



**ST MICHAEL'S ORTHODOX CHURCH
DIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA
& EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA
512 SUMMER ST
OLD FORGE, PA 18518**



ANNUAL RECTOR'S REPORT - REV MICHAEL SHEPHERD February 1, 2025

Baptisms: 3	Parish Census Fiscal Yr. 2023
Chrismations: 0	45 Active Members (91 total, incl. children (14))
Marriages: 0	Parish Census Fiscal Yr. 2024
Deaths: 5	41 Active Members (incl. children (12))

Glory to Jesus Christ. Glory Forever.

This past year has been a roller coaster ride and flew by very quickly. There have been ups and downs spiritually, physically, and mentally. As I struggled many times over the past year, I often reflected on the scripture verse, John 14:27, repeating the words of Christ in the upper room, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." Many things will trouble us in life, but when reading scripture, I assure you, we can find peace in Jesus. This is an incredibly comforting reality that can sustain us in our darkest moments. In this verse, Jesus is offering His peace to His disciples as His last will and testament. He is promising to give peace in His way, not the world's way. Jesus' peace is enduring and rooted in His eternal nature, unlike worldly peace, which is temporary. This Bible verse in particular tells us not to worry as the world tells you to worry. We should have the peace of Christ in our hearts that helps us to know He will never leave us and He will always take care of us.

The hardest thing about the rector's report is attempting to not repeat what the other members of the council have written or said, so forgive me if it sounds repetitive. First, I want to point out the Parish Census above. I have diligently tried to give an accurate account of those who are committed to Christ and His church of St Michael's, as much as we all struggle to do these very important Christ-given obediences, by listing those who prioritize communion, confession, time, talent, and treasure. Along this point, over the past three years of my assignment, I have made a point to stop using the word "dues" for people's donations and started using the term proportional giving and tithes as they are a more appropriate way to describe giving to God's Holy Church. The dues system created a mindset of entitlements whereby something must be returned or reciprocated.

Tithing, at its very basic level, helps us to develop a sense of community, trust in God, and generosity. This is witnessed by the growth in our community. It provides for orphans, widows, and foreigners. Tithing is a way to show appreciation for God's blessings by showing gratitude, which acknowledges God's sovereignty, that He owns everything, including our finances. Most importantly, tithing teaches us to prioritize God in our lives and put Him first. This is why it was so important for me to change the atmosphere of dues to tithing. I realize this was a difficult transition for a lot of folks. However, Christ sent his apostles (and each and everyone one of us) "to go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give." We had a most glorious year of giving. As I look at our financial records, St Michael's received more in tithing and donations in 2024 than in the past several years. Glory to God! Let's keep this up and continue to grow in Christ by bringing all of Old Forge to His Church. That's why, starting this year, I would like to have a recommendation that at our monthly parish meetings we choose a different local charity to donate to each time.

Speaking of bringing people to His Church, since our last annual meeting, we had three baptisms (Uriel Vo, Santo Cerminaro, & Anna Brown). We also had an increase in visitors to our parish. The fruit of their visits brought several more catechumens into the catechumenate in 2024: Chris & Neva Yeisley, Joanne Snopek, Barbara Arneil, George McCandless, and Paul Dunay. I believe the hard work of our newly established greeter's ministry played a huge part in this. During the year, St Michael's has held catechumen classes every Sunday after divine liturgy with the assistance of Uriel Vo, Joseph Hart, and Maura Elko who are all going through the St Vladimir's Catechist class. Moreover, I have seen some parishioners of St Michael's, who have not visited in a while, increase their visit over the past year and hope that our continued love for God shines forth bringing them back to the faith. Glory to God!

This year we had the blessing of singing a panikhida for our departed parishioners of St Michael's: Michael Jadik, John Pritchuk, Matushka Paula Soucek, Nicole Serniak Cochran, and Jean Mori. My brother Morgan Shepherd also passed away this past year. May their memories be eternal. Additionally, we hold panikhidas on the last Saturday of every month to honor those who have passed during that month. Unfortunately, we have seen an increase in cost to maintain our cemeteries, as you can see in the financial report. Danny Pregmon, our cemetery custodian and Vice Chair, has worked very hard to maintain our cemeteries and to coordinate the upkeep of them. I thank him for his dedication to this vital ministry. This year I also sent correspondence to our local funeral homes (see attachment) about St Michael's Funeral Directives and moving towards bigger calendars.

