

## THE SOCIAL OFFER OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF AIGALEO IN GREECE

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### **Abstract**

*In the current difficult social conditions, the Orthodox churches of Aigaleo with their social work do significantly help people who face difficult situation. The present paper aims to explore the social work offered by the churches to the citizens of the Municipality Aigaleo. For this purpose a bibliographic review in other empirical researches on the Churches of the Metropolis of Nicaea was initially carried out and a primary research was later conducted. The primary research was based on the use of cross-section data, which derived from a sample survey in a specific sample of citizens that has a direct relationship with the church. Specifically priests, members of the Ecclesiastic Councils, members and volunteers of the Funds against poverty were questioned.*

*The research showed that significant social work is carried out by the churches in order to help people in need. In most parishes daily rations offered to needy citizens are prepared, material and financial assistance to individuals and many families in need are provided, etc. The results also showed that many social activities are developed by the parishes, such as Sunday schools, learning of traditional dances, courses of Byzantine and traditional music, religious painting, etc.*

**Key words:** Churches - Parishes in the Municipality of Aigaleo, social work of churches

### **Introduction**

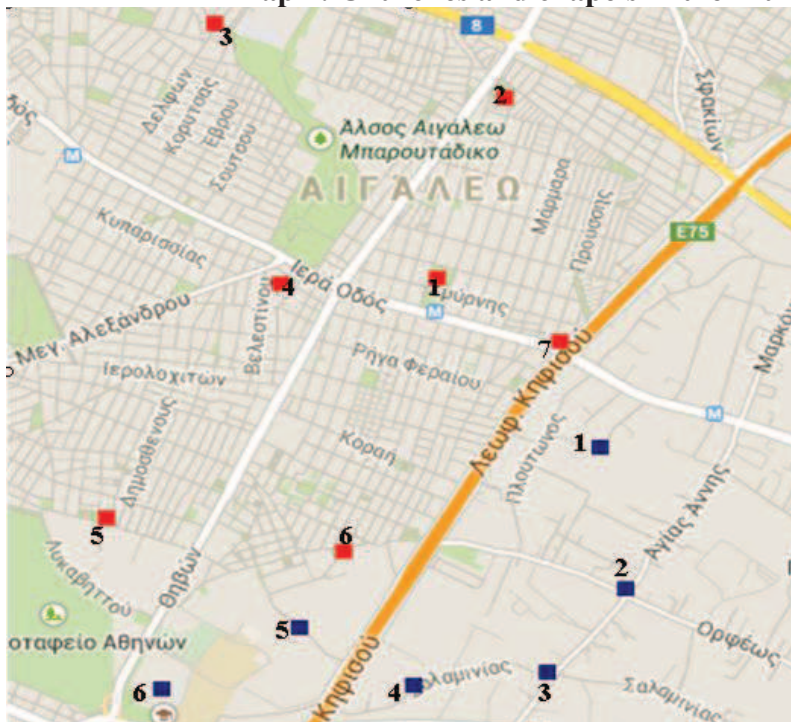
In the course of history human need to believe in a superior power, led to religions. For the Orthodox Christians, churches are the place where they pray all together and perform the sacraments of their religion, just as those are specified in the Charming Typical taught by Jesus

Christ himself and the Holy Fathers of the Church. For the faithful Christian, church is a spiritual sanctuary, where anyone can be relieved and find solutions for their problems.

Within the churches, rituals are carried out again and again, ways of behaviour and attitudes. Therefore, churches are centres of culture and civilization in modern societies. In Greece they are cultural centres, as they are inextricably linked with culture, traditions, manners and customs of the Greeks. Essentially, Greek culture and Orthodox Christianity express "two sides of the same coin" as around churches the current Greek society is based and constructed. Thus, church and society, in the Orthodox tradition are not parallel, but synonymous concepts. The church is therefore society. Traditionally in the Greek reality, society in its full and perfect form is church. The direct relationship between Church and people in general characterizes the entire history of the Orthodox Church. Within this framework, Church does not just care only to develop an independent social work, but also to serve the people in every emerging need in cooperation with all state and social services.

