

# 2021 Rector's Report

## 2021 in Review

2021 was another challenging year as we continued to deal with the effects of COVID-19. While we did not face the same restrictions on attendance as we did at times during 2020, the long-term effects of the pandemic on the life of the parish have begun to reveal themselves.

With regard to extra-Eucharistic sacraments, we had:

- 0 baptisms
- 0 chrismations
- 0 weddings
- 0 funerals

Our attendance on Sundays has generally been 15-25 in the pews while, at weekday Liturgies, there are often only 2 or 3 in the pews. On several occasions, we have had no one in the pews for Vespers on Wednesday or Saturday and, recently, we had one Vespers service where it was just me and Gerry.

Financially, we did a little better than we did with attendance. We've now had three years in a row with a surplus compared to the trend of the five years of deficits previous to my arrival. While the amount pledged for 2022 compared to 2021 is up by 5.5%, the number of pledging units (families) has dropped by 21.6%

Obviously, none of these are signs of a healthy parish. As we head into 2022, we face two major challenges that show this will be a make-or-break year for St. Thomas.

## Budget

Our budget for 2022 only really accomplishes two things: it keeps the building lit and heated and it keeps a priest at the altar. There is nothing in next year's budget for ministries or programs, nothing for education or youth, nothing for outreach, and only ½% for helping those in need.

There is no fat in this budget. If we continue to run at a deficit, there are only two real options for the parish to substantially reduce the budget any further:

- sell the building, and/or
- no longer have a full-time priest.

Am I saying that we are not giving enough and need to dig deeper? No. Many in our parish give above and beyond what is normally expected. I do not believe that a simple increase in giving by our current parishioners will be sufficient to stop the long-term decline in our finances. That brings us to our second challenge.

## People

Two years ago at our annual parish meeting, we all agreed to make changes that would result in us having a parish council of the rector and nine members instead of our current council of the rector and seven members. With three slots open for election each year, one would hope that we would have at least five or six candidates willing to run. In the last two year, however, we have had difficulty even filling three spots on the ballot. As a result, it only seems reasonable to abandon, at least for now, any attempt to expand the council.

In key positions around the parish, we have many people who have done what they do for years and it has become clear that if, God forbid, anything should happen to them, there is no one

who is available to step in and back them up. Our choir, for example, does an amazing job of covering two parishes every Sunday. That's only necessary, however, because Holy Trinity is in the same situation we are; their choir has dwindled away and no one has stepped up to take the places of the now-missing. Our choir itself is down to between four and seven regular members on Sundays and two to four on weekdays. Though it has yet to affect us on a Sunday, I have now done several Vespers services without a chanter, something we never covered how to do in seminary. Behind the iconostasis, we sometimes have help from a couple of our young men but, often, only Gerry and/or Ed are available to serve.

Around the church, Randy has been handling snow clearing duties and De has been cleaning inside every week. Pete Steggerda has been taking care of paying the bills from out in Orange City; thankfully, Manoj was available to fill in when Pete had some health issues. If we had to pay outsiders for any of these services, that would put a further strain on our already tight budget.

A year ago, I mentioned to everyone an OCA parish in Pennsylvania that voted to close its doors after 121 years of existence. There's a telling quote to which we should all pay close attention:

Though the church was on level financial footing, there were too few people to run it, [parish council President Jim O'Brien] said.<sup>1</sup>

We need to ask ourselves just how close we are to being in that exact same situation. Read the article by clicking on the link in the footnote and see just how familiar what they're saying sounds.

## Looking Ahead

If St. Thomas is to survive through 2022 and beyond, it is obvious to me that there is only one thing that will allow us to do so: new, additional people in the pews.

Every once in a while, I have heard, "Oh, if only *so-and-so* and *so-and-so* would come back." Even if everyone who has left in the past ten years were to miraculously start attending again, that still would not solve the problem as the downward trend in attendance has been going on for far longer than that. It would be nice to blame COVID-19 for all our problems but, as I learned in a conversation with an expert on church growth, COVID-19 has only accelerated downward trends in churches of all types across the country by about three years. Without COVID-19, we would still be facing the same problems but, perhaps, in 2025 instead of now in 2022.

If it is possible to reverse the decades-long trend of decline at St. Thomas, it will require fundamental changes in our relationship with the community around us. As far as I can tell, St. Thomas has never been an outward-facing parish; for the first time in our parish's history, we must turn our focus to the community around us.

St. Thomas was founded to provide religious services to a specific immigrant population in Sioux City and the surrounding areas. Many of our current members are descendants of that population, but it is important to understand that that population no longer exists. To survive, therefore, means that St. Thomas must either outgrow its original purpose or fade away like the specific portion of the community it was founded to serve. Simply walking around the nave makes this plain to see. Look at the various memorial plaques on items and see how many families listed are no longer represented in our parish. I even ran into this in my home parish; when I left to come to Sioux City, someone noted that it would be the first time in the history of St. Peter, Fort Worth, that no one from my family would be a member there.

