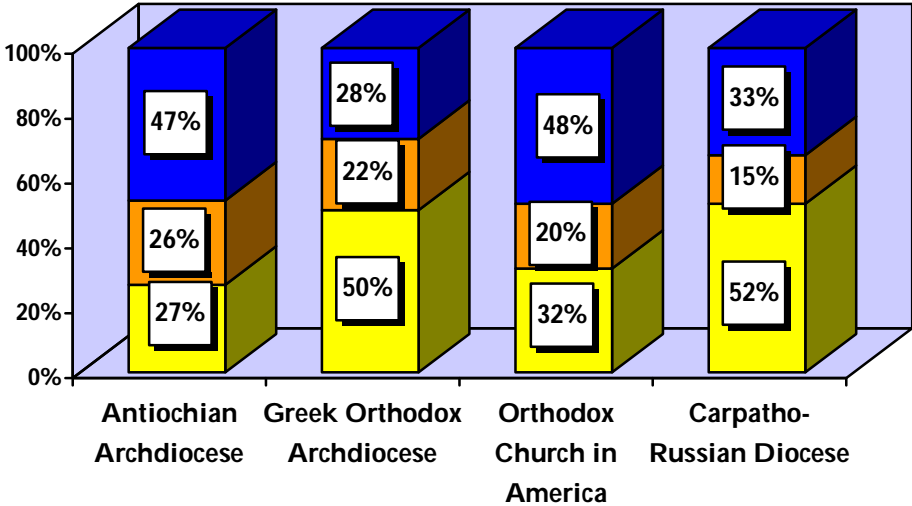
**Fig. 2b** Percentage of U.S.-Born Cradle Orthodox, Immigrants (Persons Born Outside of U.S.), and Converts to Orthodoxy among GOA Parishioners  
(based on 2010 study “Orthodox Family in America”)

- Percentage (%) of parishioners who are converts to Orthodoxy
- Percentage (%) of immigrants (persons born outside of US) among parishioners
- Percentage (%) of US-born cradle Orthodox parishioners



**Fig. 2c** Percentage of U.S.-Born Cradle Orthodox, Immigrants (Persons Born Outside of U.S.), and Converts to Orthodoxy among the Members of Four Jurisdictions  
(based on 2015 “Exploring Orthodox Generosity: Giving in U.S. Orthodox Parishes”)

- Percentage (%) of parishioners who are converts to Orthodoxy
- Percentage of immigrants (persons born outside of US) among parishioners
- Percentage (%) of cradle Orthodox parishioners



One can see that the data coming from these three different studies basically agree with each other. Converts to Orthodoxy constitute about half of the members in the Antiochian Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America, about one third of parishioners in the Carpatho-Russian Diocese, and about one quarter of the members in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. Immigrants (persons born outside of the U.S.) constitute about 15% of parishioners in the Carpatho-Russian Diocese, about 20% of the members of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America, and about 25% of the parishioners of the Antiochian Archdiocese.

**Question 4. How strong today is the “ethnic culture” in US Orthodox parishes?**

The question to what extent the various 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, scholars, and “rank and file” clergy and laity. The national survey of US Orthodox parishes conducted in 2011 under the auspices of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA<sup>9</sup> provided some good insights into this question. In this survey, each member parish was asked to respond to three questions:

- 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”)
- 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”)
- Do you **agree or disagree** with the statement: “Our parish has a strong ethnic culture and identity that we are trying to preserve?” Select one answer: “Strongly agree,” “Rather agree,” “Neutral / Unsure,” “Rather disagree,” “Strongly disagree.”

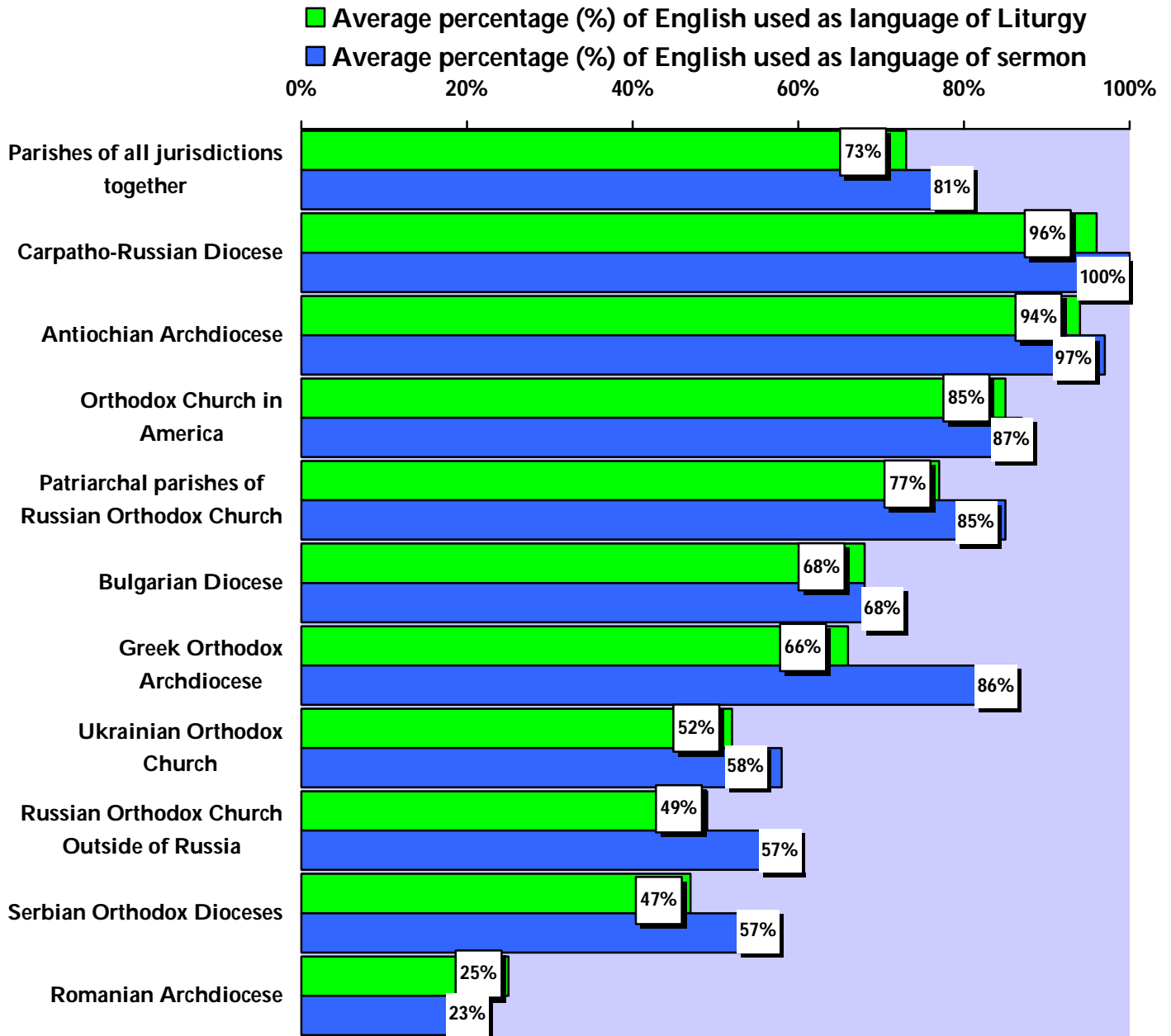
Fig. 3 on the next page furnishes information on the usage of the English language in worship services in the parishes of the various Orthodox jurisdictions.

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<sup>9</sup> Full study report is available at:

<http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/docs/research/3.%20Usage%20Of%20English%20Language%20Ethnic%20Identity.pdf>

**Fig. 3 Percentage (%) of English Used in Worship Services  
in the Parishes of Various Orthodox Jurisdictions**



Notably, on the national level, for all parishes and for all Orthodox jurisdictions combined, English is much more widely used in American Orthodox church life than are the “ethnic” languages. Nationwide, the average proportion of English used as the language of the Liturgy is 73%. For the language of the sermon, the national average of the usage of English is even higher: 81%.

