

“The Job Is Compassion and Inspiration”

Jennifer Nahas Talks with Jennifer Haddad Mosher

Note: Jennifer Nahas is a professional educational evaluator. She has led local and national evaluation studies, facilitated strategic vision setting, and worked with a variety of stakeholders to implement best practices in schools. Nahas was director of Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) from 2010–2014. She met Jennifer Haddad Mosher in New York City a few weeks ago to talk about Orthodox youth ministry.

Let's start with a little about your background. You were involved in the wider world of non-profit youth work; what made you cross over into youth ministry?

My vocation as an Orthodox Christian was formed early, thanks to my priest and parish, St. Mary's in Brooklyn. As a leading parish in the Antiochian Archdiocese's Teen SOYO (Society of Orthodox Youth Organizations), we served in many community agencies, like the Salvation Army, and learned how blessed we were to have abundance, love, and security. Several years as a counselor at the Antiochian Village gave me the opportunity to work intensely with our Orthodox campers to build fellowship, which strengthens self-worth and manifests God's presence. But it was in my work with the Children's Relief Fund (CRF) that I really started to see needs for compassion and service. Not only did we raise a lot of money for Lebanese children of war to provide the basics—housing, food, medical supplies—but later in my life, I chose to adopt two beautiful children from Lebanon. At that time, I was at Brandeis—I have a master's in Public Policy—where my vocation became my career.

My first job out of college showed me how easy it was to bring my Orthodox values to the workplace. I served as a community planner in the Mayor's

Office in Boston, ensuring underrepresented groups received the support and training they needed to move up the ladder. It was perfect: making sure neighborhoods in Roxbury and Dorchester get equal funding to those on Beacon Hill? That was so Orthodox, to me! After other jobs in higher education, I formed my own evaluation and research firm. And after 12 years in the field, working on service learning, college retention, and skill building evaluations, I was asked to conduct focus groups at OCF's College Conference. I was so excited. After all these years, I was bringing my professional expertise to the cornerstone of my being: my faith. But as on any project, I would have the daunting task of taking stakeholders' uncensored reactions and presenting them to the Church. As I was digging through the results, my non-Orthodox business partner (it's very important to have a “think partner” who can push back and hone your analysis) said, “Jen, everything you told me just seems so watered down!” I said, “This is the Orthodox Church. They aren't used to evaluations. It's going to be, at best, overwhelming to them and, at worst, threatening.” My goal was to ensure the most important elements were heard and addressed so we, as a Church, could provide the best for our college students.

You are describing a common challenge for those who bring expertise

from secular employment. We do jobs that may not exist formally in the church, and when we are invited to share our skills in that setting, it can be a shock seeing the difference in expectations and standards. I've felt similar tensions in education, in something as simple as curriculum development. I will look at materials and—thinking critically, having been professionally involved in curriculum publishing—I will think: "Wow, where do we start?" Yet I know that the people involved, the people who worked to produce the material, had excellent intentions. I don't want to come across as saying, "What are you doing?!" Yet there needs to be a way to have difficult conversations to help improve how ministry is done.

You are absolutely right. I try to walk the fine line of providing honest feedback and inspiring clients because they are on the front lines, doing God's work, and their intentions are good.

Sometimes it is difficult to say things so people are able to hear. There can be an unwillingness to consider

other perspectives, because they do not come from sources people would consider traditionally authoritative. It's not always a gender divide, or a clergy-laity divide. I once had an older woman come up to me after a talk and ask, "Why should we listen to you?" Never mind that I had the blessing of my bishop, was educated at a well-respected Orthodox seminary, and had over 10 years of experience in Christian education. That helped push me to pursue the doctorate. I had been encouraged to do so by all my advisers at St. Vladimir's Seminary, but thought, "Why yet another degree? It's expensive. It's a burden on my family. Why can't I just get down to business and serve the Church?" But I kept encountering these incredible blind spots.

It's hard to experience it, but I find it even harder to watch. While working in the ministry, I saw women who are articulate, smart, 100% committed, but the powers-that-be couldn't take them seriously. It was awful to watch. That happened to me as well. As the director, I was charged with building



Framing a house with a team at Project Mexico.

Hosting OCF students at Harvard and MIT for a home-cooked meal and discussion.



the ministry, so my team conducted need assessments, examined other campus faith ministries, and worked with Orthodox experts to put meat on the OCF skeleton. We crafted an intentional, comprehensive model with rigorous training components, vetting criteria for chaplains, and a transparent process for conflict resolution. Thanks to Ancient Faith Radio, we even developed a three-part podcast to educate folks about what real ministry would look like. It turned out to be a complete and utter waste of time because nobody was interested in building even the ground floor of Orthodox campus ministry. I remember saying to our board, “You cannot call this ‘ministry’; OCF is an organization that provides a few opportunities for our strong Orthodox high school students (those coming from camps and the CrossRoad summer institute) going to college.”