Thus, spiritual life is absolutely relevant to social life. Eminently, social life is the spiritual guided life. In the Greek Orthodox churches every Sunday the faithful are gathered to participate in the Divine Liturgy. In a large percentage of the population this is done permanently and continuously, while in another percentage fragmentary, but certainly at some point in their lives. So from the above it becomes clear that churches have an important and prominent place in the local Greek community and to the ordinary people and their contribution on a social level is undeniable. This contribution is explored by this research. The Municipality of Aigaleo was chosen as a case of study and the churches that exist in its topographic area. In the municipality there are churches, Holy Metropolitan Chapels, chapels as well as Churches of the so called Genuine Orthodox Christians. All these have both religious, and social work, as they try with actions and initiatives to contribute so as to help the citizens of the municipality, in all kinds of problems they encounter.

**Map 1: Churches and chapels in the Municipality of Aigaleo**



**Marked in red**

1. Subway of Aigaleo - Church of the Holy Cross of Aigaleo
2. Church of St. Spyridon of Aigaleo
3. Holy Trinity Church of Aigaleo
4. Church St. Constantine and Helen of Aigaleo
5. Church St. Catherine of Aigaleo
6. Church of the Immaculate Conception, St. Eleftherios, St. Dionysius of Aigaleo
7. Metropolitan Chapel St. George of Aigaleo

**Marked in blue**

1. Chapel of St. Panteleimon
2. Chapel of St. Demetrius Horseman
3. Holy Trinity Chapel
4. Chapel of St. Stephen
5. Chapel of the Virgin Birth
6. Chapel of St. John of the olive grove

Source: maps.google.gr, our processing

## **1. The churches of the municipality of Aigaleo and their social contribution**

The municipality of Aigaleo is located in Greece, in the western part of the largest and most urbanized region of Greece, Attica. It borders with the municipalities of Saint Varvara, Peristeri, Nikaia, Haidari and Tavros. The population of the municipality is 69660 residents. (www.perifereianews.com). The history of the region of Aigaleo is great since ancient times. Today is an urban municipality.

Within the limits of the municipality the following Orthodox Christian churches exist [The Hall (2002), "Bond" H.M. of Nikaia]

- Church of St. Spiridon
- Holy Trinity Church
- Church of St. Constantine and Helena
- Church of St. Catherine
- Church of the Immaculate Conception, St. Eleftherios, of St. Dionysios
- Church of St. George
- Chapel of St. Panteleimon
- Chapel of St. Demetrius Horseman
- Chapel of the Holy Trinity
- Chapel of St. Stephen
- Chapel of the Birth of the Virgin
- Chapel of St. John of the olive grove

In the current difficult social circumstances the Churches of Aigaleo with their social work significantly help people who face problems. They stand as a shelter for many families and single people who face not only financial but also wider problems. [H.M. of Nikaia (1988), "Bond" H.M. of Nikaia]

The churches of the municipality of Aigaleo fall within the Holy Archdiocese of Athens. The Holy Archdiocese of Athens has conceded since 01/15/1971 the Holy Metropolis Nikaia, not only due to the neighboring, but also for pastoral reasons the municipalities of Saint Barbara and Chaidari. The Metropolis of Nikaia set the objective for all the churches of the Metropolitan Region to acquire spiritual centres which would gather together young people and parents. With the care of the Parishes nowadays most of them own such centres. (Diptychs of the Greek Church, 2014)

Over the years the Holy Metropolis acquired two important regional spiritual centres and established a third one, highly remarkable, a comfortable spiritual centre in Aigaleo. The spiritual centre of Aigaleo helps to improve the work of the Church in the area of the municipality that we study. (Archive of the Holy Metropolis of Nikaia)

Starting from the basic doctrines of the Orthodox Christianity, it is emphasized the doctrines of the Holly Fathers have a deeply social character. Love is the infrastructure but the frame is sociality. [Konstantelos (1986), Pelagidis (2006)] With this in mind the Holy Metropolis of Nikaia has established its social and charitable work where love is the basic element that aims to be offered to people, who have great needs particularly in today's Greek society with its modern requirements and difficulties that have arisen since the financial crisis and beyond. Numerous manifestations of love, humanity and affection towards the people of the Metropolis of Nikaia who suffer are carried out locally through the Parishes. In every Parish besides the pastoral, social and charitable work is carried out as well aiming not only the psychological amusement, but also the

alleviation of the people's needs. [H.M. of Nikaia (1988), "The Hall" (2002), "Bond" H.M of Nikaia]

