

Mission impossible? An iconostasis in one weekend !

—by *Matushka Jenny Hainsworth, Victoria BC*

I have to admit it. I didn't think it could be done. My husband often gets these—ahem—ambitious ideas. But I could tell by that swirly-eyed visionary look on his face that he wasn't going to be put off this one. We were going to build an iconostasis in one weekend.

Our parish, All Saints of Alaska Orthodox mission, was reestablished in August 2001 after a dormant period of about two decades. My husband, Fr John Hainsworth, was assigned here to Victoria after graduating from St Vladimir's Seminary earlier that year. We arrived in the city with the phone numbers of four people we knew would want to be at the first service, that of the Feast of the Dormition. A year and a half later there are about thirty core members, with many more visitors and inquirers.

We began life as a mission using a tiny but beautiful Anglican chapel in the very quaint, leafy heart of the city. During the week it was used as an archives office for the Diocese of Vancouver Island, so we shared what little space there was with a collection of desks, file cabinets and bookshelves. It became apparent before long that if we wished to remain sane we had better find a bigger space quite quickly. After a couple of dead ends, we were advised to check with a Baptist church, which had just built a new temple and were looking for a suitable group to rent their old one. Upon meeting, we seemed to be a perfect fit, and we moved in on November 1, 2003. The building required very little to “Orthodox-ize” it. Indeed, the 1940s church is ideal for us — bright and clean, easy on the eyes, and with room to grow, but not so much that you feel lost in it. It is only ten minutes' drive from our previous location, and sits on a hill facing the beautiful Elk Lake. It has a very large basement encompassing kitchen, storage and lounge areas (and a ping pong table!) and there is yet another hall with a gym floor and huge windows.

The first order of business was to build stairs where the royal doors were to be, since the existing stage was too high for Father to take in one step (there were already stairs on either side of the stage, where the deacons' doors are). We enlisted a local carpenter to build some three-sided, three step stairs out of fir, a typical

wood from this region. Our first weekend in the new building was served with these glorious new steps but our icons were still on their rickety black collapsible easels. It was a bit of an aesthetic emergency. Of course we needed to build an iconostasis, but we were a bit stuck as to how to go about it. Funds were limited, as always, and we wanted this to look like a proper Orthodox church as soon as possible.

That's when my husband cooked up his scheme for an iconostasis in one weekend. We would plan it all out ahead of time, down to the details of who would do what as soon as they arrived. We would invite some skilled friends from other parishes on the mainland and up island; we would provide food, drink and fellowship; and we would go for it. Have them bring their kids and everything! It would build our community as well as the iconostasis. An Orthodox barn raising!



The framing begins to go up.

I could see there was no point in arguing, so with the theme music from *Witness* ringing in my head, I agreed to have a go at designing the iconostasis—okay, I made them let me—while Fr John and the project coordinator, Al Hargreaves, dealt with the host of other details. Among Al's many tasks was turning my impressionistic drawings into something you could actually build.

We bought the wood and other materials and laid it out in the back of the church on the Thursday. When

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everyone rolled in the next evening, we gathered at the site to do what turned out to be some really excellent standing around with hot beverages and talking. Well, that and eating a slap-up dinner of borscht and bread. At first we were disappointed at how little got done, considering we had to be finished by Saturday night, but we realized later that it had been necessary to get our bearings before leaping in. In retrospect, that time spent may have kept us from making some serious, haste-related mistakes.

On Saturday morning some men of the group got together for a 7:00 breakfast at a local restaurant (the kind with comfy booths and glossy menus showing pictures of the food, I believe), in order to get an early start on the power tools, the project, that is. Others trickled in throughout the day, although personally I waddled, being one week away from having our second child. We worked flat out until lunchtime, when a gorgeous Greek meal was brought in, the gift of some friends of the parish who own a restaurant. We took time to sit down together, catch our breath and catch up.

The entire day was characterized by a kind of wonderful harmony. Each person, even the smallest kid, seemed to find his or her perfect niche and how best to spend the time, given their abilities (or lack—my husband wisely stuck to sanding, and I didn't touch anything all day except pencils and cookies). There were those who sawed, cut and hammered; those who served snacks, cleaned the kitchen and made coffee; those who took photos and video; and those who ran around generally endangering themselves and others and eventually settling down to watch *Jungle Book* in the church basement whilst cleansing the area of anything good to eat.

At about 5:00 pm we cleared a space on the nave floor and served Vespers. My enduring image of that event is that of adults and children, piles of wood and power tools, illuminated alike by candlelight, the fragrance of incense mingling with the earthy smell of sawdust.

Then, after a chili dinner, taking kids home to bed and many more hours of work, it was finally finished. Fr John and Fr Deacon Kevin Miller hung up the oil lamps

at about 1:30 am, and after staring in disbelief at the completed iconostasis and playing with the lighting for about half an hour (oh the temptation of several sets of



Upon completion, the iconostasis is ready for icons!

dimmer switches under such circumstances) we headed home, exhausted and exhilarated.

Later that morning we returned to celebrate the Divine Liturgy. Indicating the new iconostasis, stairs, altar, indeed the new building provided for our use, and the four new catechumens received that very day, Fr John asked in his homily, "Is there any doubt that God wants an Orthodox church in this city?"

Our mission has become a strong and growing community. Although we are always in need of funds and often improvising for liturgical items which we don't have, the sense of excitement about the Orthodox Christian faith taking root in a new city and new place in the world is apparent in everyone. However, it has also been apparent from the beginning that any advances of the faith here have been greatly helped by the support of the larger body of the Orthodox Church in America. Over the last eighteen months we have been given liturgical items, financial support, spiritual guidance, resource material and encouragement from the Department of Evangelism, and much more. We face many challenges and hard work, but we are heartened by the promise of the Lord that He will be with us always, "even until the end of the age," and by the active support of the larger Church, labouring as well with the Lord to build His house—a house in which to worship Him in the beauty of His holiness, awaiting the coming of His Kingdom.