

Youth Focus Groups: Western Diocese Perspective

Background

Adults in the age range of ~18-40 or “young adults” in the Ukrainian Orthodox community are an under-represented group both in terms of church attendance as well as involvement within the Ukrainian Self-Reliance League of Canada (USRL). Many of these young people were formerly active within our Sunday Schools or in CYMK (Ukrainian Orthodox youth group), however this activity diminishes greatly or ceases altogether during this phase in their lives. Some may return to greater activity with the arrival of their children, due to a desire to “pass on” their traditions and faith, but poor retention of this group remains a problem in our community. Indeed, reflecting upon the aging community within the Ukrainian Orthodox community, one could argue that continued loss of this demographic will threaten the survival of this community in the near future. As such, there is a need to engage this group, assess its needs and determine what, if anything can be done to increase their involvement within our community.

The Joint Standing Committee (JSC) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada (UOCC) and USRL evolved from one of the 8 recommendations of the CYC Futures Project in 2005. It is comprised of members from both the UOCC and USRL with a core mandate to identify mutual goals of UOCC and USRL and develop an implementation strategy to achieve such goals. Ultimately, it is hoped this collaboration will lead to renewal of both organizations and by proxy the Ukrainian Orthodox community. Since 2005, this committee has met bi-annually to distill the issues facing our community into 6 workable recommendations and projects. These recommendations are youth focused and encompass camps, institutes, chaplains, a paid youth worker, leadership development and engaging our young adults.

In order to reasonably address the issue of non-involvement of young adults, it was felt necessary to conduct a series of focus groups with this demographic to ask them directly what we need to do to retain them within our community. These focus groups were to occur in major centres within each Diocese (Eparchy). Participants were invited by open invitation (email, phone, in-person) to a 2-hour session where JSC members administered a standard questionnaire and recorded the proceedings. The questionnaire included questions in the domains of assessing and defining activity or personal fulfillment, assessing barriers and priorities, defining impressions of and links to our community, and finally looking forward towards potential solutions. Meeting notes were analyzed by a single reviewer and categorized into broad themes. To date, sessions have been conducted in Vancouver, Edmonton and Calgary. These Western Eparchy collated results are reported here, and were previously presented at the Western Eparchy meeting in Edmonton in October 2008.

Methods and Analysis

Three sessions were conducted in Vancouver (6 participants), Edmonton (18 participants) and Calgary (11 participants). Eleven participants self-identified their level activity as “active”, while 11 defined themselves as “moderately active” and 13 as “minimally active” or “inactive”. It is important to note here that activity was related to UOCC only. No person identified himself or herself as active within USRL.

Six general themes (with subthemes) emerged: spirituality, community, motivation, language/culture, organizations and looking forward. These are each discussed in turn below.

Results

1) Spirituality

Needs and Knowledge

Many participants rated their knowledge of the Orthodox faith as poor.

“I feel my parents/church failed me in instruction in the Faith”

As such, they expressed a desire for Bible study or workshops on the Orthodox faith. There was a split between those who felt fulfilled in our church and those who were looking elsewhere. In addition, some participants felt that some of our parishes are spiritually weak in terms of the knowledge of the faithful and their actions. Finally, there were several comments reflecting a poor understanding of our existing UOCC Sunday School curriculum potentially as it was not utilized or promoted within their parish.

Worship

Overall, participants provided positive comments on the outward traditions of worship in terms of our architecture and music. At the same time, they expressed a desire for meaning within that tradition.

“It seems many parishioners are just going through the motions”

In addition to active participation, young adults wanted to better understand the Divine Liturgy, and this need was not expressed just in terms of language. There were a few comments on length of service.

“ Why does the choir have to treat it like a concert?”

Relevance

While there were many positive comments that the Orthodox Church has a “backbone”, participants also expressed a desire for priests to be more “in touch” with modern times and young people. Several comments about poor sermons that were not reflective of current events and challenges were made. Criticism was also

directed at the Ukrainian Orthodox community at large in that we are too inward focused, and do not adequately work for the community in which we live.