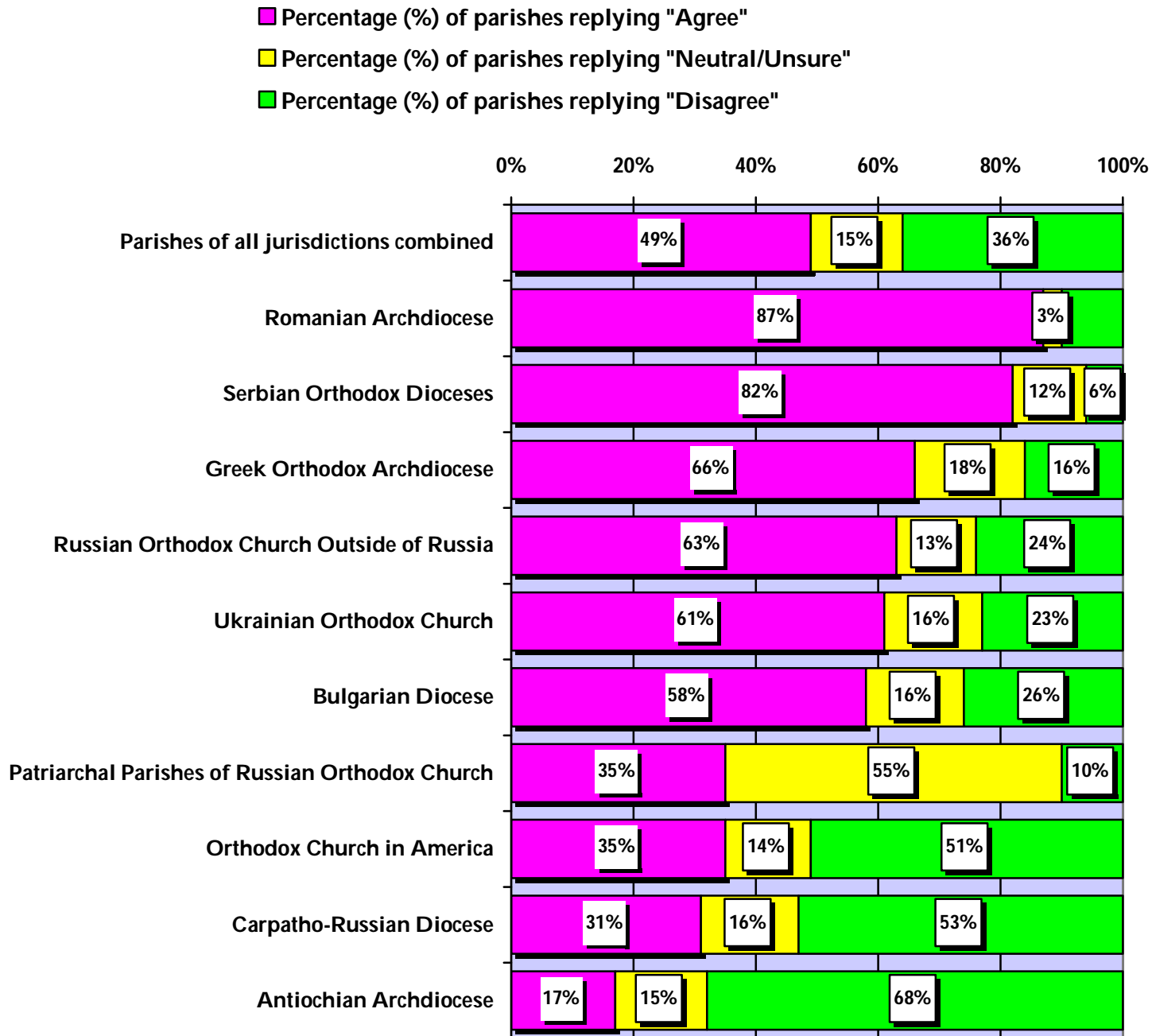
Based on data in Fig. 3, Orthodox jurisdictions in America can be divided into three categories with respect to the use of English versus other languages. The first group includes three Churches which almost exclusively use English as their language of both Liturgy and sermon. These jurisdictions are the Carpatho-Russian Diocese, the Antiochian Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). The second group includes Churches in which English dominates in worship services, but other languages also have a significant presence. This is the case in the Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Diocese, and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. The third group consists of Orthodox jurisdictions in which various non-English languages remain at least as important as English or even dominate as languages of Liturgy and sermon. These are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Romanian Archdiocese.

Fig. 3 also shows that in all U.S. Orthodox jurisdictions (the Romanian Archdiocese being the only exception) English is more widely used for the sermon than for the Liturgy. This makes sense, because in the Liturgy, the parish can still use a language of ritual which is not understood or spoken by some of its church members. However, delivering homilies would make no sense without clear communication between clergy and people present in the church. To conclude, in terms of the languages used in worship services, the majority of U.S. Orthodox parishes and most American Orthodox jurisdictions can be described as predominantly “English speaking.”

The fact that the English language now prevails in American Orthodox church life - both as the language of Liturgy and sermon - may prompt the premature conclusion that a solid majority of American Orthodox parishes can be viewed today as “all American” congregations. However, survey data tell us that this is not exactly accurate. The final question in the 2011 U.S. national Orthodox parish survey asked: “Do you agree or disagree with the statement, ‘Our parish has a strong ethnic heritage and identity that we are trying to preserve.’” In essence, this question asked about how important the “ethnic culture” is to the parish community. Fig. 4 shows that almost half (49%) of all U.S. Orthodox parishes agreed with the statement, “Our parish has a strong ethnic heritage that we are trying to preserve.” Only 36% of parishes disagreed with this statement, and 15% responded, “neutral or unsure.”

**Fig. 4 Strength of Ethnic Identity in the Parishes of Various Orthodox Jurisdictions**

**“Do you agree with the statement ‘Our parish has strong ethnic heritage and identity that we are trying to preserve’?”**



Further, in six out of ten U.S. Orthodox jurisdictions, a strong majority of parishes agreed with the statement about “having a strong ethnic heritage and identity.” These jurisdictions are: Romanian Archdiocese (87% agreement), Serbian Orthodox Church (82%), Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (63%), Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (63%), Ukrainian Orthodox Church (61%), and Bulgarian Diocese (58%). Conversely, in only three jurisdictions (Orthodox Church in America, Antiochian

Archdiocese and Carpatho-Russian Diocese), more than half the parishes disagreed with the statement about “having a strong ethnic heritage and identity.” In summary, the predominance of the English language in most U.S. Orthodox jurisdictions does not necessarily mean that their parishes have abandoned ethnic identity and culture.

**Question 5. In terms of the age of parishioners, how “old” are the members of U.S. Orthodox parishes?**

A good answer to this question came from the 2016 national study, “Orthodox Christian Churches in 21st Century America.”<sup>10</sup> The parishes were asked “Of your regular participants, please estimate the percentage of the following age categories: ‘Children, preteen, youth (age 0-17),’ ‘young adults (age 18-34),’ ‘adults (age 35-64),’ ‘senior citizens (age 65 and older).’” Five hundred eighty parishes (i.e., 30% of all U.S. Orthodox parishes) participated in this study. In addition to combined results for the whole group, statistically reliable results for five individual jurisdictions (with large enough numbers of participating parishes) were obtained: the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA),<sup>11</sup> the Orthodox Church in America (OCA),<sup>12</sup> the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese (AOCA),<sup>13</sup> the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses,<sup>14</sup> and the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese (ACROD).<sup>15</sup>

Fig. 5 shows that for all U.S. Orthodox Churches combined, senior citizens (age 65 and older) constitute about one quarter (24%) of all regularly participating members, while young people (children, preteens, youth and young adults) comprise 35%. However, U.S. Orthodox jurisdictions differ considerably in the age composition of their members. Among the five individual jurisdictions, Carpatho-Russian parishes have the highest percentage of older members: 41% are senior citizens and only 25% are young people. On the other extreme, the churches of the Antiochian Archdiocese have the most youthful demographics: only 19% of their regularly participating members are aged 65+, while 40% are children, youth and young adults under 35 years old.

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<sup>10</sup> Conducted by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA. Full study report is available at: <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/news/2018/study-orthodox-christian-churches-21st-century>

<sup>11</sup> 162 participating parishes (or 31% of all GOA churches)

<sup>12</sup> 168 participating parishes (or 30% of all OCA churches)

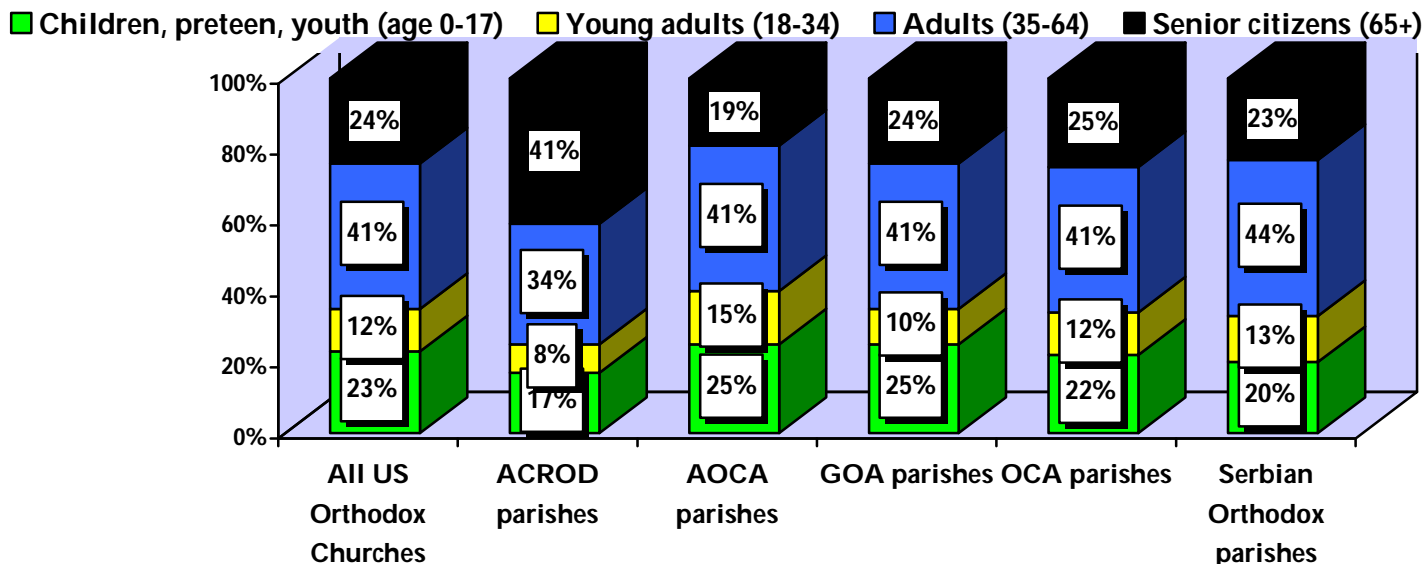
<sup>13</sup> 99 participating parishes (or 40% of all AOCA churches)

<sup>14</sup> 43 participating parishes (or 35% of all Serbian Orthodox churches)

<sup>15</sup> 37 participating parishes (or 46% of all Carpatho-Russian churches)

**Fig. 5 Age Composition of the Orthodox Church Members**

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



It is helpful to compare the data on age composition of U.S. Orthodox Church members (presented in Fig. 5) to the age distribution of the general U.S. population. According to the 2010 US Census, people under age 18 constituted 24% of the total population; ages 18-34 were 24%, ages 35-64 were 39%, and ages 65+ were 13%. Thus, the most dramatic difference in the age composition of US Orthodox Churches versus American general population is in the presence of young adults between the ages of 18 and 34. Indeed, the percentage of young adults in the American general population (24%) is *twice* that of among the members of U.S. Orthodox Churches (12%).