If the old families are gone, then we must replace them with new families; specifically, new young families. To do that, we must reach out to the community around us; not just our local neighborhood, but all of Sioux City and the surrounding areas. We cannot simply hold an event

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1 Dwyer, Kayla (2021-01-09). "[After 121 years, area's first Orthodox church closes](#)". *The Allentown (Morning) Call*. Associated Press. Retrieved 2021-12-31.

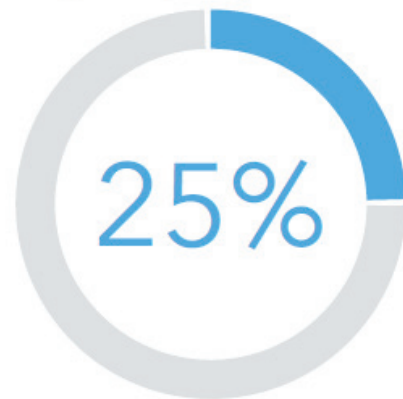
at the church and expect new families to visit and then join; we must make ourselves known in Sioux City to the general population. Just as everyone, even the non-religious, knows about Sunnybrook, so must they know about St. Thomas, not as they know about Holy Trinity as famous for its ethnicity, but as a church of loving Christians open to those of any background.

Sioux City will not be the easiest place to do this as current demographics and psychographics are tilted against us. While the U.S. population is growing at a rate of 0.71% annually, the population within a 20-minute driving radius of St. Thomas is only growing at a rate of 0.15%. That translates into a projected growth of less than 1,000 people between 2021 and 2026. The number of families is growing in the U.S. at a rate of 0.64% per year; in our area, that number is only growing at a rate of 0.08%.

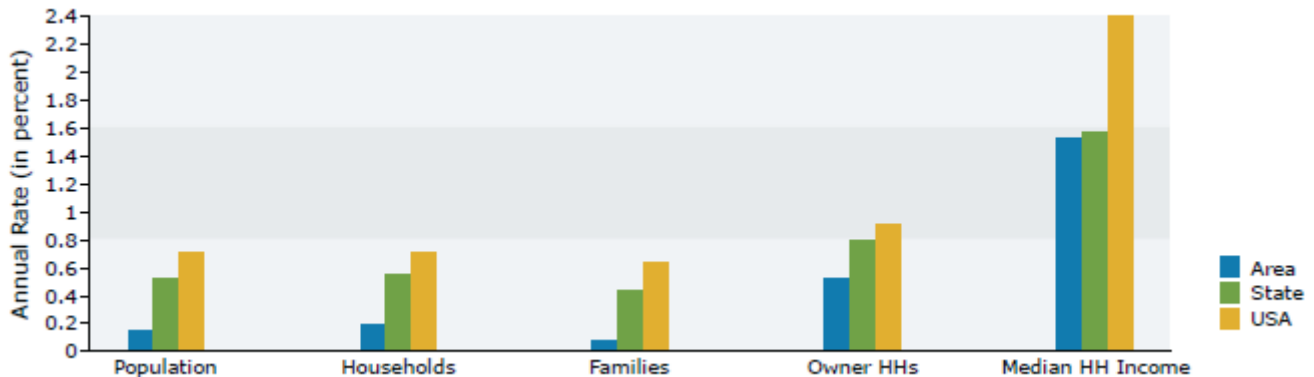
As it has for the last 20 years, that growth will primarily be in the Hispanic population. At the 2010 census, Hispanics made up 18.3% of our area's population; now, they make up 22.8% of the population and, by 2026, they are projected to be at 25.1%.

The median age in our area is expected to rise from 34.2 in 2010 to 36.6 in 2026. The median household income is rising at a 2.41% rate nationally compared to a 1.53% rate locally.

2026 Projected Hispanic Population Percentage



Trends 2021-2026



In short, the area within a 20-minute driving distance of St. Thomas, compared to the national averages, is shrinking in relative population while it grows both older and relatively poorer. What we need to do would be difficult in a demographically-favorable area; here, it will be a herculean task.

Should we pray and have faith that God will provide? Of course, but, as I read recently, God doesn't expect us to lean on a shovel and pray that a hole will appear. If we are to succeed, it will take faith, hard work, and, above all, commitment from each and every member of St. Thomas. The price of failure is obvious; we need only look down the street at the recent merger of Calvary Episcopal and St. Thomas Episcopal, forced upon them by dwindling membership and finances in both parishes. We should take it as no consolation that almost every church in Sioux City is facing difficulties like ours as that merely means the competition we face for new members is great. The price of success will be great but the prize of success will bring glory to God and renewed life to St. Thomas Orthodox Church.

*Fr. Peter*