In my last report, I noted, "As the church of St Michael's is our home parish and God's Holy Temple, it should be taken care of by all of its people." Because of this, we ramped up our Friday work days to whenever a person is free. The Catechumens are actively taking a role in maintaining our Holy Church. Danny Pregmon continues to cover the maintenance for all of our buildings, along with his wife, Sandy, who still comes in weekly to clean. Marie Pasternak has continued the important service of decorating our beautiful temple with flowers during our feast days. Maura Elko has done a wonderful job in ensuring our fiduciary requirements are met when counting the offerings. This ministry is very important especially as we start figuring out our new program, ChurchTrac. Thank you to Patty Jones, Marie Pasternak, Emily Krenitsky, Tammy Wytovich, and Emily Hart who assisted in counting. Thank you to Jason Hart and Kelly Cigna for their meticulous auditing of our accounts.

In taking care of God's Holy Temple, the parish council has focused a great deal of time, talent, and treasure in the maintenance and beautification of the church. Over the past year, we have implemented the "Heavenly Image" program and used those donations to repair the walls, ceilings, and window sills, by plastering, sealing, and painting all the walls. We also had all the lights over the pews, and in the chandeliers, replaced along with having the chandeliers cleaned. This was a very tedious process, but it was a vital necessity as it hadn't been done in quite some time. The aisle carpet was replaced, and the carpet in the altar removed. On top of all of these improvements, we added stars to our ceiling, which only amplified the beauty of our Temple. These stars add to our understanding that the whole of creation exists not only because of Christ but for the sake of Christ, for the fulfillment of His sovereign purposes, and for His glory. St Paul makes a similar point in Romans 11:36 about God Himself, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things." To quote a long time parishioner, "Our church has always been beautiful, but now it truly feels like I am walking into the kingdom of heaven!"

As you can see, our choir has moved down stairs. I realize this is hard for some as it may seem like a change in "how we do things." Nonetheless, I have received overall support from those who have listened to our choir over the past year and commented on how much more relaxed and beautiful the singing has become. Of course, this is due to the dedication of Barbara Sevensky, Maria Pasternak, Matushka Emilia Shepherd, Emily Hart, & Jason Vo who sing in the choir. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

We had our 2nd Annual Veterans Day Pasta Meal and Chicken BBQ, which was a great hit, and brought a lot of exposure to our church. Thank you to all the volunteers and support we had for those events, especially

Tammy Wytovich and Sandy Pregmon. It was beautifully done and was a great way to remember all of our veterans both living and departed, which was very moving for me. As soon as those events were over, they began planning for our other events.

Our church continues to grow, and I thank God everyday for this blessing and to His Eminence, Archbishop Mark, our Archpastor, for entrusting me with the flock of St Michael's. It is through his love of Christ that reminds us that we must foster a relationship of love. This means we must actively participate in the will of God to cultivate a deep and meaningful connection with our neighbor in our faith in Jesus Christ. We do this by demonstrating love through actions and attitudes that align with Christian teachings, including compassion, forgiveness, service, and prioritizing the other person's well-being as you would your own. This is our obedience as Christians. If Christ is our priority, then we do this freely.

I would like to thank the Parish Council, who worked tirelessly over this past year, to show their immense love and dedication for the church through their sacrifice. An example of their love, the parish council decided to implement live streaming of our divine liturgy so that our homebound parishioners could feel as though they are worshipping with us. I am humbled by this. It truly is a blessing to work with our parish council, who have taken the time to get to know me, my wife, and my family. They have provided me with words of wisdom, recommendations, and support, making my pastoral responsibilities easier to carry. This year, because of electricity bills, I elected to move my office from the hall to the counting office, and the parish council lovingly took it upon themselves to ensure I had a proper office. They had my office repainted, carpeted, and furnished. In addition, they bought a new printer and laptop for us to take care of our administrative and fiduciary responsibilities. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to Tammy Wytovich, Danny Pregmon, Vitaliy Rakovsky, and Maura Elko for your contribution to the church. Also, thank you to my wife, who is a sounding board in everything that I do, and for my children, who are there in the background cheering and saying, "Go dad, you got this, and we love you!" This truly makes the calling to the priesthood a family ministry.

Let me close by thanking all the parishioners of St Michael's, in advance, for your continued active engagement in our parish. The parish council and I are grateful, but we cannot do it alone. It takes all of us, priests, deacons, laity, parents, kids, to be the complete Body of Christ. As a parish, we're just beginning to comprehend the fullness and challenge of living out our Parish Mission – Values – Priorities, particularly in light of the challenging landscape of Old Forge, as an Orthodox Church. I'm excited to see what the Holy Spirit has in store as we enter this new and different era. I look forward to growing our pastoral relationship.

In Christ,

Fr. Michael Shepherd