Specifically:

- Specific Assemblies of Priests and Clergy Conferences are conducted.
- A Provident Fund for the Priests of the Metropolis operates.
- Pilgrimage tours and excursions are organized at home and abroad, bringing together clerics, and ordinary citizens.
- Moral fees are given to residents and worship rituals are conducted.
- Various events for the spiritual edification of the people are held.
- Parents Association operates under the name "The Holy Family", which supports the family in all kinds of difficulties.
- The local Church frequently visits the army camp in order to encourage and strengthen the troops.
- In local churches Sunday schools are created where all children of the municipality can participate.
- Specific Holy Ceremonies for Student take place in special occasions such as exams etc.
- Cooperation of church with the teachers of all levels of education.
- There are welfare cycles of both local and central level in the entire municipality having as a benchmark the local church.
- The church also participates to the human suffering where necessary through the provision of health care, distribution of food, clothing and footwear.
- Moral-social assistance to citizens in need is provided.
- Prisoners and ex-prisoners and their families are assisted both morally and financially.
- A Centre for Social and moral support exist.
- Current events are been held within the churches of the municipality
- Support is provided to people living in institutions. Particularly visits take place to the Judicial Prisons at Korydallos, in the Women's Prison at Korydallos, in the juvenile detention centre at Korydallos, in different juvenile institutions, at the Prisoners hospital 'The Apostle Paul', in the Psychiatric Hospital of Korydallos, in the General State Hospital of Nikaia - Piraeus, to the Infectious Disease Hospital in Dromokaitio - Public Hospital, in the institution for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled - In the Institution for the chronic patients in Scaramanga, in nurseries and children's institutions and in the institution for the Elderly .
- The churches of Aigaleo are present and offer their help in urgent and difficult circumstances that assistance is required, such as the Institution of compassion for the rehabilitation of the deprived girls, the Office for the assistance of Workers' etc.
- Financial assistance for families with many children.
- On the initiative of the Church a 'School for Parents operate' as well as Camp, an Secondary Evening General School under the name "The Three Holy Hierarchs", a School for Accounting Studies under the name of "Byzantium" a Professional School for Girls called "Saint Philothea".
- Material-technical and spiritual support is provided for the well function of the Nurses school, such as the Higher School of Nursing in the General State Hospital of Nikaia, the Higher School for Nurses 'Olympias'.
- Blood donations are being held in the churches of the Metropolis.
- Material and financial support is provided to the Public and Private Schools.
- Effort is made so that there is close liaison of the local church with the teachers, parents and students.

- Commendations of honesty and diligence are given to students as well as awards to pupils for outstanding acts.
- Christian Youth Association - and Boy Scouts operate.
- Scholarships are given.
- Libraries are assisted both financially and materially.
- Ecclesiastical - Byzantine Music School operates in the Metropolis etc.

Of the above it is established the officially enacted social work of the churches in the municipality of Aigaleo. The basic question is whether the citizens of the municipality are involved in these social programs of the churches of the Metropolis and what are the factors that affect their participation. To answer our question we conducted a fieldwork in the municipality. Particular emphasis was given on the opinion of young people.

## **2. Fieldwork - Statistical Analysis**

The fieldwork of the present study explores the factors that influence the participation of the citizens in the municipality of Aigaleo in the social work that is carried out by the Parishes that spatially belong in the Municipality of Aigaleo. In order to conduct the research the primary sample survey method was selected using questionnaires. A questionnaire was created aiming a specific sample of citizens that have a direct relationship with the church. Specifically we interviewed priests, members of Church Councils, Members of Charities and volunteers. The survey was conducted in churches on Sundays immediately after the Holy liturgy. The questionnaires were distributed to a randomly selected sample.

The distribution and collection process of the questionnaires took place during the period 1/3/2014 - 20/3/2014. The total number of questionnaires distributed was 100. In the survey 100% of those surveyed responded.

