

ST. JAMES ARMENIAN CHURCH

PASTOR'S ANNUAL REPORT

(January 1-December 31, 1989)

By the grace of God we completed another good year together in the life of our parish. I will comment briefly on each of the four major areas of my ministry and conclude with some points to ponder and programs to plan. Areas of my pastorate I will cover here are liturgical, educational, pastoral and administrative (parish and inter-church levels).

I - LITURGICAL

Worship is central in the life of christians and the central worship experience for christians is the Divine Liturgy (Badarak). Badarak has been celebrated in our church every Sunday, except when we all attended the Divine Liturgy by His Holiness, the Catholics of All Armenians at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

We have designated the second Sunday of the month as "Family Worship Sunday", when pupils and teachers of the Sunday School have been requested to attend Badarak along with their parents, in lieu of classes. On those Sundays the topic of the sermon, for the most part, has been explanation of the various parts of the Divine Liturgy. On the first Sundays of the month, in lieu of sermon, I have encouraged the congregation to ask questions of interest, pertinent to our christian faith, practice and cultural legacy which I have tried to answer and explain to the best of my ability.

It has been a source of spiritual satisfaction for me to have representatives of three generations serving at the altar at the same time, ranging in ages from 15 to 87. My thanks to our faithful deacons John Vakassian and Mark Kapikian as well as Garo Kapikian and the two poorvaragirs, Gregory Haroutounian and Gregory Bashian. Of course my gratitude goes to all the members of the choir, our competent and professional choir-director Raffi Sevadjan, as well as the organists Alice Sakalian, Meline Kasparian, Marguerite Sagatelian and Yeretzgin Mary Ashjian. Two other altar servers are in the process of being trained.

During 1989 I have administered the sacrament of baptism on 13 children (8 last year), chrismation on one child and one adult, 6 weddings (5 last year) and 6 funerals (5 last year). I will have to admit that we would have more weddings here if our church as well as auditorium facilities lent themselves more in size and beauty to the special occasions. When requested, I have also conducted other minor services, known as sacramentals, such as houseblessing, grave blessing, betrothal service (nushandook), "gira-gamoodk" service, which is a memorial service held on the first Saturday evening after a funeral, at the home of a deceased person. It seems that some people are unaware, while others indifferent about the spiritual value of these services. Continuing the practice of these services is part of the preservation of our traditional liturgical wealth and life, which should be guarded with care.

The purpose of having an adequate and beautiful church, which we deserve and plan to have, is to be able to have a conducive and appropriate atmosphere and facility to worship together in large numbers in the faith and tradition of our forefathers. However the ultimate goal of church attendance should be spiritual nurture and uplift. One of the effective ways of achieving that is to attend retreats. Two such occasions were made available this year; one, a "day of spiritual renewal" in Bayside and the other a weekend experience at a retreat center. Attendance from our parish was very minimal at both gatherings which proved to be spiritually both enlightening and nourishing. A christian can never be so busy that he/she has no time for spiritual cultivation. The gospel says: "What is it worth if you gain the whole world, but lose your soul".

II - EDUCATIONAL

As pastor, I have continued to utilize the following occasions and programs for educational purposes: Sermons, adult educational programs, significant occasions in the life of families, such as christening, wedding, hospitalization and funeral, the Armenian and Sunday Schools and other programs of lecture or discussion.

The content and presentation of my sermons have fluctuated to include the feasts of saints and celebrations, biblical, ethical, liturgical, theological, cultural and essential topics. I have tried to make the message of the day relevant and meaningful. While this has not always been possible, considering the wide variety of the educational and religious backgrounds of the congregation, nevertheless I have been encouraged by comments and testimonies regarding the effect of the message intended.

The use of both languages in our church, while a blessing to many, it is still a bone of contention for some. The ideal situation would be for everyone in the church to understand classical Armenian on a satisfactory degree and for everyone to understand modern Armenian, so that only our "mother tongue" will be used in this, our Armenian Church. Reality being different from the ideal, it has become necessary to use both languages to impart the religious message and to provide sufficient explanations and materials to make the content of the worship service understandable. We cannot forget that with increased inter-marriages, we have more people who do not understand Armenian, yet wish to be part of our worship and communal experience. Of course we can all care and resolve to learn the spoken Armenian better for better communication and to acquaint ourselves closely with the content and meaning of our worship services in order to derive utmost benefit from them through participation. We have special classes for this purpose. Every member of this church has to decide for themselves what to do about the importance of worship experience, so that time will be made and devoted to making the central corporate experience of our christian faith, which is worship, truly meaningful, uplifting and inspiring.