Another area that would have received much more attention in the secular world had to do with vetting and holding accountable those doing OCF work in the field. OCF did no back-

ground checks on its chaplains, although we know not all jurisdictions do them either. I brought this up to the board and the hierarchs countless times. They could not or would not hear me. It was only when I involved a gentleman from the insurance world that I started to break through. It would take one bad person in a woman’s dorm room—but I still don’t really think they understand they are sitting on a timebomb.

It’s incredibly difficult when you are doing any kind of direct service provision in so many different locations. The paperwork and the legal issues are so complicated. We struggle with the same challenges in FOCUS [Fellowship of Orthodox Christians United to Serve]. People are so eager to work, but these need to be addressed first; the foundation must be laid very intentionally.

Yes. Maybe it’s because we’ve had so much work in the outside world, we know: when you enter into something, you look at all the risks. You need to know how to meet all the demands of

financial accountability, and how to ensure safety of the organization and of those you serve, way before you can even start looking at how your services are, or aren't, having an impact.

I am struck by the fact that service and volunteerism were such an important part of your formation. These days I am thinking harder about how religious education can better support service and volunteerism, because in many parishes we deal with them in such a token way. Rarely do we see sustained engagement with our needy neighbors, which is what is needed for these encounters to be truly transformative. Too often efforts are a one-off: "We'll distribute Thanksgiving baskets!"

Yes, the Thanksgiving baskets are nice, but it's a feel-good box we check. I was part of the evaluation team on AmeriCorps and I spent three years out in the field looking at service learning projects that happened over time and had sustained, transformative results. I thought, this is easy, how are we, as a Church, not doing this? I commend the FOCUS for taking the big leap into real service. At OCF, I created rubrics that defined what it is to be an Orthodox leader on campus and what it means to serve as an Orthodox Christian. Take the Real Break program, for example. Wherever students travel, it's their job to spend the entire week seeing the light in the person they are with. That's it. Real Break, of course, puts students in places where they can make a difference: build a garden, read to children, deliver meals. But what it's really about is to witness, in the moment, and be present to the light. To see Christ in the person before them.

That is where we meet Christ. My foundational experience in Christian education was working in inner-city

New Haven with children who lived in housing projects. While completing my first master's degree, I interned with a woman, Gretchen Wolff Pritchard, who ran a children's ministry out of a local Episcopal parish. We ran a summer camp and, during the school year, had a weekly evening program for including a worship service, art projects, and dinner. Later we added an after-school program. This woman had designed all her own educational materials, because nothing on the market met the needs of those children. She was brilliant and creative, and the materials were beautiful and effective. These kids were from desperately poor families, were often raised in single-parent homes or by grandparents, and were dealing with failing schools and parents or older siblings on drugs or in prison. Yet we did incredible things with them and had wonderful outcomes. She would give workshops about it and people would remark on her materials: "Those are incredible! Where did you get them?" She would come home and tell me about these exchanges, and finally, I said, "Gretchen, you should find a way to produce and sell what you make; clearly there is a market." She said, "I have no idea how I would do that." So I taught myself how to write grant proposals and raised capital for her to start replicating her materials. Over the next decade I managed the production of everything she designed.

We don't have that level of skill, in the Orthodox church. You should be doing that for us, in a paid position, because you have done it successfully out in the community.

Or we should satisfy ourselves with being comfortable with adapting and using excellent materials that already exist. But having experienced work-



A hike in the woods at a college OCF conference.

ing with kids in that deeply impoverished context, here I am, a matushka in an Orthodox community, running a church school much more conventionally than I would do if it were completely up to me. I've realized that kids in upper socioeconomic brackets may be well-dressed and fed and may attend better schools, but they too have deep unmet needs. Many experience a similar disconnect with their parents and with the Church. They're also trying to figure out how what they encounter in the world and in the Church fit together. Yet no one seems willing to put in the amount of energy that Gretchen did to get inside of kids' needs and meet them. In our parishes, we may talk about it as ministry, but really we approach from a sense of anxiety: "we just have to have a children's program"—or in your case, "we just have to have a youth or college ministry."

Then we can check that box. Yes, there's that. But anxiety is fear. I think people

are afraid of dealing with the kinds of secular issues that we deal with constantly in New Haven or Detroit. What we see out in the larger world is playing out with our Orthodox teens and college students as well. They are not different. Having worked with hundreds of Orthodox college students, I see three types. There are the "cave dwellers": students afraid to leave their rooms. They have been sheltered and lack the skills to negotiate the complex college scene, so they don't integrate. At the other end of the spectrum are the "lock boxers": they lock their identities in a box, to be taken out after their college party years. But we all know these kids lose the key to the box. They wave goodbye to their parents. The pants get tighter, the shorts get shorter for young women. For the young man, bravado is rewarded. These students make unhealthy and sometimes life-altering choices that can lead to depression, dropping out, or a complete loss of self.