The research took place in churches - parishes of the Municipality of Aigaleo. Specifically the Exaltation of the Holy Cross church, Saint Catherine's church, the Annunciation of the Holy Mother church, St. Constantine and Helen, Holy Trinity and St. Spiridon, the Metropolitan Chapel of St. George. These specific churches are located in central points of the municipality of Aigaleo (see. Charter 1), having great dispersion that allows access to all the citizens of the municipality. They also have sufficient size to accommodate a large number of believers in liturgies.

The questionnaire consisted of ten (10) closed questions with predefined answers from which the respondents could choose more than one. The first section of the questionnaire includes questions 1-3 and examines the demographics of the participants (gender, age, status of the respondent). The second section of the questionnaire includes questions 4-10 and examines the contribution of the parish in the social work. This social work refers to actions taken by each parish in order to alleviate all the people affected by difficulties. In the questionnaire also, there are questions that focus on young people.

The questionnaires were collected, tested for validity and numbered. Then the data were uploaded in the statistical data analysis program IBM SPSS STATISTICS 20.0, in two different files (sav) from which the frequency distributions emerged.

Figure 1: Gender of respondents

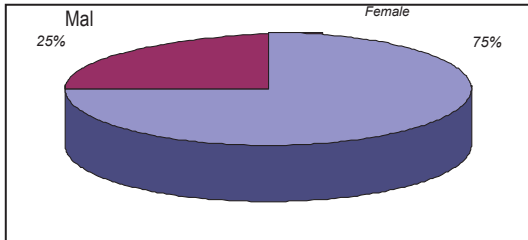


Figure 2: Age of respondents

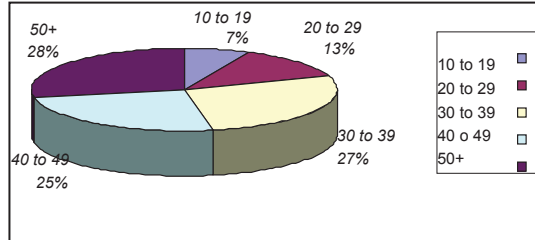


Figure 3: The status of respondents

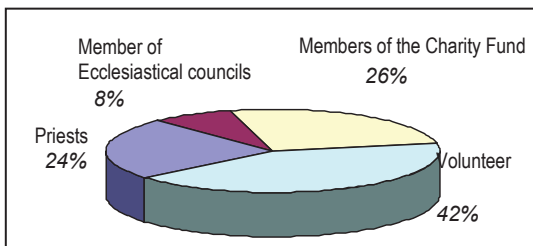


Figure 4: Measures to alleviate the financially weak parishioners

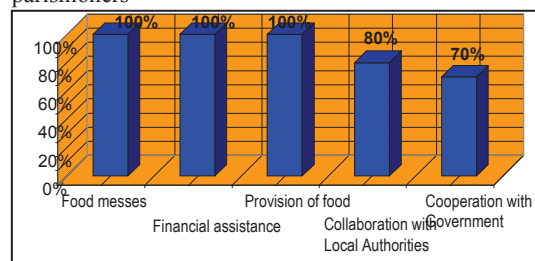


Figure 5: Resources to enhance the social work of the church

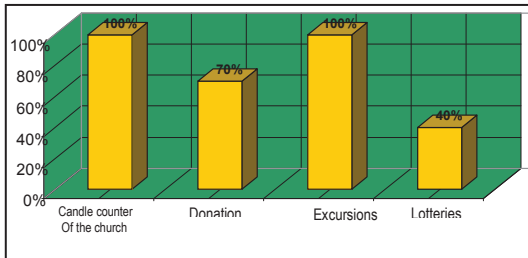


Figure 6: Activities to attract young people in the Church

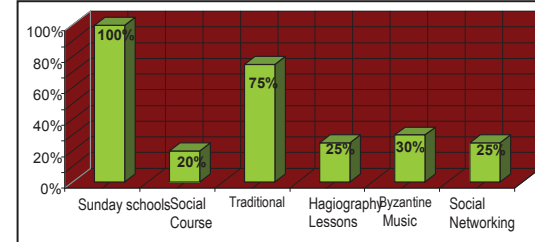


Figure 7: The response of young people to the actions of the parish

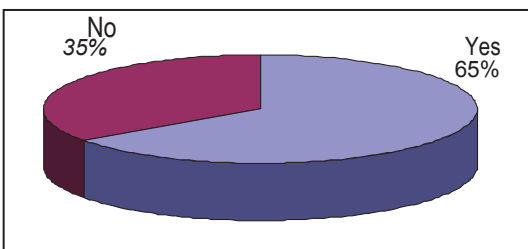


Figure 8: Causes for the non participation of young people in the acts of the church