This year I have concentrated intensely on explaining the meaning and message of the Badarak, utilizing sermon time, adult education class time, explanatory materials inserted in the Badarak books, and even showing slides of the Badarak in the church following the Liturgy. I have continued having Pastor's Educational Programs (P.E.P.), intended to acquaint interested people with Armenian language and literature, Badarak and the Bible. This fall the attendance was bigger than before (aggregate number of 21). My teaching was supplemented by guest instructors, who made the program even more PEPY! This program lasted 10 weeks and ended before the start of holidays and inclement weather.

Another series of P.E.P. is planned for the next two months, with special classes on Armenian communities throughout the world as well as Bible study sessions, in addition to Armenian language and literature.

In addition to the adult classes, lecture presentations were made in our parish on the occasion of "Project Save" exhibit, on the "Genocide" by Lional Galstaun at Westchester Community College, slide presentation on "Eastern Turkey", a talk on "Distinctive Contributions of Armenians to World Civilization", other monthly programs by our Cultural Committee, our Lenten talks by priests from the same families; (father and son, the Rev. Hairabedians, father and son, the Rev. Maksoudians and brothers, the Rev. Nalbandians) and others. My thanks to all who contributed to the educational and cultural enlightenment programs of our parish.

The major cultural function of the year was the Armenian Concert by the Erevan Choral Society of Cambridge, under the direction of the Very Rev. Oshagan Minassian, co-sponsored by our church and the Holy Ascension Church in Trumbull, CT., held on June 3, 1989 in Stamford, CT. The occasion turned out to be not only a victorious celebration of the Armenian music, but also one more way of enjoyable and effective cooperative effort between two neighboring parishes. The cordial relationship existing between these two parishes, each about the same community size, suggests another major function to be co-sponsored in 1990 - perhaps a dinner-dance event.

We have continued to use our monthly parish newsletter HOPE and the bulletins as another vehicle of imparting useful instructions and news. The HOPE is received by more than 600 people.

Before I conclude this section, let me mention that a few youngsters from our parish attended both the St. Vartan Summer Camp Session and St. Nersess Summer Sessions, benefitting from the wholesome atmosphere and teaching in both programs. I have served on the teaching staff of both sessions.

Our children's Armenian and Sunday schools are blessed with three of the basic ingredients of a successful school; teachers, curriculum and physical facilities. Every year we are left wishing parents will bring their children to the Sunday school regularly and promptly. Those who do, know how much their children are benefitting in terms of learning about our religious and cultural heritage.

III - PASTORAL

One of my most challenging and rewarding experiences comes from times and situations when I am called upon to share the pain and concerns of people, who face personal, family, faith, job or other problems. This is the most significant level the church through her servants touches the lives of people when they need divine assurance and comfort the most. My visitations to the sick in hospitals or at home bring me in contact also with the family. I have tried to relate the healing presence of Christ in the lives of patients as well as their families. As Christian believers we do well to ask for the pastor's presence and prayers as soon as we know of someone sick, at home or in a hospital.

In addition to crisis or other personal situations for pastoral counseling, I utilize baptisms and weddings, as well as unhappy occasions to instruct and counsel. Prospective couples meet with me on the average 3 to 5 times prior to the wedding, being instructed in the basics of christian family and sacramental living, the fundamental teachings of the church and their responsibilities in the life of the parish.

IV - ADMINISTRATIVE

I feel fortunate and happy to have a person like Gale Perzigian as the church secretary, for she is conscientious and thorough in her work. She continues to spend three days a week, 10 am to 4 pm doing a fine job "womaning" the office. We feel the need for 5 days' service in the office.

The church is blessed to have a person like Elmas Davidian, who not only gives her time to keep the books straight, but in addition, offers her services for almost all of the major functions of the parish.

I am grateful to both Elmas and Gale for their invaluable services. I am also happy to inform you that the treasurer of our parish council, Martha Gurahian has been meeting with Elmas every Wednesday to assist in keeping the accounts and the books, putting in long hours.

I am also happy to see people enjoy the new parish directory, put together recently, after a long planning by a committee headed by Ann Der Boghosian. We are grateful to Ann and the other members of the committee for such a fine production.

In my capacity as the ex-officio president of all church organizations and committees, I have attended almost all the meetings and offered suggestions and recommendations when necessary. I am glad to see the Women's Guild and the Senior ACYOA carry out their tasks with rejuvenated enthusiasm.

The Parish Council this year has concerned itself with the question of involvement and participation on the part of parishioners and others. The Council even devoted a special session discussing and brainstorming ways to promote interest and enthusiasm among those people who seem to be complacent or indifferent. There seems to be a wide variety of concepts and suggestions among the members about effective ways of implementing their suggestions. We even had a meeting with the pastor and the Parish Council of St. Thomas Church, Tenafly discussing similar issues of mutual concern.

