

Pastoral Report
Annual Meeting
February 8, 2026

To my brother clergymen and brothers and sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ!

A priest serves at the pleasure of his bishop. So I would like to thank His Eminence, Archbishop Alexander, for the opportunity to serve you, the faithful, of St. John of Damascus Orthodox Church in Tyler, TX. It is safe to say that no one here, including me, anticipated that I would be offering the pastoral report at St. John's annual meeting this year. Hopefully when a priest leaves a parish, it is a sad affair, and he is missed, as is the case here with Fr. David and Matushka Amy's departure. It is a blessing to arrive at a parish where the priest has been loved and cared for. I am still transitioning into the role of rector of St. John's and want to thank you for the warm welcome my family and I have received and also for your patience as I continue to learn the role of being the priest of this parish. When I arrived at my previous posting, the parish was in shambles and the community about ready to close its doors. This is not the case here. St. John's has beautiful iconography adorning a permanent temple complemented by a newly built parish hall (in addition to whatever we are calling that dilapidated structure on the hill). By God's grace, much has been accomplished and the parish has grown and our temple is often filled to near capacity. Yet, even so, there is still work to be done.

I have been called the obvious choice and the logical choice as Fr. David's replacement. This might be so, but I very much want to be a good choice, the right choice. As the case with many parishes throughout our diocese, St. John's has undergone a lot of change over the past few years and this past year is no different: a new priest and lots of new faces. It is easy for a place that has felt like home suddenly to feel quite differently, and what once seemed immovable to feel like it has shifted beneath our feet. I have not arrived with the intention of changing anything at St. John's, but rather with a desire to continue the efforts begun by Fr. John and Fr. David. Yet, as we all know, as the parish grows change is inevitable. That doesn't make it any easier though. If you have been a member of St. John's for some time, perhaps you might feel as if you are being replaced or pushed out of the way. This will never be my intent. The longstanding members of this community, the "old oak trees" to borrow a phrase from the historian Livy, are essential to growing a healthy parish and incorporating new members into Christ's Body, the Church. Yet, room will need to be made for the newcomers, we will need to share the things that we love about St. John's and adapt to the people God brings to us, and inevitably our community will change in this process.

So we will need to change to meet the new and various needs of all the different kinds of people God brings to us. As our numbers increase, we will need to change how we serve each other and the broader community so that we can be faithful stewards of our time, talent, and treasure. We will need to change so that we can heed the exhortation of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesian Christians, in order "...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ... (Eph. 4:12-13). As counterintuitive as it sounds, we will need to change in order to remain united as the Body of Christ. We will experience this unity only to the extent that each one of us identifies with Christ, who does not change, and his Body - not with a committee, or a ministry, or some particular function - but identify with the Body of Christ Himself. To use just one example: there are any number of ways to facilitate coffee hour, and God help us, we will try all of them if needed, but what is important is that we commit ourselves to the habit of eating

together after the Liturgy so that we can share, even if for a moment, our lives together. Coffee Hour is where we experience in a concrete manner the spiritual reality of being joined together into one body when we receive Holy Communion. We serve two tables at St. John's: the Holy Table and the Table of Fellowship. We experience Christ at each one. We must be willing to try new things, even to support things we disagree with, for the sake of building up the Body of Christ. I ask for your prayers as the parish council and I try and strike the appropriate balance between what change is beneficial and what should be passed by. For this we need true servants - not just people with ideas. Ideas are easy. Knowing which ideas will benefit this community at this particular time is the challenge. This requires humility and a willingness to work as a team with a desire for what is best for us, not just duplicating what has been done somewhere else.

In 2025, the average attendance at St. John's was 165, and we received 35 people into the Church. We have celebrated 1 wedding and 1 funeral (and 1 burial). We have constructed a new parish hall, and installed the next phase of our iconography. We have also created new committees to meet the needs of a growing parish. All of this while celebrating our liturgical services throughout the year and "doing life" together. As a result of many years of faithfulness, overseen by Fr. John Mikita and Fr. David Bozeman, this mission has been elevated to parish status. This elevation may seem perfunctory, yet I do not want it to pass unnoticed as St. John's has been dedicated to the task of mission-building since its founding. So it is fitting that the mission dedicated to building new missions is now the parish dedicated to building new missions. At least that is my hope, that the parish will remain a mission-oriented community. In 2014 Fr. John Mikita, the founding priest of this parish community, said in an interview with the Tyler Morning Telegraph, "Our goal is not to build large churches with big congregations...We focus on spreading out from city to city." Indeed, the strength of St. John's is seen in her missionary efforts and the success of our daughter missions - the St. Paisios Mission in Nacogdoches, by God's grace, will begin construction on its own building this year, and the St. Ephraim Mission in Hallsville welcomed a new priest this past November. For the past three years, St. John's has supported Dn. Seraphim Crossman and family during their time at seminary and the soon-to-be Fr. Seraphim and family will serve a parish or mission within the diocese, thus continuing the missionary work of St. John's. In addition, we continue our missionary efforts by financially supporting the St. Ephraim Mission with monthly contributions.

There is a long list of things we want/need to attend to at our parish (as there always is!), projects we need to make decisions about (I will mention some of them later in the meeting), but let us not lose sight of the long-term commitment this community has made to continue the growth of the Orthodox Church here in East Texas. And today let us celebrate God's faithfulness in bringing about our founding mandate clearly stated by then Archimandrite Gerasim 12 years ago in an interview for the local newspaper, "Our hope for the St. John of Damascus Parish is to serve as a witness to the Christian faith in East Texas, to introduce the local people to the Orthodox Christian Church by means of her worship and proclamation of the Orthodox Christian faith..." Let this be our guiding principle: faithfulness to the Orthodox liturgy and the proclamation of Jesus Christ risen from the dead to save sinners, even those of the East Texas variety.

May God bless us this year as we struggle to remain true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and strive to introduce the "local people" to the Orthodox Church.

Respectfully Submitted,

Fr. Joshua Trant