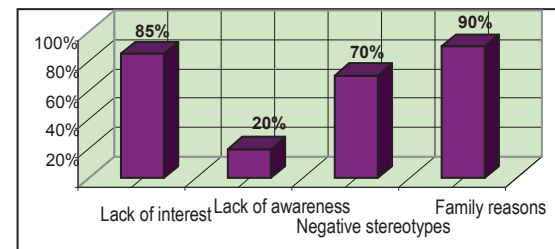
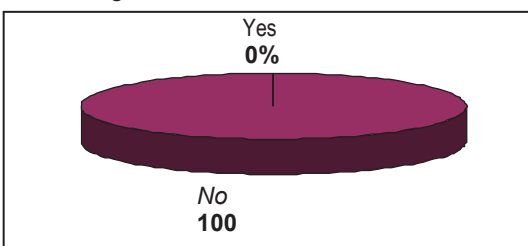


Figure 9: Existence of projects for the approximation of the foreigners in the Parish



### **3. Comments on the results**

The examination of the questionnaires revealed the following findings. Regarding the demographic characteristics it is apparent that the participation of women (75%) is higher than the participation of men (25%) in all the activities of the social work of the church (See Figure 1). There is, therefore, a sensitivity of the female sex as for the social work of the church is regarded. Let it be noted however that priests are excluded, because they are all (100%) male.

Subsequently, the analysis of the profile of respondents shows that the age dispersion of the sample is located in the middle age layers since 27% of respondents are aged between 30-39 years and 25% are between 40-49 years. However, the most significant proportion of respondents (28%) is in the age group of 50 + years. As is apparent from the analysis of the questionnaires, the lowest percentage is occupied by young people since only 13% are aged between 20-29 years. The lower rate of 7% is occupied by the age group of 10-19 years old. Of this outcome it can be concluded that the majority of respondents are adults, showing their support to the social work of the church in the local community (See Figure 2). The large contribution of older age groups (80%) may be due to the fact that they have more experiences of the difficulties they have faced in their lives and thereby they want to enhance their fellow citizens as much as possible. On the contrary, the young people are minimally involved (20%).

By analyzing the results of Question 3 (status) it is clear that the sample is very well informed on the religious issues since they voluntarily participate in a fairly large proportion (42%) and they contribute in the social work of the parishes. In the very next percentage, but also significantly high 26% of respondents answered that they are members of the Charity Fund. Followed by, 24% of the respondents who are the priests of the parishes themselves that help with all their power in the social work of the parish that they serve. The members of the ecclesiastical councils participated with the lower percentage of 8%. Therefore we can observe a great sensitivity of the sample and that is why the vast majority of them offer voluntarily their services in the church. Highly important is also the contribution of the respondents in the charity fund, since this way they save income for the church allowing its pastoral work (See Figure 3).

As we can observe from the analysis of the fourth question, the majority of the respondents answered that the parishes do help the economically weak parishioners with the daily organization of food messes and also with financial assistance through the Charities and on provision of food in a percentage of a 100%. It is true that every day hundreds of citizens of the Municipality of Aigaleo find shelter and a hot plate of food in the environment of the churches. Food is mainly provided to large families or lonely people who have no income to live. 80% of respondents claim that their parishes help the economically vulnerable groups in collaboration with the Local Authorities. In general there is a very good cooperation between the Church and the Local Authorities, since Local authorities are responsible and have the information and data that is necessary for its citizens (e.g. number of large families, number of vulnerable families). Highly good is also the cooperation of the church with the Social Grocery store which is organized by the Local Authorities, since they support each other by sharing food and necessary goods for the residents of the parishes. 70% of respondents also contend that there is good cooperation with government agencies (e.g. District authorities, Welfare authorities, Foundations) (See Figure 4).

