

Orthodox church reaches final push in birth

The consecration of St. George symbolizes for its members continuing growth and change

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THE OREGONIAN

The consecration of an Orthodox church is as tenderly regimented as the baptism of a child.

On Sunday, religious leaders will wash the black walnut altar at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church, anoint it with blessed oil and dress it in new white linen, a cloth it will wear for as long as it serves the church.

Consecration is the final push in the birth of this building, which held its first services three years ago. For members, it also symbolizes continued change for the estimated 83,700 Antiochian Orthodox in North America.

This branch of Orthodoxy is growing not just from the descendants of immigrants from countries such as Lebanon and Syria but also from adult converts seeking the roots of ancient Christianity.

As a result, the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese

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The Rev. Alban West (from left), Bill Lamvik and Bill Bitar place the top on the altar at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church.

IF YOU GO

What: Consecration of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church
Where: 2101 N.E. 162nd Ave.
When: Service begins at 9 a.m. Sunday, followed by a noon brunch in the church hall.

Church: Sunken pool is for baptizing adult converts

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of North America has tripled in size over the past 25 years, said the Rev. Alban West of St. George.

The growth was ignited in 1987, when the archdiocese was joined by about 2,000 people and 17 Orthodox churches that had been organized by former leaders of Campus Crusade for Christ. Since then, more than 100 churches have joined, along with many individuals from evangelical and mainline traditions, said the Rev. Peter Gillquist, director of missions and evangelism for the archdiocese and formerly a regional director for Campus Crusade for Christ.

Many converts began looking into Orthodoxy after big changes in their home churches, such as the ordination of women or homosexuals, said Howard Lange, administrator of the church's Department of Missions and Evangelism.

Converts "see the Orthodox church as the full and original... church founded by the apostles," Lange said. "They say, 'It appeals to me because the church doesn't change.'"

More than half of the Antiochian clergy — including Gillquist and West — are people who converted to the religion as adults.

Some of that growth is reflected at St. George, where the church serves 100 families — a mixture of "cradle Orthodox" and converts — compared with about 65 families 10 years ago.

In the northern arm of the new church, tiled steps lead into a deep sunken pool — a feature rarely found in older churches. Adult baptisms used to be so uncommon that few churches set aside a place for adult immersion.

At the old St. George, the congregation would simply borrow a special trough-sized tub from Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. But that wouldn't do at the new St. George, because roughly a quarter of Father Alban's baptisms are now for adults.

Members dug the foundation for the first St. George in 1930 with shovels in hand, said Bill Bitar, whose father and uncle were among the founders. In 1965, the church moved to a bigger church building on Southeast Holgate and 115th Avenue.

But the Holgate church was far from perfect. The altar faced the wrong direction. Women cooking for church festivals had to crowd into a cramped kitchen over a tiny sink. Large weddings and funerals often moved to Holy Trinity for space.

Church members dreamed of a spacious home on a lot they'd purchased in east Portland, but it was a big investment for a small group. After ground was broken in 1994, little happened.

Then, a 1998 visit from the Antiochian church's North American leader, the Most Rev. Metropolitan Philip Saliba, prompted a flurry of pledges and ultimately the construction of a \$1.5 million church and a \$1.2 million hall next door.

"There were a lot of doomsayers — 'Oh, we can't do it, it's too much,'" said Bitar, who led the construction, and whose family donated the money for the hall in honor of his parents. "You have to go out on a limb once in a while. That's what we did."

Structurally, the building at 2101 N.E. 162nd Ave. is a contemporary Northwest mixture of wood and steel, rather than traditional — and expensive — stone. As a result, the domes are lightweight fiberglass under sturdy gold automotive paint, rather than gilded wood or copper.

But the church architecture still narrates the faith's history, from its cross-shaped outline to domes that symbolize the meeting of heaven and Earth. Icons glow from gilded backgrounds on a screen in front of the altar.

The Antiochian archdiocese has long been an easy place to fit in, said West. Decades ago, the Antiochian church's North American leaders urged parishes to use English in worship.

Ultimately, it is "a comfortable place for converts to come," West said.

Many say that attitude comes from Metropolitan Philip, who envisions a strong role for the church in North America. Last year, the Holy Synod of Antioch granted self-rule to its North American church; the change already has allowed Saliba to organize the country into regional dioceses and to choose his own bishops.

The decision means "this is seen as a mature church that can make decisions about its own affairs," Gillquist said.

Last week, Saliba enthroned his first bishop in Los Angeles. That bishop will also attend the St. George consecration.

Although the church opened in 2001, the consecration had to wait — for the new icons, for the altar, for space on Saliba's calendar.

"It is not just another building," he said, "but a place where we experience the kingdom of heaven."