

## PASTOR'S ANNUAL REPORT - 1996

By the grace of God, we completed another year of active parish life. 1996 will remain in the annals of our parish as a special year because it commenced with the gracious visit of His Holiness, Karekin I, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, to bless our new church cornerstones, received from Armenia, and it ended with the exciting news that we may be privileged to have our new church consecrated by His Holiness, when he visits our Diocese for its centennial celebration in May 1998. This will give our church the unique privilege of having the "Amenayn Hayots" Catholicos not only bless the cornerstones, but also consecrate our new church. This prospect will surely be an added stimulus to join and multiply our efforts and support in order to make certain that the new church is ready for consecration when Vehapar Hayrabad is here in about 15 months.

Another reason for a joyous celebration as we were ending the year 1996 and welcoming the new year at the Greek Church hall, was the princely donation of one million dollars (\$1,000,000) made by Hayik and Vartouhi Tutak to expedite the construction project of our new church complex in White Plains. The Parish Council and the entire St. James parish are truly indebted to the Tutak family for their timely and generous gift. May God continue to grant them and their loved ones good health, happiness and long life.

This year is special also because we are ready to go into the next phase of the progress of our parish. In exactly two months, we vacate the present premises after seventeen years of a productive period of growth here, having almost doubled our membership, our budget and our efforts. As announced recently, as of the third week of April (April 20) right after "Green Sunday" we begin holding our church services in the St. Hagop Chapel of St. Nersess Seminary in New Rochelle. Sunday School classes will also be held there at 150 Stratton Road, New York. Our church administrative offices, organizations' gatherings and the Armenian School classes will all be held at our new parish house (also known as the "White House!") on our church property at 1131 North Street, White Plains, NY. These arrangements are for the interim period until the completion of our construction project.

We plan to continue our activities as vigorously as before depending on available accommodations. We expect parishioners and friends to continue their enthusiasm and participation in all aspects of the parish life with an understanding spirit of "family members" bearing temporary inconveniences patiently and cheerfully.

At the last Annual Parish Assembly, held on March 3, 1996, digressing from my practice of the previous years of reporting on my pastoral activities in various categories (spiritual/liturgical, educational/cultural, administrative/organizational and counseling service), I gave a bird's-eye view of the phenomenal and significant activities and progress we have had for the last 15 years since we moved to Purchase. This year, as we are ready to move out of Purchase, I wish to make a review of our parish life, its membership and organizations, their involvement in the parish life, accomplishments, potentials and challenges. In a sense, this is a state of the parish address at the threshold of a concluding phase in Purchase and the prospect of a new period of anticipated vigorous activities in our new quarters in White Plains. Essentially, I wish to address some basic needs and concerns related to the progress and growth of this unique parish.

Like other parishes of our diocese, St. James is composed of individuals and families with various geographic backgrounds; Near East, Turkey, Iran, Europe and of course American born. Despite the diversity of origins, temperament, training, values and life styles, we have a mutually enriching well balanced relationship with each other, focused on the main goal of the parish, which is to make everyone equally welcome and feel special, and offer the different kinds of church ministries to all, with no exception or distinction. I must admit, however, that some effort has been needed to orientate new comers to the different ways of participating in the life of the parish, particularly in terms of membership and stewardship obligations, two issues I will focus on in a few minutes. Happily, our non-Armenian or Armenianized "hars's" and "pesa's" easily identify themselves with our church participating in group activities, such as choir, Sunday School, Women's Guild and even serve on the Parish Council, feeling "at home" with a warm welcome.

Our parish is unique because it has so many talented individuals and dedicated families. There are on-going efforts to identify more and more such individuals whose talents and energies will contribute greatly to the further growth of the parish and community life.

I appeal to all our voting members that we observe our obligation to pay our annual membership dues by December 31. Not doing so will fluctuate the number of voting members from year to year and will make it difficult to maintain a record of continual growth in our membership. Besides, it will give a wrong message. By the end of December, a few weeks ago, there were 44 voting members of the church who had not yet fulfilled their obligation in order to qualify to participate in this Annual Assembly. And this, after two reminders from the officé. There are some who think that their anticipated absence from the Annual Assembly exempts them from paying their dues. Such people according to the Diocesan By-Laws, are expected to pay their back dues to resume the status of bona fide membership. My recommendation is to pay the membership dues at the beginning of the year and then tend to our subsequent financial obligations for the rest of the year.