Based on the responses of the sample, the resources for the enhancing of the social work of the parishes come in a percentage of a 100% of the candle counter of the church and of the revenue arising of the excursions that are organized by each parish. Subsequently, 70% of the funds for the parishes' offers to the economically weak derived from the donation of the ordinary faithful people, who support this way the work of the Church. Finally, a 40% claim that churches have

some income to support their pastoral work of the organization of lotteries. From the answers it becomes clear that the centre of the social work of the Church is the human, as the resources for the realization of this project derive from the faithful people, and are directed to support other people who hardly survive (See Figure 5).

In addition, there are many activities undertaken by the parishes so to attract young people to church. 100% of the respondents claim that this is done with Sunday schools organized by parishes every Sunday after the Divine Liturgy. Also, they organize courses of traditional dances, involving many young people. While a smaller percentage (30%) considered of highly importance the fact that there are lessons of Byzantine music. In addition, a percentage of (20%) consider that young people are attracted by the hagiography lessons and by the social tutorial carried out by the parishes. Finally, 25% of the respondents consider important the social networking as through this, good effort is done so as to highlight the work of the church and attract many young people to the parishes.

In summary therefore, we emphasize that the church is in need of people who will support and will be at her side. All parishes are highly active in social actions, such as Sunday schools and lessons of traditional dances young people actively participate and work all together united in the church's environment. It is distinguished also a turn of the church in modern technologies especially those used by young people, such as facebook, twitter. In a fairly good percentage (25%) parishes use social media to guide and attract young people closer to the church (See Figure 6).

The majority of the respondents (65%) answered that young people meet up with the actions and activities carried out by their parishes. At the same time a high percentage (35%) of the sample responded that young people do not meet up with the activities of their parishes (See Figure7). However, since church wants all young people to stand on her side, that is why church has developed all these actions discussed and analyzed above.

The respondents who participated in the survey answered by majority that family reasons and lack of interest are the main reasons why young people do not meet up with the actions of the church in a percentage of 90% and 85%. It should be noted that a very large percentage of the respondents (70%) answered that the negative stereotypes and prejudices negatively affect young people, so they do not actively participate in church activities. Finally, 20% of the participants answered that the lack of awareness of youth results to the absence of their participation (See Figure 8).

Finally, the absolute majority of the respondents (100%) replied negatively in the question regarding the implementation of a program to approach foreigners. No parish has in action such a program of foreign assistance in the Metropolis of Nikaia and Aigaleo, as it is shown in Figure 9. It should be emphasized that church should arrange and support this vulnerable social group, which is in a real need of help (See Figure 9).

## **Conclusions**

This survey revealed that citizens and especially young people find it difficult to approach the church because of prejudices that are spread about it. This fact is observed within the churches where the majority of the people are elderly. In addition in various gatherings carried out within church life the same phenomenon is observed.

From the juxtaposition of the above data, and of the fieldwork it is found that there is a sufficient number of churches in the municipality of Aigaleo. Some of these churches which were established as parishes have a very good dispersion in the central areas of the municipality (see



Map 1). This fact allows them to be easily accessible from the entire population of the municipality. In addition, these churches have official statutory role in the social contribution (see Chapter "The Churches of the municipality of Aigaleo and their social contribution") and do that in their daily life.

The research resulted to interesting conclusions, such as the great social work offered by the churches towards young people and adults who need help. Certain factors determine the social work of the churches, as revenue comes mainly from the financial contribution of the faithful in the church's candle counter, revenues of the charity fund, but most of the offerings and donations of the faithful which greatly aids the work of all churches. Furthermore through the organization of lotteries, but also of some events - excursions some revenue are left for the Church in order to fulfil its task.

More specifically, in most parishes daily rations offered to needy citizens of the municipality are prepared and economic relief is provided. Also families with many children who struggle to make ends meet are supported, due to their many daily needs which cannot be met. Finally, in collaboration with the Local Authorities, and proper state institutions, Church coordinates its social work and helps all parishioners.

The research showed that the parishes have developed many activities in order to attract young people closer to them, such as Sunday schools, learning of traditional dances, lessons of Byzantine music courses of religious painting, and communication via social networks (facebook, twitter). Youth participation is quite high, however definitely much more can be done so as for them to come closer to the church and to benefit from its offer and its work, which very often is purely social and not religious. The research showed that the non-participation of young people in the activities of the Church has mainly to do with the lack of interest, as well as with various family reasons.

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