Then there's the group in the middle, the students who have developed skills to balance both tendencies. If we've done our job, we've created Orthodox college students with a deep sense of purpose, unbridled joy and openness, and a strong moral center. They become the designated drivers, whom others depend on in crisis, who get help for a depressed friend or organize a visit to a hospitalized friend. It's the young woman who doesn't plan on having sex, but who is prepared for the realities of sex in college. It's the young man who might drink at a party but doesn't overdo it. These are the Orthodox students who will intervene and protect. I can tell you from being on many college campuses, these students are noticed and appreciated. They are the new crop of servant leaders that embody Christ's message and action. They know their worth.

We as a Church don't want to look at the cave dwellers or the lock boxers. We must overcome our collective fear. It's okay that we don't know exactly what do about it, but we have to acknowledge the reality of their lives, expect mistakes, and be ready to serve these students.

Let's return to the theme of rubrics, intentional planning, and evaluation. If you ask your average parent, "What's your desired outcome, either for your individual kid or our youth program?"—if the parent were really honest, the desired outcome would be something like "We want more people in the next generation to pay the bills. We want our church to survive." Which, of course, is a much paler version of what should concern us: our children's spiritual well-being.

We need a collective conversation on what the outcome should be. When I asked parents what they hoped their children would get from OCF, you aren't going to believe what I heard: "I want my kid to marry not just an Orthodox Christian, but a Greek or a Russian Orthodox Christian." I was stunned. We have a lot of work to do if this is our starting point.

The corollary I encounter in education is that we spend so much time in discussions about what to teach: how much Scripture, how much history, how much tradition. "Let's make a chart about who needs to know what when." Yet the most important thing is to teach discernment. Discernment and thinking are critical to the Christian life, yet we virtually never talk about them.

I used to tell some of the priests I worked with in OCF: "Think of college students as emerging. Or evolving. They will make mistakes; our



job is to be there without judgment but with compassion and inspiration. Don't shut them down. Don't shame them. We'll lose them forever."

Young people do make mistakes; we should expect it and bear it graciously. Perhaps this reflects how immature we are as a church in America. We treat the faith as if it were fragile. Orthodoxy is stronger and more flexible than that.

Even though we're the ancient faith! Orthodoxy is a soul. It's not just knowledge; it's character, it's who you are. What we are talking about is a lot messier, it's not really easily programmable. It's modeling, facilitating, rather than directive teaching. It's experiential. In my field, we would say, "Every child needs a caring and committed adult," which is code for, "Every child needs an adult, not necessarily a parent but perhaps a teacher, who really is committed and is going to open possibilities." That's what allows a young person to be successful.

The Orthodox Church can do that. One study I cited at OCF showed that students from urban Baptist communities

Conducting a workshop for seminarians on the realities, risks, and opportunities of attending college today. Photo by John P. Nieuwsma.

had retention and graduation rates higher than the national averages. The study found that this resulted from their connections to their churches, which have a strong and distinct culture, similar to those in immigrant communities. These cultures were different from mainstream religion. These urban churches were the centers of family life, with strong youth groups, lengthy church services, different food and music. Sound familiar? Students from a tightknit church community, such as a second-generation Orthodox church, can do really well in college. How great is that? The Orthodox Church could knock this one out of the park with some intention and resources.

When I arrived at OCF, I was told a story that became my goal for the ministry. A kid from New England goes to college in New Orleans. The first weekend, his mother drags him to church and introduces him to the priest. The priest gives him his card, saying, “Call me if you need me.” The young man, not interested in going to church, immerses himself fully in the social end of college by joining a frat. Weeks later, there he is, drunk out of his mind; his friends have ditched him, he is in an unfamiliar area and scared. The priest’s card happens to be in his pocket. He calls the priest at 2 AM and says, “I don’t know where I am.” What does the priest do? Gets in his car and picks him up. Puts him to bed without a lecture. Gets him up in the morning, makes him a nice big breakfast, and says: “I am so glad you called.” ✱

© 2017 THE WHEEL.
May be distributed for
noncommercial use.
www.wheeljournal.com

*What does it mean to do really well?
To fall—because we all fall—and to
get back up.*



Jennifer Nahas is a veteran education practitioner. She focuses on offering evaluation research and data-oriented strategic planning assistance to educational organizations that promote success for young people in high school, college, and beyond. As Executive Director of Orthodox Christian Fellowship from 2010–2014, she worked as an advocate for Orthodox students on college campuses.



Jennifer Haddad Mosher holds a MAR from Yale Divinity School and a ThM from Saint Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, and is a PhD candidate at Union Theological Seminary. Her research focuses on the theology of childhood and the development of Orthodox pedagogy. She has represented the OCA at ecumenical gatherings and now serves as a member of the WCC Reference Group on Human Sexuality. She teaches in workshops and retreats and has worked as a grant writer and an editor. She lives in the northeastern United States with her husband and three children.