

FOCUS ON DIOCESAN MISSIONS: St. Innocent of Alaska Mission, Oneonta, NY

QUICK FACTS:

Date founded:
1997

Services held at:
St. James Episcopal Church

Priest:
Fr. Vasil Dubee
St. Tikhon's Seminary
Class of 2009

Website:
stinnocentmission.org

The Diocese of New York and New Jersey is blessed to have several active and growing missions. Previously, we have written about the establishment and work of St. Simon Mission, New Brunswick, NJ; we will now take a look, over the next three issues, at the missions of upstate New York, starting with St. Innocent of Alaska Mission in Oneonta.

History

St. Innocent Mission was founded in 1997. For more than a decade, its faithful members faced the challenges common to the life of a fledgling mission parish: changes in location, the struggle to build up financial resources, clergy turnover, members moving away for work prospects, and so forth.

Fortunately, during much of this time, the dedicated flock were able to worship at Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery in nearby Otego, NY, while looking for a space closer to town where they could establish a stable, visible presence in Oneonta. At times over 70 people would gather for Sunday Liturgies with the St. Innocent community.

In 2011 a milestone project was undertaken by the Diocese of New York and New Jersey to lead St. Innocent's forward into the next chapter in its life. With support from the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors Fund for the strengthening of mission parishes, "Operation Oneonta" was launched, bringing together teams of Orthodox faithful from within and beyond the NY State Deanery to St. James Episcopal Church, whose congregation had generously offered space to St. Innocent to build an Orthodox chapel. Now, for the first time in a long time, the mission had a "permanent temporary" chapel setup (photo on right) in which to celebrate liturgical services. This new beginning held great promise for the future, a new foundation on which a future could indeed be built.

Rebuilding Begins

In December of 2015, Fr. Vasil Dubee, along with his wife Matushka Lesya and daughter Veronica, arrived at St. Innocent's, holding their first liturgy there on the feast day of St. Nicholas. After commuting from eastern Pennsylvania for two months, Fr. Vasil and



his family moved to Oneonta in February of 2016. During this time, average weekly attendance was around 35-40, including many children.

Getting used to his first parish assignment, acclimating to what the mission was doing, Fr. Vasil understood that priorities needed to be established. Adult education classes were moved to Sunday during coffee hour, which improved attendance and participation. A new focus was placed on teaching and forming the many small children who belong to the mission. Most importantly, a stable liturgical schedule was renewed and expanded, with Vespers and Liturgy celebrated on weekends and feast days. Added were the Canon of St. Andrew and Pre-Sanctified Liturgies during Lent; celebrations like the Feast of St. Elias with the blessing of cars; and blessings of fruit and flowers in August at the Great Feasts of the Transfiguration and Dormition. Outreach was enhanced, with ads in newspapers and social media, pysanki classes during Lent, and participation in a fall ethnic food sale, selling pierogies and cabbage rolls. The latter has been a big success: While the first time the parish participated netted them about \$1,000, the most recent sale brought over \$4,000 and an increased awareness and presence of the mission in the community. The mission has also thanked their hosts, St. James Episcopal Church, by helping during their clean-ups and presenting them with an icon of St. James.

Results: Today at St. Innocent, while attendance and membership have remained essentially the same due to many job relocations away from Oneonta for long-time families, stewardship is beginning to take hold – nearly half the families now make annual pledge commitments since Fr. Vasil began teaching about stewardship and pledging. More outreach is underway: Fr. Vasil has begun teaching a course on Orthodoxy at the local Center for Continuing Adult Learning every April through May, drawing as many as 45 people per class. Father also teaches a week-long class at nearby Hartwick College, where Archbishop Michael too has been a presenter.

Future: By the Grace of God, the mission was able to secure, debt-free, 10 acres of land in early 2017, only a mile and a half from a major exit off of I-88, a wooded location within the town of Oneonta. The accompanying photo shows the land in the process of being cleared of over 200 trees in preparation for future development. After Pascha this year, the mission received more



good news involving matching grants for their building fund in \$10,000 increments for every \$10,000 raised by the mission. Work has begun on developing site and building plans. Meanwhile, St. Innocent Mission continues to worship in its beautiful space at St. James Church, with sincere gratitude to the community of St. James for their hospitality, to Archbishop Michael and our Diocese for their prayerful and material support, and to Almighty GOD for His faithfulness and blessings!