**Question 6. Are American Orthodox parishes growing in numbers of members?**

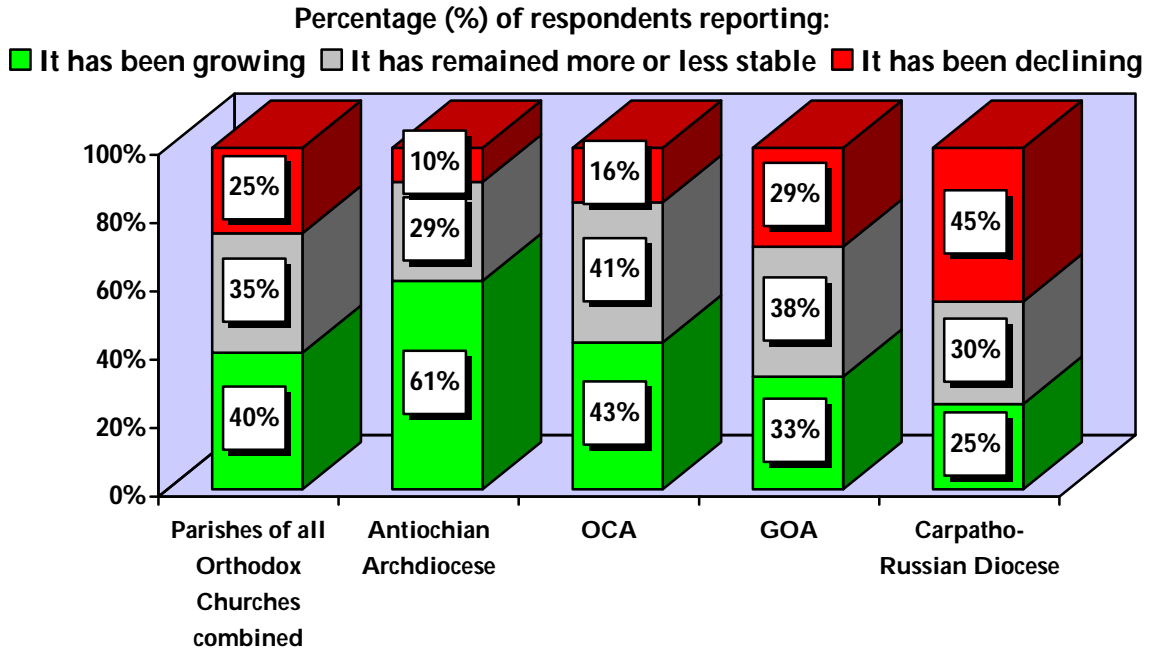
The partial answer to this question came from the 2015 national study, "Exploring Orthodox Generosity: Giving in U.S. Orthodox Parishes."<sup>16</sup> Nearly 3,000 lay parishioners and 420 parish priests from all jurisdictions participated in this study. Along with the overall national analysis, four jurisdictions had a sufficient number of participating parishes to allow for the separate analysis of their data: the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, the American Carpatho-Russian Diocese, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America. One of the questions in this study asked the respondents (both clergy and laity): "How would you describe the change in the membership of your

<sup>16</sup> Conducted by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA. Study report is available at: <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/docs/research/OrthodoxGenerosity.pdf>

parish during the past 3 years?" Fig. 6a shows the answers to this question offered by lay parishioners, while Fig. 6b shows replies of the clergy.

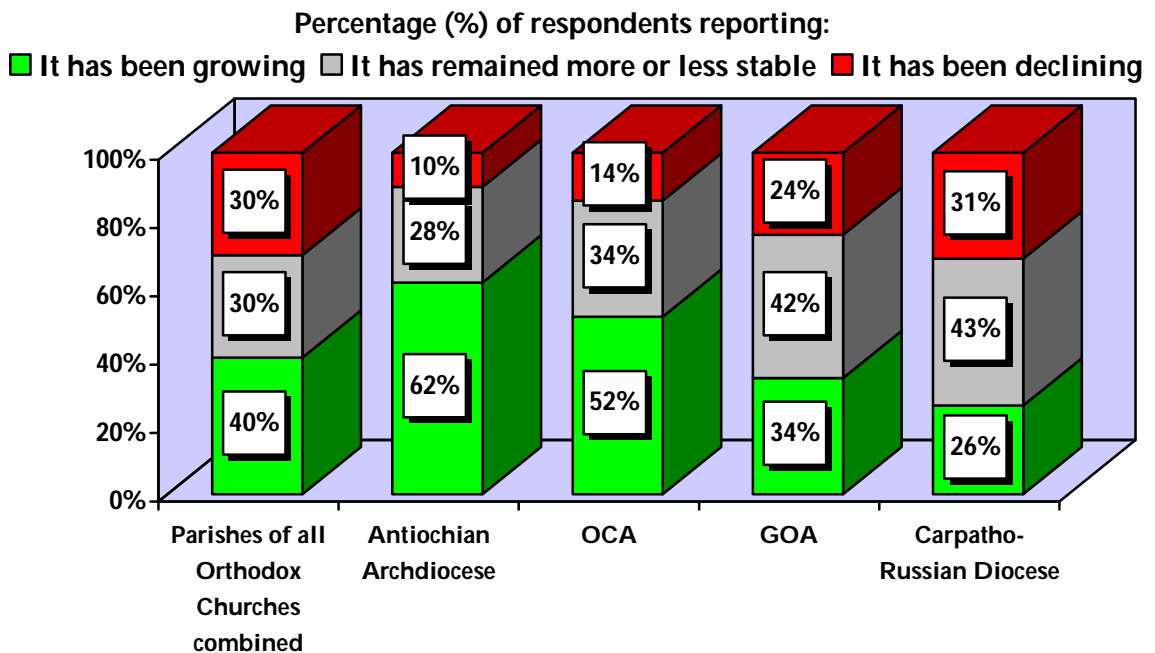
**Fig. 6a Change in Membership of the Parishes during Past Three Years from Perspective of Laity:**

"How would you describe the change in the membership of your parish during the past 3 years?"



**Fig. 6b Change in Membership of the Parishes during Past Three Years from Perspective of Clergy:**

"How would you describe the change in the membership of your parish during the past 3 years?"





Three main observations can be made from Fig. 6a and 6b. First, the opinions of clergy and laity about the growth or decline of their parishes are fairly similar.

Second, according to the study participants, the plurality of U.S. parishes (40%) experienced growth in membership during 2012-2015. About one third of the churches (30% as reported by the clergy and 35% by the laity) remained stable and about one-quarter (30% and 25%) declined in members.

Third, Fig. 6a and 6b also show that the trends in membership change were different for various jurisdictions. An overwhelming majority of respondents from the Antiochian Archdiocese (61% among laity and 62% among priests) indicated that their churches have been growing during the past three years and only one in ten (10%) reported decline of their parishes. On the opposite end are the parishes of the American Carpatho-Russian Diocese: only one quarter of their respondents said that their parishes had been growing, while 45% of lay parishioners and 31% of priests reported that their parishes experienced decline in members during 2012-2015.

***Question 7. How actively do Orthodox Church members participate in the lives of their parishes outside of worship services?***

It should be noted that this question is crucial for all American Christian denominations. In his book, "The Other 80 Percent,"<sup>17</sup> the renowned American sociologist of religion, Prof. Scott Thumma, argued that in most religious congregations -- regardless of particular denomination -- only 20% of members are actively involved in the lives of their congregations beyond worship. In the case of U.S. Orthodox Churches, this question can be addressed by the data from the 2016 national study, "Orthodox Christian Churches in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America" (see detailed reference to this study in Question 5).

The study asked Orthodox priests two questions about the involvement of parishioners in the lives of their parishes:

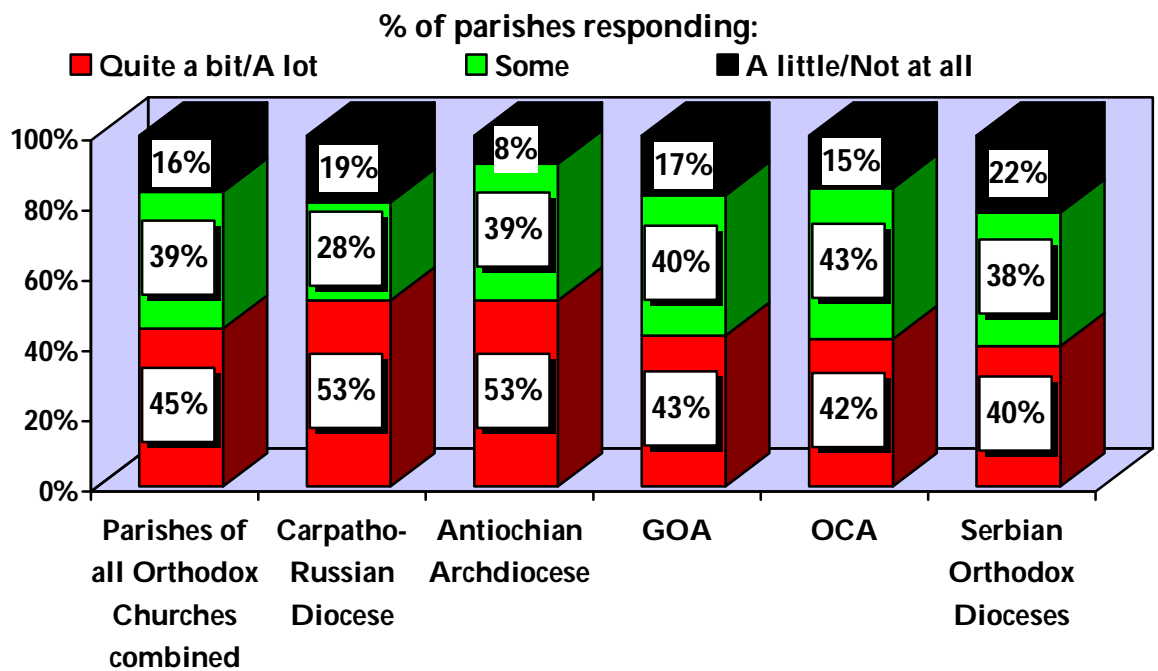
- ❖ "Overall, to what extent are your parishioners involved in the parish' various programs, committees and projects outside of worship?"
- ❖ "How easy or difficult is it for your parish to recruit people for volunteer leadership roles: for example, serving on governing boards or committees, or teaching Sunday School?"