2) Community

Belonging

Having others within their peer group and socialization is important to this age group. The peer group can provide motivation to participate within the community activities. When one tries to “break into” a peer group (e.g. when relocating to a new city), it can be difficult, and contribute to young adults reducing their involvement in the UOC. Finally, in larger centres, simple geography can be a barrier to linking frequently to the peer group and fostering a sense of belonging.

Family & Continuity

For many within this age group, the Ukrainian Orthodox church is a “comfort zone”.

“Same place it has always been”

“We attend this church out of habit”

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is the one in which many of these young adults were raised, and many linked their attendance to the rearing of their own children. Those with children stated they attend regularly as they want to provide their children with similar upbringing to what they had. Some stated that they would attend more regularly once their children were older. Finally, those without children stated they do not attend regularly as they have no children, but might once that occurs.

Age Gap

Among this age group the older demographic within our community is noticeable. Many felt there was “no energy” and that the community was “disengaging”.

“We are preserving the church for the older people”

This observation is coupled with concern about what will remain in 10-20 years once the older generation is no more. Similarly, this group feels that there is little focus on youth or young adults within the UOC.

Mixed Marriages

Young adults raised within the community stated a definite pressure to marry “within” community. Those who had married outside of the UOC now faced issues such as “what church will we attend?” Participants who had married into the UOC often stated they were not made to feel welcome and that the language barrier made it difficult to participate or feel as they belong.

3) Motivation

Negative Experiences

Unfortunately, most participants stated that they had had a negative experience within the UOC. Some were made to feel unwelcome or had a difficult time “breaking in” while others were “pounced on” to do something or join a group or take a leadership position. Other negative experiences were expressed in terms of concern about “anti-Christian” behaviour or political agendas demonstrated by both members and leaders with our church and community.

Priorities

Within this age group either career or family were identified as the top priority for them. As well, there was a stated need to achieve balance between these priorities with church life. A point that was stressed was that the perceived relevance of any activity or association to the participant’s every day life determined its priority. When asked to prioritize between faith, culture and community, 40% placed faith as their top priority, while culture and community each ranked first among the remaining participants.

Barriers

This demographic identified several barriers to UOC involvement. Many of these have been discussed previously and include geography, time, a previous negative experience, mixed marriages, and being new to a community.

4) Language and Culture

When discussing the Ukrainian language and culture, it appeared that a different upbringing gave a different perspective. While some placed their culture before their faith, others had no ties to our culture. However, most felt that retention of some degree of the Ukrainian culture was important. Not surprisingly, language was identified as an important issue, however there was no real push for “all English” within our worship services, with the desired amount ranging between 20-50%.

5) Organizations

The Ukrainian Self Reliance League and her component organizations (such as the Ukrainian Women’s Association of Canada – UWAC or the Ukrainian Self-Reliance Association - TYC) were not “on the radar” for this demographic in the present state of their lives. While many saw value in the Ukrainian Orthodox Youth organization (CYMK), many were unclear on the relevance of TYC or UWAC to their lives. Some felt these organizations were “pushy to join”, that the separation of the men and women was undesirable, or that these organizations were not welcoming or accommodating for young people.

6) Looking forward

Modernization and openness

When considering the future of the UOC, participants felt that the stigma of language should be removed, and that there should be enough options within our community that people could feel included regardless of their knowledge of Ukrainian or English. This linked to further comments regarding mixed marriages where young adults felt that there needs to be increased acceptance of non-Ukrainians within our community.

Participants felt that gender gaps should be bridged, as in consolidating the women's and men's organizations. As well, generational issues should be addressed with an increased focus on youth and children's activities. We should adopt less of an inward focus, be more open and welcoming and remove any barriers where possible.

“Why can't we start church earlier? I'm up anyway and it would allow for more time with my family later”

When considering the administration and logistics of our community, there was a call for paid workers, as there was a general feeling that we can no longer rely on volunteers to do all of the work. Where possible, we should be pursuing consolidation and amalgamation both within the UOCC and USRL.

Engagement

Young adults generally felt that they may eventually need to set the course or standard for our community and that time will need to be devoted to change our vision.

“If not me, who? If not now, when?”

