This fall heavy equipment finally began pushing dirt here in Wilmington, preparing the ground for the foundation of our new 4,300 square foot social hall. This new one-story structure will be connected to our present temple. The $815,000 building has been in the works for the last seven (7) years. It’s a huge effort for our parish, which began at a parish meeting on July 13, 2002. Putting up a separate new social hall would allow the church to use the basement for Sunday School classes. The parishioners accepted the idea. Little did we know what kind of road lay before us—a seven year journey.

Our first step in this journey was to form a Vision Committee, whose job was to define vision and mission statements for our parish. (These can be seen at our parish website: www.stmichael-delaware-oca.org) The Vision Committee turned into a Vision/Expansion Committee. Over the years, several sets of parish surveys were designed and utilized in order to gain a parish consensus as to our facility needs and priorities while remaining united as a parish. Finally, we agreed to divide the project into two phases: the first phase would be the new social hall; the second phase would include an expansion of the church’s Nave with additional parking.

We knew that this expansion would require a ton of money, more than we could raise from ordinary fund-raisers. Therefore, our parish was brave and hired a professional capital campaign company (called “IMPAC”) to guide us through a real capital campaign. It was a step of faith. (We selected IMPAC over several other similar firms because they were Scripturally-based in their stewardship approach; they were not “hard-sell”, not “Madison-5th Avenue”.)

Planning and executing the “EXPANDING HORIZONS: Building for God’s Kingdom” capital campaign (as we called it) was an intensely busy six months of non-stop meetings. However, thank God, it paid off extremely well with Building Fund pledges coming in at three times our annual budget. $350,428 was pledged at our kick-off banquet on June 16, 2003. Parishioners pledged sacrificially, in amounts of $5,000, $10,000, $20,000, $30,000 or more. They had three years to pay off their commitments. The theme was sacrificial giving. Some parishioners, for example, decided to delay purchasing a new car for a few years. Some folks probably gave 10% (a tithe) of their income. Others probably gave 15% or more. Not everyone had the same resources. Not everyone could give the same amount—but everyone could.

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Have you ever wondered where all of the teenagers in your parish have gone? They seem to disappear around age 16, and they may eventually return when it is time to get married, or have their children baptized. Unfortunately, this scenario is far too common for many parishes. Priests and parishioners may ask themselves, how do we get them to stay?

Thankfully, the answer is very simple: friendship.

By developing friendships with other Orthodox teens their age, students between 14 and 22 years are much more likely to be excited about attending church programs. In our Diocese, the proof is found in the programs of the Teen Activities Committee, or TAC, an unofficial committee which was established in 2003 by Tatiana Bohush (St. Nicholas, Philadelphia), Nicholas Macura (St. Herman of Alaska, Gradyville), and Kimberly Metz (St. Nicholas, Bethlehem). Veterans themselves of the annual Winter Teen Retreat and Saint Tikhon’s Summer Camp, they saw a need for revitalization of these programs to attract more teens and keep them interested in the Church.

Since 2003, the Teen Camp portion of St. Tikhon’s Summer Camp has enjoyed a 76% return rate of campers ages 14-17. Campers who graduated the program return the following year as counselors. Similar success has been found with the Retreat program – in 2009, every one of the students had already participated in a session of the Retreat. These numbers tell us that the teens are enjoying the programs and want to come back.

The Teen Camp programs are similar in nature, featuring daily workshops with Diocesan priests, time for sports and recreation, and visits with His Grace, Bishop Tikhon. A special segment of the Teen Camp focuses on traditional cultural activities including Slavic cooking lessons, Russian dancing, and Ukrainian pysanky egg making. But many of the teens tell us that the best part of the program is having the chance to meet so many other Orthodox people their age.

“I have friendships that started at camp that have lasted a whole lot longer than any friendship I’ve made outside of camp,” shared Alex, age 19.

“The programs let teens from all walks of life explore the Orthodox faith while focusing on dilemmas that pertain to our age group,” - Daniel, 19
has enjoyed a 76% return rate of 14-17. Most of the campers who completed the program return the following year as counselors. Similar success has been found with the Teen Retreat program – in fact, in 2009, every one of the students had participated in a previous Teen Retreat or Camp. These numbers tell us that the programs are popular and enjoyable, and the teens want to come back – often.

The Teen Camp and Retreat programs are similar in nature, featuring daily workshops with Diocesan priests, time for sports and recreation, and visits with His Grace, Bishop Tikhon. A special segment of the Teen Camp even includes traditional cultural activities such as Slavic cooking lessons, Russian dancing, and Ukrainian pysanky egg making.

After five years of hard work to increase the educational value and popularity of the Teen Camp and Winter Retreat programs, the TAC has now become an official part of the Diocese as the Office of Young Adult Activities (OYAA). Fr. Timothy Hojnicki of Holy Apostles Mission, Mechanicsburg, has been appointed as spiritual advisor.

The Office of Young Adult Activities has a lot in store for 2010, including the annual Winter Retreat this February 12-14, the Teen Camp program at St. Tikhon’s Summer Camp from July 4-10, and a new Spring Retreat within the Philadelphia Deanery this April. OYAA members also plan to visit Diocesan parishes by request, to help individual parishes develop stronger programs to retain their young adult population.

For more information about OYAA programs, or to download event registration forms, please visit their new website at www.ocayouth.org.

"I have friendships that started at camp that have lasted a whole lot longer than any friendship I’ve made outside of camp"
- Alex, 19
really sacrifice. The theme was “Equal sacrifice, not equal gift.” Over the next 3 years, the parishioners paid their pledges until it was all collected and deposited in the Building Fund. Remarkable! On the heels of this success, we then conducted a second major round of pledging, this time all by ourselves without the help of the hired professionals. We asked our parishioners to commit to a pledge for our future mortgage payment “for the life of the mortgage.” On top of this, parishioners were urged to start paying on these mortgage pledges immediately, prior to actual construction. As a result, over the next two years, the total cash raised for the building fund reached over $450,000.

In time, the Vision/Expansion Committee turned into a real Building Committee. With our funds, architects and engineers were hired and plans were developed. The county approval process dragged for over two long years! With the blessing of Bishop TIKHON, we signed a contract with an excellent firm, ICS (Integrated Construction Services) and actual construction site work began this fall right after the Exaltation of the Cross. To buttress our ongoing major fund-raising efforts, our valiant group of pierogie makers have held their annual Fall Food Festival each November, raising enough money to buy brand-new professional-grade appliances to outfit the entire new kitchen! The Sisterhood through its annual Baklava sale has raised funds designated for new furniture. And, a special Fund-raising Committee worked extremely hard to hold a Silent Auction and Dinner in 2008, which gathered nearly $15,000 for our mortgage.

All throughout this process, His Grace Bishop TIKHON has monitored, encouraged, and prayed for our efforts. He helped us size the building project according to our budget constraints. He waited to see the financial commitment of the parish before giving his blessing for our first phase of construction. Thank God, we could show him that we have about half in cash and half in mortgage pledges for a project that is just under one million dollars. We truly thank God for His help in all this. To help us conclude the financial package for our project, we turned to the Russian Brotherhood Organization (RBO), based in Philadelphia. We are grateful to the RBO for offering us an interest rate better than the bank’s rate for the $500,000 note. On Sunday, October 25, 2009, John Wanko (RBO national president) and his family came to St. Michael’s to formally present the RBO mortgage loan to the bishop and the parish. With the funding in place, we are looking towards the completion of the project by next spring, Lord willing.

To support, go to http://agiasophiaharrisburg.com