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<sup>17</sup> Thumma, S., and Bird, W. *The Other 80 Percent*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass

Fig. 7 shows that when answering the first and more general question, "Overall, to what extent are your parishioners involved in parish's various programs, committees and projects outside of worship?" nearly half (45%) of U.S. Orthodox priests responded: "Quite a bit/A lot." Only one in six clergy (16%) indicated that their parishioners were involved, "A little/Not at all." Among five individual jurisdictions, the parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese and Carpatho-Russian Diocese reported the highest involvement of their members in various areas of the parish life. In both jurisdictions, 53% of the parish clergy reported that their members are involved "Quite a bit/A lot."

**Fig. 7 Overall Involvement of Parishioners in the Life of a Parish:** "Overall, to what extent are your parishioners involved in parish's various programs, committees and projects outside of worship?"

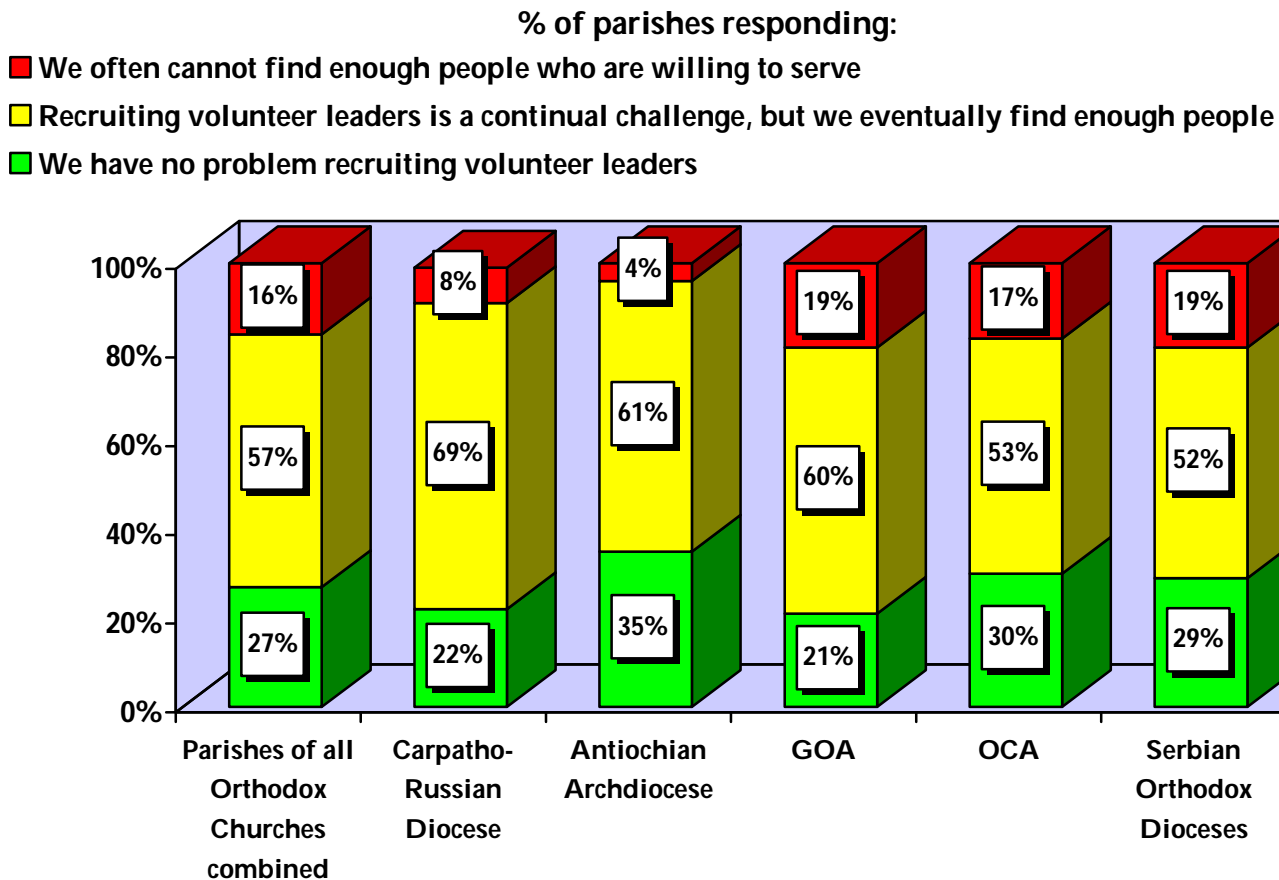


However, when it comes to a more specific question about availability of volunteers who are willing to take responsibilities for various leadership positions (governing boards, committees, Sunday School), the responses from the parishes were less enthusiastic. Fig. 8 indicates that, according to the clergy, only about a quarter (27%) of American Orthodox parishes "have no problem recruiting volunteer leaders." Among five jurisdictions, the best reported situation is in the Antiochian Archdiocese: more than one-third of its clergy (35%) feel that they "have no problem recruiting volunteer leaders." On the opposite end are GOA parishes: only one-fifth of GOA priests (21%) "have no problem recruiting volunteer

leaders." However, for neither of jurisdictions is it trivial to recruit the volunteer leadership that is needed.

**Fig. 8 Availability of the Volunteers in U.S. Orthodox Parishes:**

"How easy or difficult is it for your parish to recruit people for volunteer leadership roles: for example, serving on governing boards or committees, or teaching Sunday School?"



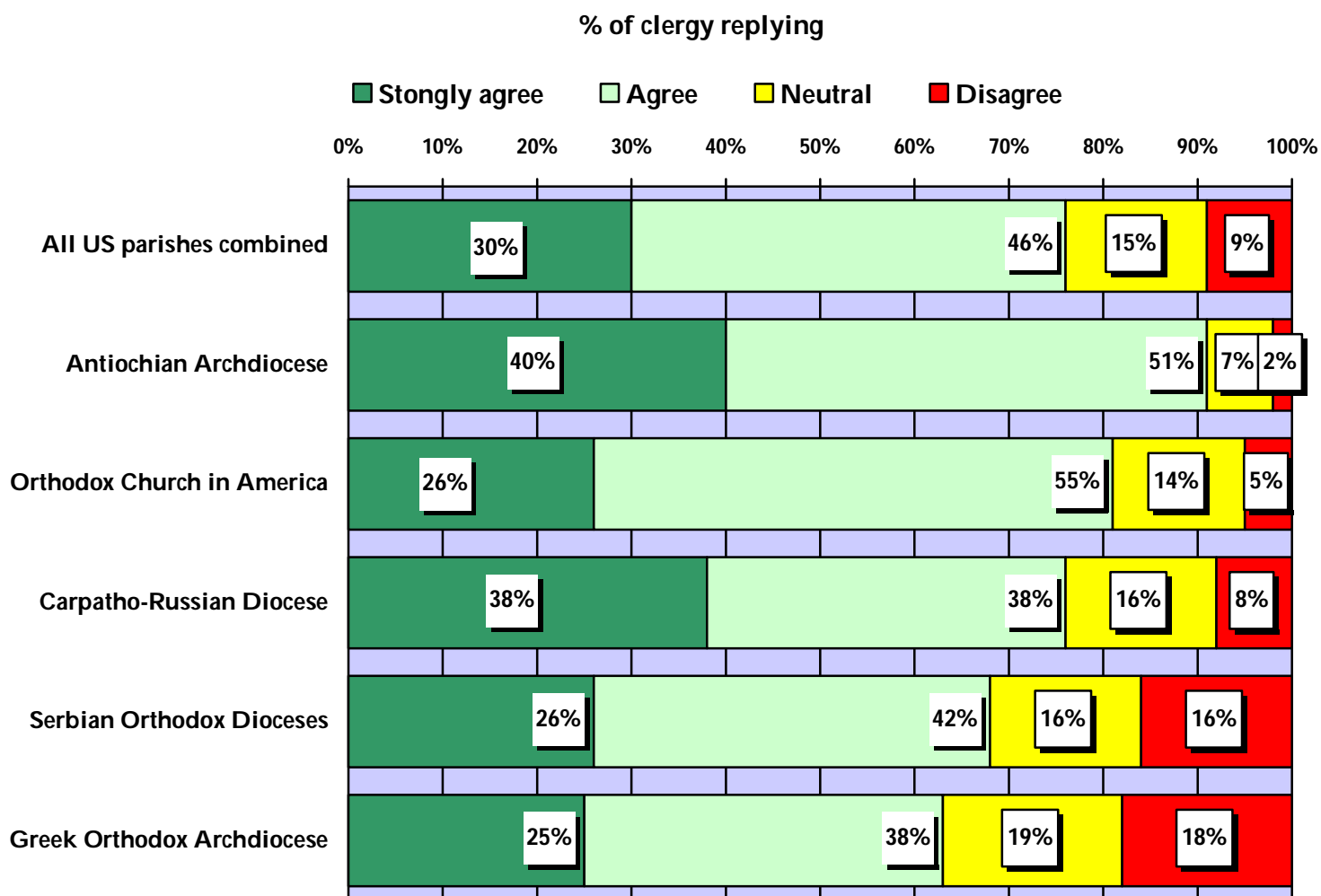
This finding – the fact that only about a quarter of Orthodox parishes have no problem finding volunteer leaders – is supported by the data from 2008 study of American Orthodox laity “The Orthodox Church Today.”<sup>18</sup> In this study, the respondents (lay parishioners) were asked, “How well does the statement ‘We do not have problem finding people to volunteer in the parish’ describe your parish?” Answering this question 27% of respondents selected answer “quite well,” 50% replied “somewhat,” and 23% reported “not at all.”