“We go through cycles in life and at times we give a lot and at other times nothing at all”

If this community is to survive, we must not give up, take ownership, and try to solve problems instead of just talking about them. People want to be engaged and feel that attendance at church cannot be a chore. Indeed, there was a positive response in engagement simply from having these focus group sessions.

“I feel better talking about my church”

Participants were asked what they would contribute to the future success of our community. 43% indicated they were willing to contribute their time, 27% stated they would contribute money, 19% their experience and 11% said they were unwilling to contribute anything at this time.

Impressions

Finally, the facilitators were asked for their impressions of the focus groups. Their thoughts are as follows:

“The participants also felt that at the present time their involvement is purely emotional; they need to see some potential; their faith is important and that is why many came to the meeting, and they still need convincing that if they gave more money that it would help the UOC.”

“The organizational building blocks as currently structured in UOCC and USRL are falling apart. There is some concern for USRL but more focus and concern about the consequences for the UOCC. The heavy inference was: Are we reacting to change OR are we (could we be?) agents of change?”

“We need to make the changes in the UOC and these changes need to work for them as young adults and will last (it need to be sustainable). The young adults do not need a quick fix but a permanent solution.”

“The group made the statement that they have become complacent. We have taken, the church and organizations, for granted. Could this mean that there will have to be some extenuating factors/disaster that will cause these adults to get involved? “

Discussion

The focus groups conducted to date brought together a diverse group of young adults, and as such the opinions reflected that diversity. However, general themes emerged such as increased openness internally in terms of our language and acceptance of non-Ukrainians and externally in terms of how we operate within our community. Overall, there was a desire for more focus on faith and being active, knowledgeable participants within our worship services. This group will only prioritize what is relevant to them, and they are not always finding this relevance through belonging to our community. Of particular concern to the USRL should be the general disinterest this group has towards this organization (with the notable exception of CYMK). If the USRL is to survive 20 years into the future, it will require significant change and revisioning to do so. A difficult question to ask is whether the original principles that USRL was founded on are still relevant in today's context. When our young people are so highly integrated into Canadian society, what appeal does “Self-Reliance” have? Is there another focus this organization can embrace that would be more relevant to this group?

This demographic is not a homogenous group and therefore there will be no single solution to address their needs. Indeed, there will be more success with a multi-faceted approach as opposed to relying on any particular program. As well, any changes must be organizational and cultural; a real lasting change of vision as

opposed to any “quick fix”. To effectively engage this group, it is important to understand them. The group referred to as Generation X (born 1965-1980) have been described as resourceful and independent who dislike micromanagement or the “establishment”. They possess a great deal of technological savvy and place high value on work-life balance. The Millennials or Generation Y (born 1981-1999) are creative, thrive on innovation and are collaborative. They have a high sense of entitlement and question everything. While also technologically adept, they operate at a scatter-shot pace and have a short attention span. To successfully engage these people, we must adopt strategies and attitudes that will complement the attributes of this demographic. This may require significant changes to how we operate at local, provincial, and national levels.

The secular fields can be referred to for ways to approach this organizational change. Kotter, in his seminal paper “Leading Change” in the Harvard Business Review discusses organizational change in terms of 8 steps;

- 1) Create urgency; 2) Form a powerful coalition; 3) Create a vision for change; 4) Communicate the new vision; 5) Remove obstacles; 6) Create short-term wins; 7) Build on the change; 8) Anchor the changes into culture

This process could be adapted to truly changing the culture within our community, but it will take vision, leadership and commitment to do so.

It may seem very daunting, and begs the question “Where to start?”. Ultimately, we must each take personal responsibility for making it work. We must be proactive, creative and patient. There will be no success if it is “someone else’s” job to create change within our community. We must each individually commit to making our community a place where all are welcome and where people want to belong.

Next Steps

It is the intention of the JSC to complete these focus groups in the major centres in the Central and Eastern Eparchies by the spring of 2009. The results will then be collated and analyzed with recommendations from the JSC to follow at the USRL General Meeting in August of 2009.

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References: Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996. Kotter, John. P. "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail." *Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review*. March–April, 1995.