One very concerned and extremely dedicated member of the Parish Council, Edward Essayan just completed the constitutionally allowed three terms of office, lasting 6 consecutive years. Those who are close to the life of this parish know that Ed played a prominent role not only in the negotiations and the acquisition of our present property 11 years ago, but also in the endless and difficult negotiations of the Kenilworth property, which, if it is the will of God, will become our next

church site. His exemplary record of faithful church attendance, his eagerness to safeguard the traditional heritage of the church and his participation in church functions can serve an example and model to many. His parting words to the Parish Council were an earnest appeal for greater commitment to the church. Ed, may God bless you and your family.

I extend the same wish to all members of the Parish Council, its devoted Chairman, Dr. Lionel Galstaun, the Sunday School and Armenian School teachers, the Building Committee and its dedicated Chairman, George Davidian, the Fundraising Committee, the Cultural Committee and its tireless Chairman, George Omartian, the Manager of 2 rug sales, Garo Bashian; the Chairman of the Hye-Steppers, George Guendjoian and last but not least our Gnkahayr; Mr. & Mrs. Suren D. Fesjian for their continued and anticipated support of Soorp Hagop.

Recently I sent out letters to about 75 individuals who have not yet committed themselves to voting membership in our parish. I am happy to inform you that through additional personal contacts the response to date has been 20% which constitutes 10% increase on our paid up membership.

I intend to continue my efforts at this membership drive and increase the number of our voting, supporting and involved members. Your assistance is needed to succeed. Prospective members need to remember that the church needs them in order to grow in number and quality, that we all constitute the golden link from our glorious past to the hopeful future and that we still depend upon the church, our "spiritual mother" for our own spiritual nurture, cultural enlightenment, pastoral guidance, communal solidarity and ethnic awareness. Is it now our duty to stand by her and foster a feeling of family fellowship?

On Diocesan level, I concluded my 8 year service on the Diocesan Council in May and chose not to run, in order to devote more time to my parish activities.

On the sad occasion of the visit of the Catholicos of All Armenians and the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia to New York, made to coordinate the relief efforts of the community, I was assigned the responsibility of being the coordinator of the arrangements and activities during the 9 day historic visit of the Pontiffs, in addition to being the technical advisor in the production of the video cassette, titled "Mission of Mercy", released a few weeks later.

The tragic earthquake in Armenia moved our hearts in profound compassion. Among the countless people who went to the earthquake areas in missions of mercy were people from our immediate community as well. They were Avadis Sakalian, George Leylegian, Harry Keleshian, Grigor Melikian and Armen Guroian. Heart-rending reports were heard here from nurse Maggie Jesraly, Philip Morris and AmeriCares representatives, Carol Der Boghosian and Grigor Melikian. We must continue our care and concern and especially our financial assistance through different channels, as the need is so great that continual tangible help will never be exhaustive.

Other Diocesan activities included occasions, when I have been part of the group of clergymen headed by our Primate, welcoming Jan Cardinal Willebrands (representative of the Pope) and Pope Shnouda, the head of the sister Coptic Church.

As pastor of our parish, besides participating in the annual Diocesan Assembly in May, I took part in the annual clergy conference of the Diocese which I served as Chairman.

I have continued my participation in the Sound Shore Clergy group, consisting of pastors of the churches in the area, that meet monthly for a lunch program. Once a year we host the monthly meeting. This group is another window for me into the workings of sister churches and an occasion to cultivate fellowship with fellow non-Armenian clergymen.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that faithful members and friends who choose a parish as their spiritual home become active participants in many or all aspects of its life and growth to the extent of their interest, time and ability. They understand the church's tradition of both receiving and giving - stewardship giving of their time, talent and treasure. To offer one's service in any way that will contribute to the building up of the kingdom of God and His House of worship in our parish, as well as to foster Christ's loving presence in our midst, is a rewarding spiritual experience all members should participate in.

As we get ready in 1990 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of our church here in Purchase, may the "spiritual church" become rooted within us more deeply, as we continue our determination to build the "physical church", not for the sake of building, but attending; not for the glory of the past, but with the hope of the future; not for hollow ethnic pride, but for full spiritual nurture; not necessarily and only for our children, but definitely and collectively for ourselves now. May it become all of these plus an abundant source of spiritual knowledge and inspiration, love and comfort, and an anchor of hope and strength.

I consider it a privilege to serve the Lord and am glad to have all of you as my beloved parishioners and friends. Serving this community is among the greatest joys of my life. I pray God will bless the "Soorp Hagop Family" with good health, happiness and vision, and may the Holy Spirit inspire us all to become more active participants in making this parish more dynamic and vibrant.

With prayers,
Rev. Fr. Karekin Kasparian
Pastor