<sup>18</sup> Full study report is available at: [www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org)

**Question 8. How “welcoming” are American Orthodox parishes for first-time visitors, new members and those who are new to the Faith – the converts to Orthodoxy?**

The data from several national studies help to shed light on this question. In the 2016 national study, “Orthodox Christian Churches in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America” (see full reference to this study in Question 5), Orthodox parish clergy were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Our parish is good at incorporating newcomers into the parish.” Fig. 9 shows the answers of the priests in all U.S. parishes combined and separately in five Orthodox jurisdictions.<sup>19</sup>

**Fig. 9 Do you agree or disagree with the statement “Our parish is good at incorporating newcomers into the parish?”**



<sup>19</sup> These five Orthodox jurisdictions had a great enough number of parishes participating in the study to allow for making statistically sound and reliable observations.

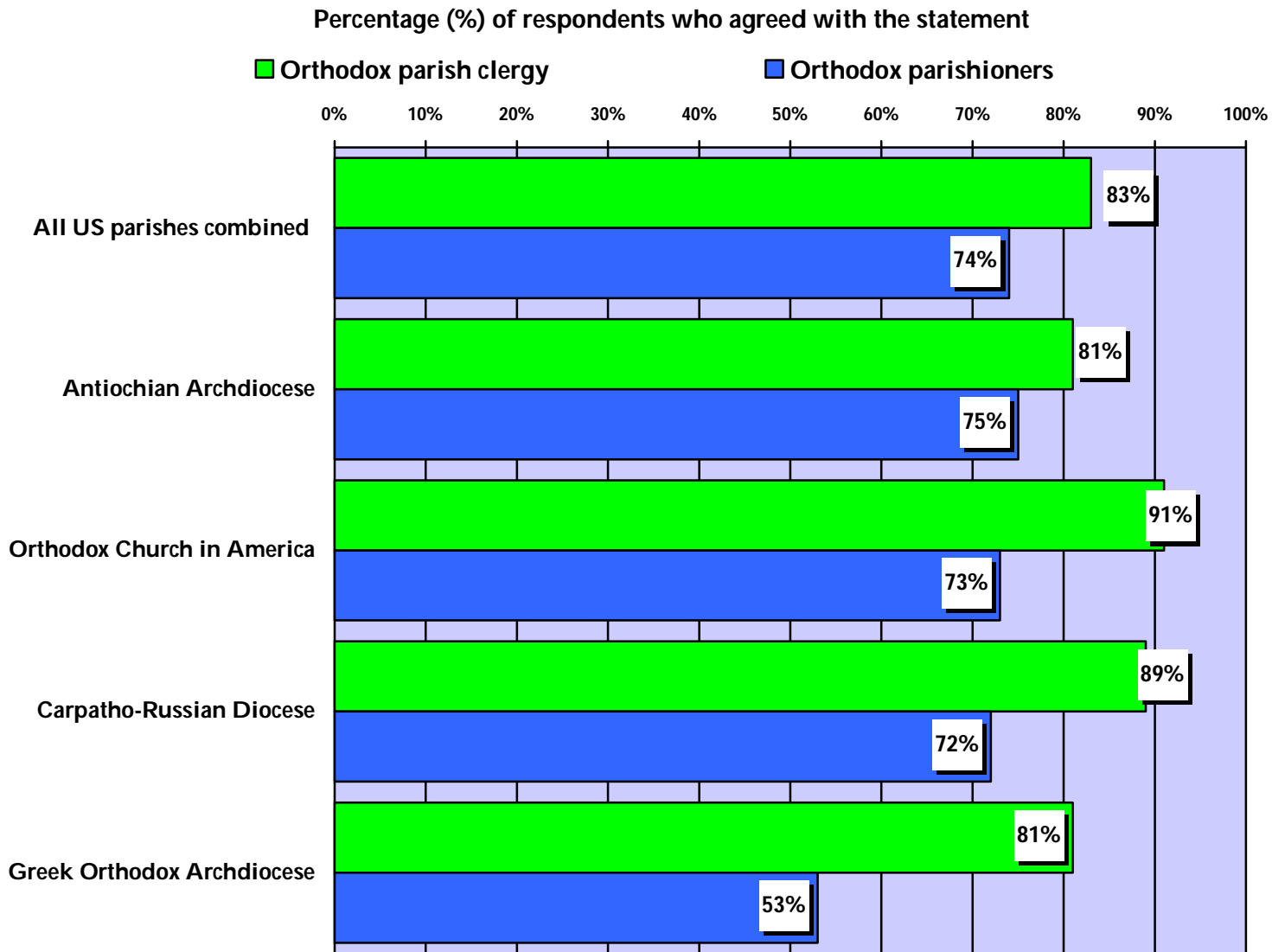
Fig. 9 shows that overall American Orthodox priests have a very positive view about how welcoming their parishes are for new members. Indeed, more than three-quarters of them (76%) either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement “Our parish is good at incorporating newcomers into the parish.” Among five individual jurisdictions, the clergy in Antiochian Archdiocese have the most positive feelings about ability of their parishes to easily incorporate new parishioners (91% agreement), while the GOA priests were least likely to feel that “Our parish is good at incorporating newcomers into the parish” (63% agreement).

The data from another study, however, suggest that the lay church members are less confident about the “welcoming spirit” of their parishes than the parish priests are. In 2015 study, “Exploring Orthodox Generosity: Giving in US Orthodox Parishes” (see detailed reference to this study in Question 6), both parish priests and lay parishioners were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Our parishioners are encouraged to invite friends and neighbors to visit our church regardless of whether they are Orthodox or not.” Fig. 10 compares the percentages of clergy and laity who agreed with this statement. Data are provided for all U.S. parishes combined and individually for the parishes of four jurisdictions.<sup>20</sup> The single most important observation from Fig. 10 is that in all Orthodox jurisdictions, more clergy than laity agreed with the statement “Our parishioners are encouraged to invite friends and neighbors to visit our church regardless of whether they are Orthodox or not.” Similar to the preceding item, it appears that the clergy express more optimism than the laity about the openness of their parishes for newcomers.

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<sup>20</sup> These four jurisdictions had sufficient number of the respondents for making statistically reliable conclusions.

**Fig. 10 Do you agree or disagree with the statement “Our parishioners are encouraged to invite friends and neighbors to visit our church regardless of whether they are Orthodox or not”**



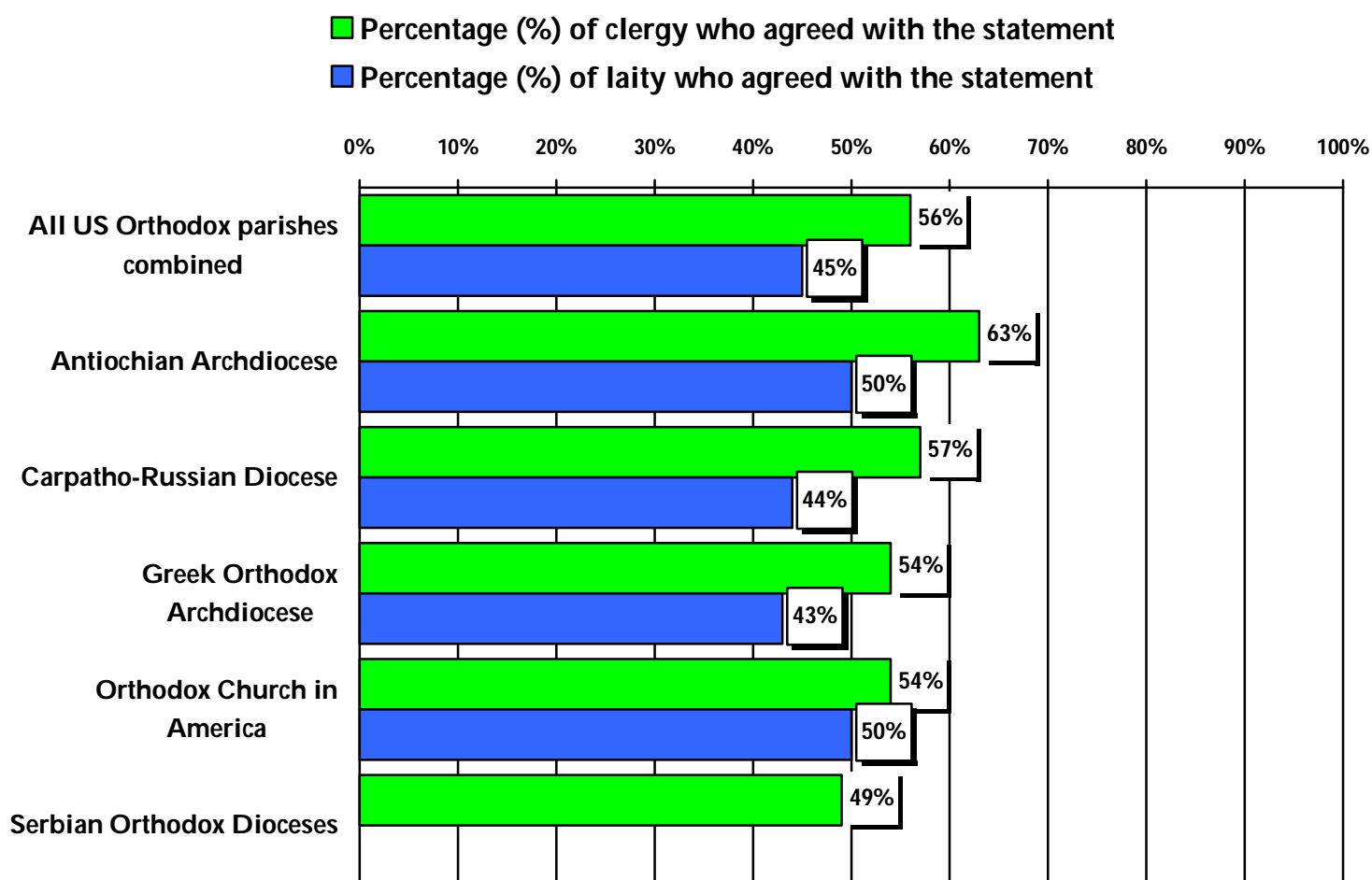
**Question 9. How good are American Orthodox parishes in terms of adjusting to changing circumstances in their lives and trying something new?**

The short answer to this question is: “Not very good.” The data from several studies support this answer.

