

Dear Fellow Youth Workers in Christ,

What the Archangel Gabriel said to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the time of the Annunciation he says to all of us, "Do not be afraid..." Whether that is during a time of uncertainty, of distress, of natural disaster, or in our current time, those words of our Lord spoken through His archangel were given to us as well. "Do not be afraid..."

As the Orthodox Youth Directors of North America we are writing to encourage all of us to maintain first our faith and then our ministries to our youth at a time when both are challenged.

First, our faith. Nothing replaces faith in God. Learning is given to deepen it. Services are given to help it grow. Prayer is given to strengthen it. But nothing replaces faith. Noah had to have faith BEFORE he built the ark. Abraham had to have faith BEFORE he was asked to leave his own country. Moses had to have faith BEFORE he led God's people out of Egypt. The Three Holy Youths had to have faith BEFORE they stepped into the fiery furnace. Our Lord had to have faith in His Heavenly Father BEFORE He ascended the Cross. Nothing replaces faith. Without it, nothing is possible. But with it, mountains will move. We confront the mountain in front of our ministry and with faith in God it WILL move!

And second then, our ministry to our youth. The mountain in front of our ministry WILL move! In fact, it is already moving. The "distance" between us is being erased. Why? Because love does not know separation and prayer does not know distance. As your fellow youth workers in Christ, we encourage you to maintain your connection with your youth, with our kids, AND as always point them toward CHRIST, just as St. John the Baptizer of our Lord did. At a time when people were questioning WHOM to follow, John pointed them emphatically to the Lamb of God. John at that time lost his disciples, his followers, because He pointed them to CHRIST. Stay connected with your youth and point them to Christ and His Church.

How?

Thanks be to God, He's already given us the tools in this day and age. He's given us distance learning which many of us have been engaged in for a while now. He's given us the ability to broadcast services, which many of us have been doing for a while now. He's given us online chat rooms and apps to stay together over distance, and we've already been using them to stay connected. He's already given us the tools and now we are called to use them like never before. But they are only the tools and with them we will help our youth follow Christ and lead them back to His Church.

As the Orthodox Youth Directors of North America, we are offering encouragement in our common ministry. Our website, developed together, is a source of information, resources and tools all of us can use to help our Youth confront with faith their current circumstances. This website was designed for all of us, where we could share, and now can see, the good work God is allowing us to do with our youth.

To that end, not only are there resources here that can be used to help us in our youth ministry, but we will also be offering an additional page sharing what others are doing across our country to minister to our youth at a time of crisis.

We are asking all those engaged in youth ministry across the country to point God's children to Him and His Church by doing the following:

1. First, direct them toward their parish and their priest. What is their parish doing to help them maintain and increase their faith in God? Are they streaming services? Are they offering online sermons? Are they offering online learning opportunities? Are they finding new ways to minister to their faithful? Point them toward Christ and His Church through their parish.
2. Then direct them toward their Archdiocese/Metropolis/Diocese. What is their Diocese doing to help them maintain and increase their faith in God? They may be streaming services if their parishes are not. They may be offering new online content to learn about and enrich their faith if their parish is unable to do so at this time. They may have set up new online chat rooms to support and encourage one another in a way they had not before. Again, point them toward Christ and His Church through their Diocese.
3. Then also, direct them through our common website to the work being done all over our country, by all our Churches, to support one another in our faith. There is much being done by the grace of God. Point them to Him and His Church through our common ministry; and finally,
4. Continue to help each other, minister to those in need, and remember, as God gives you the ability, EVERYONE...by visit, by call, by card, by instant message, by email, by video chat, by the means and tools at your disposal, and above all by prayer. Need doesn't stop because life has been put on hold.

As the Youth Directors in North America we are offering you an opportunity to join us for a special edition of our Webinar series entitled "Do Not be Afraid: Youth Ministry Now" which will take place on Tuesday, March 24 from 3pm-4pm EST. The link to join this webinar is https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_A4Fsu6hcR9-S_Y0iYkyb-Q or you may join from our website. Join us in conversation as we help each other engage our ministry and youth in a time of crisis.

In addition, the Orthodox Camp Directors in North America are offering a "Town Hall Meeting" online every Tuesday for the coming weeks, beginning March 24 from 11am-12pm. We will discuss the impact of our current situation on camps and their programs. The link to join this gathering: <https://zoom.us/j/482432443> or join from orthodoxyouth.net.

Finally, remember that while nothing replaces faith, so also nothing replaces prayer, nothing replaces reading the Scriptures and nothing replaces the Sacraments and Services of the Church. We may not have access in person to our Sacraments or the Services of the Church at this point in time, but we will again, and we will rejoice in them like never before, and thank God for them like never before. While we are separated from them (though we can participate online through streaming services and are encouraged to do so) spend additional time in prayer, additional time in Scripture reading, and additional time thinking about what the Sacraments mean to you. If God has allowed them to be removed from us for a time, then we need to give serious thought about them and about our relationship with them.

Have FAITH and PRAY and ask God to inspire us with LOVE because with FAITH the mountain will move, and with love there is no distance, and with prayer there is no separation.

With love in Christ,
The Orthodox Youth Directors of North America