

Answered Prayers

Gretchen Murray, Traverse City Record Eagle 8.4.07

Fr. Iakovos Olechnowicz sits among the round conference tables in the fellowship area of the church that has become his newest appointment. A few steps away stand rows of chairs and a small altar that comprise the sanctuary of the Traverse City Orthodox Church.

Surveying the room Fr. Olechnowicz (Olek nó vik) seemed satisfied with the storefront on Hastings Street that, until a few weeks ago, held nothing but potential for the congregation. Since 1999 the Traverse City Orthodox Mission Church has been renting space in other area churches, meeting twice a month and setting up and tearing down their paraments for each service.

"I felt it was critical to establish a space for us throughout the week," Olechnowicz said, explaining one of his first priorities. "The Congregational Church where we held services gave us two and a half hours on Sundays to have service, pack up and be done. In our church there is a whole array of services that are performed throughout the week. Now we will be able to have a whole liturgical life."



Iakovos Olechnowicz began working at the Traverse City Orthodox Mission on July 1. He relocated from Vestel, New York.

The semi-permanent home has been welcomed by the 100-member congregation. "These people have been on starvation rations for eight years," he said. "With that kind of coverage — no local pastor, it's to their credit. They've really hung in there."

The small Traverse City congregation is part of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a Christian church that traces its hierarchy back to the apostles. Today's Eastern Orthodox Christian church is a confederacy of orthodox churches with cultural ties to Russia, Serbia, Greece, Poland and other ethnicities that all share the same faith.

"While the large downstate Orthodox churches with a varied ethnic population can remain cultural, there's not enough people here to do that," said Harriet Rennie, president of the parish council. "We're small, and since we're the only Orthodox Church in the area, we have to incorporate all traditions into one house so that people used to worshipping in any orthodox practice will be comfortable here."

Olechnowicz's 20 years in the priesthood has prepared him to help the congregation make the transition from a mission to a full-fledged chartered church. A native of White Plains, N.Y., he studied business logistics before obtaining a theological degree from Christ the Saviour Orthodox Theological Seminary and has held previous pastorates in New York as well as West Virginia and Pennsylvania along with a four-year stint in Johannesburg, South Africa, with Greek Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church permits priests to marry, and while the Olechnowicz family found the experience enjoyable, it made them realize some interesting facts about life in the United States.

"The biggest difference in America as opposed to South Africa is that the people are not as tuned in to religion here," Olechnowicz said. "The personal requirement for faith-based living doesn't seem to be present in America. South Africa has a violent society where people often find themselves victims."

He finds Americans more stable, softer and secure. "There isn't the same sense of temporariness of life. In South Africa people seemed much more anxious and aggressive in investigating faith. They need their faith. I don't have a sense that Americans have that same urgency," he said.

He feels that starting up the Traverse City church could be his biggest ministerial challenge so far, but for the congregation, their prayers have been answered.

We feel we're living our dream," Rennie said. "We needed a very special priest, and we waited for the right person."

Fr. Olechnowicz reminds her that this is only the beginning and the church likely will move at least once more before it can transfigure into a church building. His initial plans include lots of pastoral care and after that, outreach.

The Olechnowicz family feels committed to this mission church and they have done something they haven't in the past — put down some roots of their own. They recently purchased a home in the area, something they haven't done with any other of his pastoral calls.

"I have what, maybe 20 years left (to pastor)?" he reasoned. "I am making a long-term commitment to making this work." He feels Metropolitan Nicholas, head of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Detroit, read the situation and, even though it took a while, made the match to the benefit of everyone involved. "I think he read the situation well. I think he was waiting for me for this position," Olechnowicz said. "And I think he read my heart."