In the 2016 national study, “Orthodox Christian Churches in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America: a Parish Life Study” (see full reference to this study in Question 5), parish priests of various jurisdictions were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Our parish is willing to change to meet new challenges.” The same question was asked of lay church members in the 2015 national study, “Exploring Orthodox Generosity: Giving in US Orthodox Parishes” (see full reference to this study in Question 6).

Based on these two studies, Fig. 11 compares the opinions of Orthodox clergy and laity<sup>21</sup> about the openness of their parishes to changing circumstances. It shows the percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement, "Our parish is willing to change to meet new challenges." Two major observations can be made from Fig. 11. First, a significant number of American Orthodox parishes may remain tied to established routines, unwilling to change and explore "new ways of doing things." Only slightly more than half of the clergy (56%) and less than half the laity (45%) agreed with the statement, "Our parish is willing to change to meet new challenges." Second, in parishes of all jurisdictions, clergy are more "optimistic" while lay church members are somewhat more "skeptical" about the ability and willingness of their parishes to embrace various changes in their lives.

**Fig. 11 Opinions of Orthodox Clergy and Laity about the Statement "Our Parish Is Willing to Change to Meet New Challenges"**



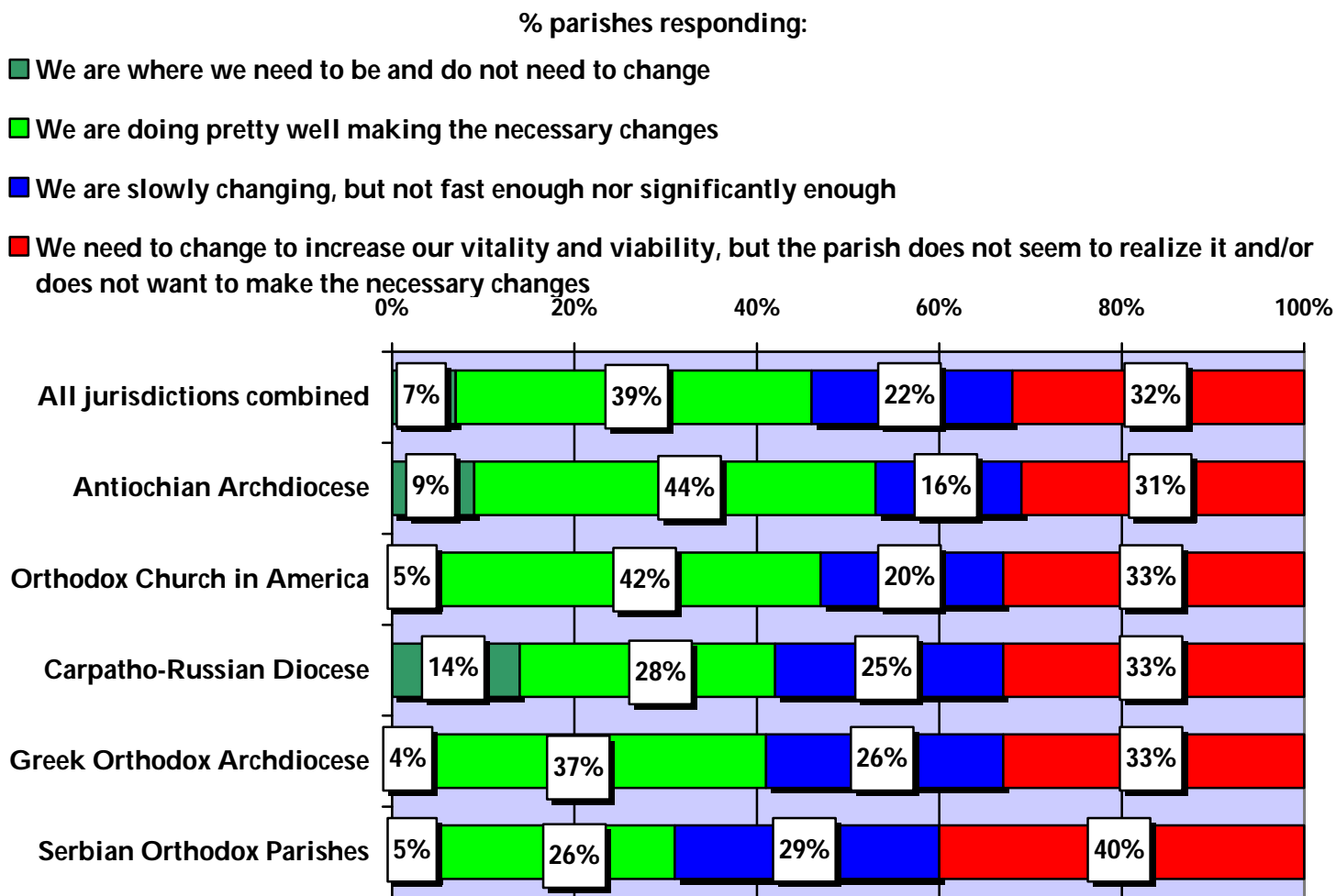
<sup>21</sup> There are no data on opinions of Serbian Orthodox laity in Fig. 12, because of an insufficient number of respondents representing Serbian Orthodox parishes in the 2015 study.

A question may be raised: "How strong is the actual need for change in the Orthodox parish life?" The 2016 study, "Orthodox Christian Churches in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America" explored this issue. In this study, Orthodox parish clergy were asked: "Which of the following best describes your parish?" The respondents were given four options to respond:

- ❖ "We are where we need to be and do not need to change"
- ❖ "We are doing pretty well making the necessary changes"
- ❖ "We are changing slowly, but not fast enough nor significantly enough"
- ❖ "We need to change to increase our vitality and viability, but the parish does not seem to realize it and/or does not want to make the necessary changes"

Fig. 12 shows the responses to this question by clergy from the five jurisdictions.

**Fig. 12 The Need for Change in U.S. Orthodox Parishes:  
"Which of the following best describes your parish?"**





Two conclusions can be drawn from Fig. 12. First, less than half of the clergy are satisfied with the overall situation in their parishes. Indeed, only 46% of the priests think that their churches are either "where they need to be and do not need to change" (7%) or "are doing pretty well making the necessary changes" (39%). In the majority of parishes, priests are expressing concern, because they face the need for change, but see the parish as either too slow in adopting changes that would help them (32%), or as simply ignoring this need altogether (22%).

Second, among the five jurisdictions, the Serbian Orthodox parishes appear to be in the most difficult situation: 40% of Serbian parishes are reported as disregarding the need for a change, while 29% of them do not cope well with adopting needed changes and adjustments. The Antiochian Archdiocese seems to be managing change more successfully. It is the only jurisdiction in which more than half the parish priests report that they are either "where they need to be" (9%) or are successfully introducing needed changes and adjustments (44%).

The next question that arises from data in Fig. 12 is: "What are the major reasons that prevent many parishes from making needed changes?" To examine this question, the survey asked the clergy: "If your parish has difficulty changing, to what extent has each of the following made it more difficult for your parish to change?" See Fig. 13.

**Fig. 13 Major Obstacles that Prevent Orthodox Parishes from the Needed Changes:**

**"If your parish has difficulty changing, to what extent has each of the following made it more difficult for your parish to change?"**

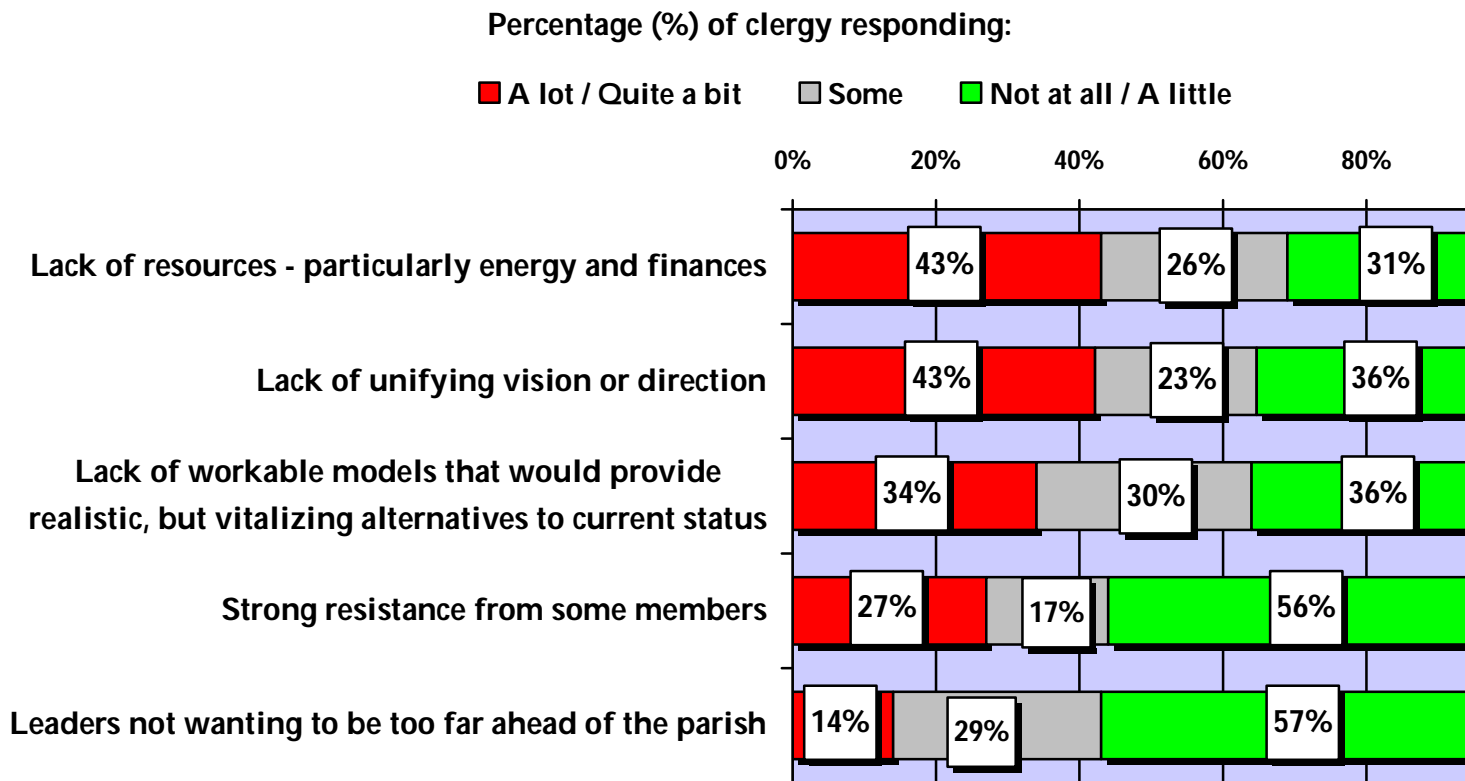


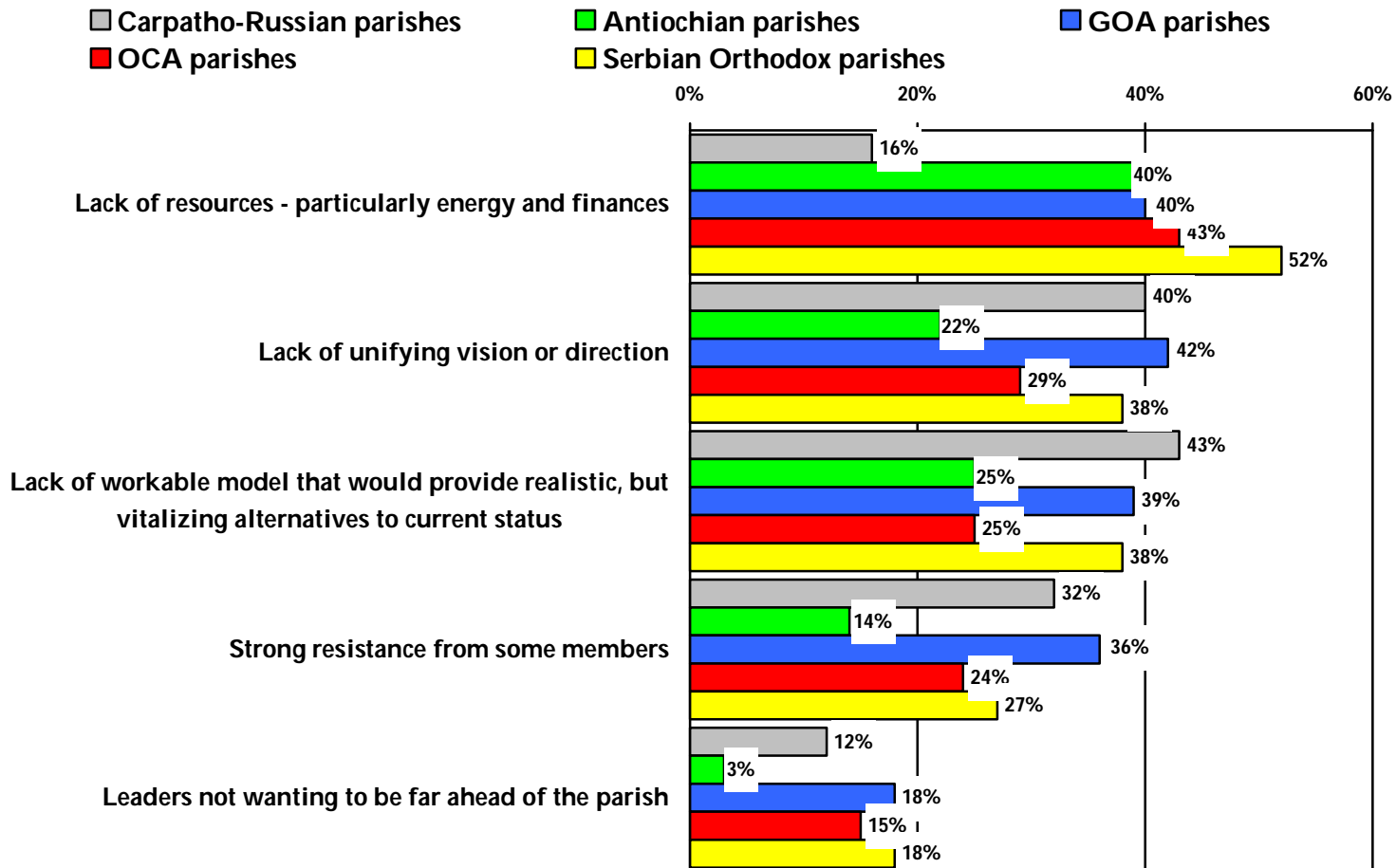
Fig. 13 shows that the greatest obstacle for needed changes in the life of a local parish is a lack of human energy and financial resources. The second and third in importance obstacles boil down to basically the same problem: the parish community realizes that there is a need for change, but does not know how to address this change, because of a "lack of unifying vision or direction" or a "lack of workable models that would provide realistic, but vitalizing alternatives to the status quo."

It should be noted that there are some variations among the clergy of different jurisdictions in how they describe the major obstacles to addressing needed changes in their parishes. See Fig. 14. In particular:

1. Lack of resources (human energy and finances) was especially often indicated by the Serbian Orthodox clergy as the major impediment to change in their parish communities;
2. Strong resistance from some parishioners plays a much greater role as an impediment to change in Carpatho-Russian and GOA churches than in the parishes of other jurisdictions.

**Fig. 14 Major Obstacles for Implementing the Necessary Changes in a Parish:  
Differences between Antiochian, Carpatho-Russian, GOA, OCA and Serbian Orthodox Parishes.**

Percentage (%) of clergy reporting each obstacle as preventing "a lot/quite a bit" the needed changes in a parish



In order to better understand what else inhibits parishes from implementing needed changes, the questionnaire asked clergy to explain any "other major obstacles." Five consistent patterns emerged from the answers. The first pattern was about **apathy among church members**. Here are two quotes exemplifying this pattern.

- ❖ "A complete (100%) lack of commitment to serve the church in any capacity. There needs to be at least one person other than the priest who can be a leader and show self-sacrificing love for the Church, and dedicate themselves much more than the level of dedication we have had thus far."
- ❖ "The vast majority of parishioners are convinced the parish will die and there is nothing they can do about it. They are assuming it will be around long enough to bury them."

The second pattern was about ***instability and constant turmoil in parish membership*** caused by a variety of reasons. Here are two quotes expressing this pattern.

- ❖ "Parishioner turnover; people leave the city for work. Parish does a lot of evangelism but we can't grow due to the constant turnover."
- ❖ "Fluid membership environment."

The third pattern was about the ***ethnocentrism of the parish community***. Here are two quotes reflecting this pattern.

- ❖ "Valuing ethnicity above the faith."
- ❖ "We still have a substantial 'ethnic' focus."

The fourth pattern was about the ***lack of inter-Orthodox cooperation and Church unity***. Here are two quotes exemplifying this pattern:

- ❖ "Jurisdictionalism is killing us - we supposedly are 'the Church' in our area, but factionalism and lack of communication / forgiveness between clergy has effectively wiped out our thin witness."
- ❖ "Absence of jurisdictional unity (three small parishes within walking distance)."

The last pattern was about an ***adverse economic or social environment*** in the community where a parish is located. Here are two quotes reflecting this pattern:

- ❖ "We are in a depressed, declining community."
- ❖ "The city around us is dying, and Orthodox have moved away. In this environment it is hard to attract new members, and even after catechumens are baptized, they tend to move away for better work prospects."

#### ***Question 10. What is most needed for U.S. Orthodox parishes to become stronger and more vital?***

This is an important, and very complex question. At this point, we have only a partial answer to it, based on the opinions of the lay Church members who participated in the 2008 national study, "The Orthodox Church Today."<sup>22</sup> Respondents were asked: "What is most needed for your parish to strengthen and to grow?" See Fig. 15

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<sup>22</sup> Study report available at: [www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org)

**Fig. 15** “What is most needed for your parish to strengthen and to grow?”

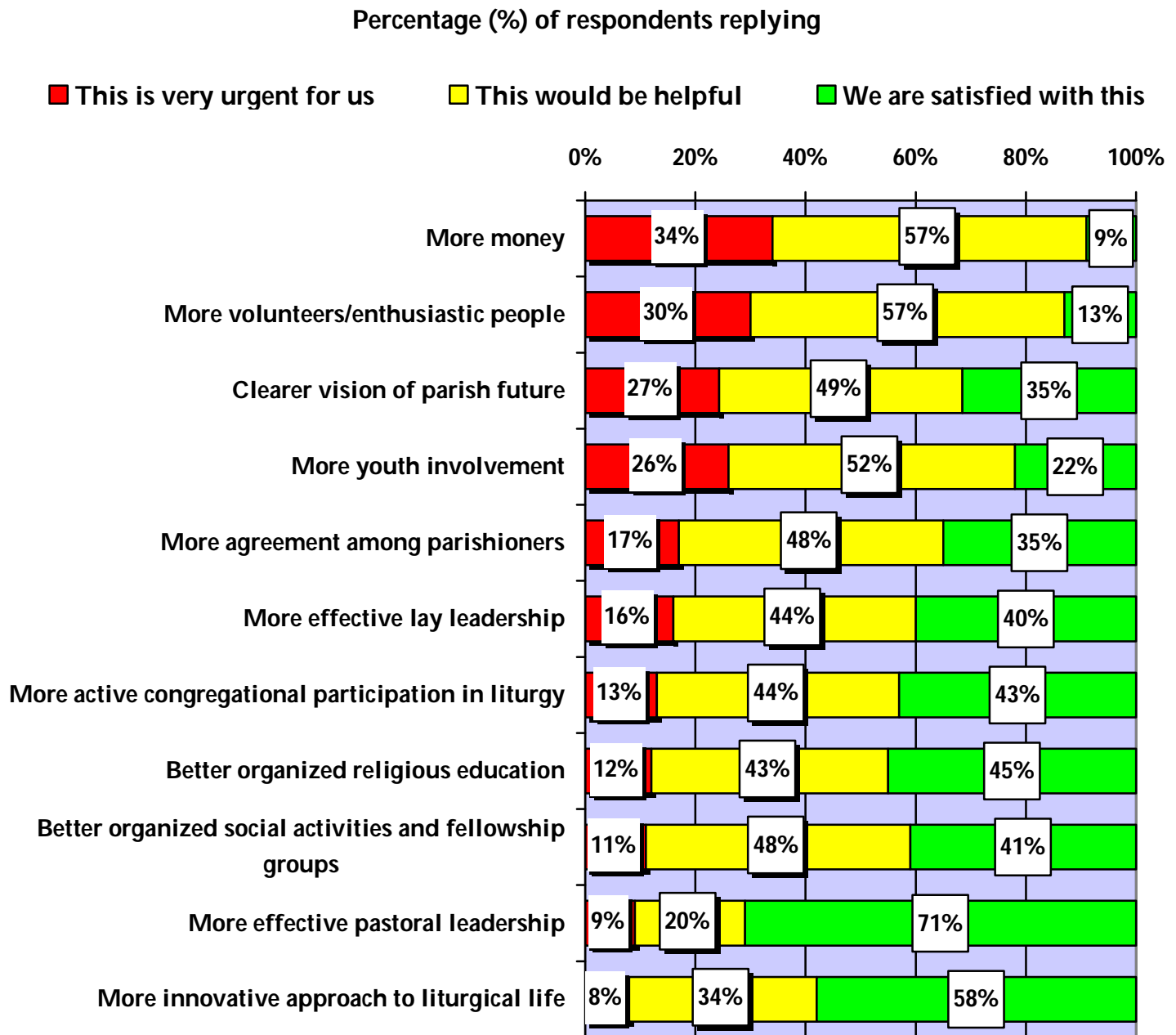


Fig. 15 shows that the parishioners most frequently chose two items as urgently needed to ensure a bright future for their parishes: “more money” (34% reported that this is “very urgent”) and “more volunteers and enthusiastic people” (30%). No more than 13% of parishioners participating in this study said that they are “basically satisfied” with these two aspects of their parish life. In other words, the vast majority of American Orthodox parishes are to a lesser or greater degree struggling with their finances and with availability of people willing to volunteer in a parish.

Two further challenges were mentioned by more than one quarter of the respondents as “very urgent”: the need to have a “clearer vision of the parish future” (27%) and “more youth involvement” (26%). Only one out of three respondents felt that his/her parish had clear vision for the parish future, and just 20% felt “basically satisfied” with youth involvement in his/her church.

**Question 11. How do American Orthodox parishes envision their future?**

Insight into this question comes from the 2016 study, “Orthodox Christian Churches in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America: A Parish Life Study” (see detailed reference to this study in Question 5). In this study, parish priests in various Orthodox jurisdictions were asked: “Which of the following best describes your sense of this parish's future?” Fig. 16 shows the responses to this question for all American Orthodox parishes combined and for the five individual jurisdictions.

**Fig. 16 The Vision of American Orthodox Clergy for the Future of their Parishes:  
"What of the following best describes your sense of this parish's future?"**

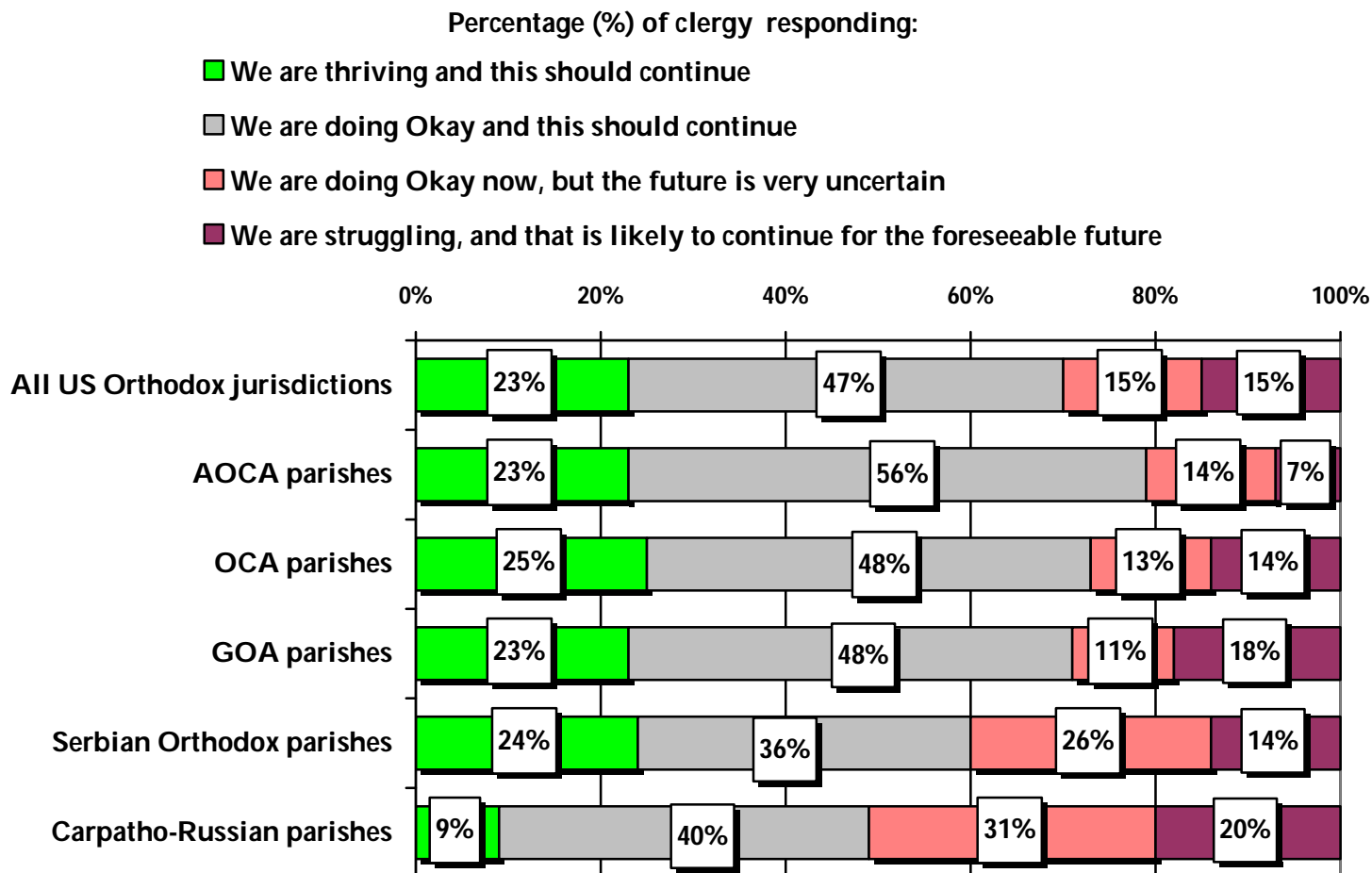


Fig. 16 allows for several observations. First, overall, the American Orthodox parishes can be divided into three categories:

1. The truly **vibrant, flourishing, and thriving** parishes whose clergy responded: "We are thriving and this should continue." Less than one-quarter (23%) of American Orthodox parishes see themselves in this category.
2. The **"normal"** parishes whose clergy responded: "We are doing okay and this should continue." Nearly half (47%) of American Orthodox parishes see themselves in this category.
3. The **struggling** parishes whose clergy responded "We are doing okay now, but the future is very uncertain" or "We are struggling, and that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future." Almost a third (30%) of all American Orthodox parishes are in this category.

Second, the picture presented in Fig. 16 should be of concern for US Orthodox Church leadership, both because the number of truly thriving church communities is small (23%) and because the share of struggling parishes is quite significant in itself (30%), and greater than the percentage of thriving churches.

Third, regardless of the many differences between the Antiochian Archdiocese, GOA, OCA and Serbian Orthodox Church, the share of "thriving parishes" in these four major<sup>23</sup> American Orthodox jurisdictions is remarkably similar: about one-quarter.

**Question 12. Where can I find more information about Orthodox parish life in today's America?**

Here is a website with abundant resources: [www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org)

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<sup>23</sup> The term "major jurisdictions" is used in reference to the size of church membership. Among all US Orthodox jurisdictions, the Antiochian Archdiocese, the GOA, the OCA and the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses have biggest number of members.