A church member not only receives certain intangible benefits by being active and participating in the life of the parish, but also offers his talent and time to help in various programs and projects that contribute to the financial well-being of the church. In addition to the time for worship, if each member were to offer an average of 2 hours a week in service to the church, there will be over 100 hours a year per person, multiplied by 200 members, the parish will receive about 20,000 hours of assistance and service. You must admit that's a lot of hours in a year. You also know that not everyone is able or willing to give average about 100 hours of service a year. On the other hand, we also are fortunate to have members who gladly offer their talents and time in countless hours. Those with the unwilling attitude of "Let George do it", should be willing to compensate by increased financial contribution, because after all, those who work hard and always do so to alleviate the church's financial burden, in addition to the fun and satisfaction they experience in the process. Sometimes those who do the share of others and put in extra time to help with revenue producing functions, get so tired of seeing other members standing in the wings and not "lifting a finger" that they have little time left for worship and religious education programs.

It is also to be pointed out that a faithful member of the church maintains a continuous and consistent attendance and participation. That is how the parish grows in numbers and in strength. That is when we derive full spiritual benefits from the House of God, in terms of comfort, inspiration, enlightenment, uplift and strength. The church, after all, as someone has suggested, is not to be used like a pharmacy, to be visited only when one needs a cure or healing, but rather like a temple and a school to satisfy our needs for worship and purification, spiritual knowledge and progress.

A swift look at our church groups present the following picture: For detailed description of their activities, you have their respective annual reports attached.

The Choir-when in full attendance, sounds absolutely beautiful. But our Choirmaster is constantly complaining that we need more singers, both female and especially male, so that the harmonious singing will be enhanced. We appeal to you that more of you come forth and join in the bliss of singing praises to our Lord and fully participate in the worship experience of the church. Our choir has committed itself to host the Annual Assembly of the Association of Armenian Church Choirs of America in our new church in the year 2000 AD. Long before then we need to double our choir membership.

I am happy to inform you a group of 12 youngsters from our Armenian and Sunday Schools have now become our Junior Choir after several practices with me last summer to learn the songs of the Badarak.

In addition, our on-going deacons' training program will culminate in receiving the ordination as sub-deacons by our Primate on Saturday, March 22, 1997 on the eve of Palm Sunday. They are: Edouard Zakharian, James Najarian and Stephen Mekenian, who serve at the altar regularly.

The Armenian School-which has registered a phenomenal increase in attendance this year, enjoyed observing its 25th anniversary and the privilege of receiving a message of appreciation and blessing from His Holiness, Catholicos Karekin I. The dedicated teachers, headed by their capable principal, spare no effort to give their best to the pupils.

The Sunday School-with its devoted teachers, offers a solid Christian education program, which needs and deserves the consistent cooperation of all parents to render itself effective. The monthly "Family Badarak", a unique phenomenon in our parish, is a most effective medium of enhancing the children's understanding of the basic teachings of the church.

The cooperation of parents is absolutely essential in order for the teachers to have the encouragement and the satisfaction of their worthwhile service. The religious and cultural education of our children should be at the top of our interests and concern.

We are sorry that after about two years as Superintendent, Maralle Cachoian Schanz just resigned for personal reasons. Her competent service and faithful dedication will be sorely missed if her family relocates.

The Women's Guild-in its second year since its revitalization, indeed holds the potential place of being "the backbone of the church", with a group of enthusiastic members who are destined and determined to do bigger things once we move. I am quite pleased about the sensitivity of the members to keep a happy balance among the various types of activities.

The Hye Steppers-are a unique group of people who have succeeded in learning and promoting Armenian culture through authentic ethnic dances and at the same time maintained a warm fellowship of good comraderie among their members. They always welcome and invite new members to join them. I am not aware of the existence of a group quite similar to our Hye Steppers in other parishes.

The ACYOA Seniors-group in our parish seem to fluctuate in their interest and activities partly because of the age and priority gaps, in addition to their commitment to the pursuit of studies and jobs. There is a neucleus of about a dozen young adults who did such a great job with the Palm Sunday ACYOA Day celebration last year. The potential exists for this group to be revived.

As for ACYOA Juniors-we are in the process of organizing the leadership with parents to take over the sponsorship of this small group of pre-teens and teens. We are attempting to get some of the seniors motivated to take on the Juniors.

Adult Education-has been disseminated through the various cultural programs of the church organizations, the language and Bible study sessions, the Culture Committee's activities and programs offered on special occasions in the church calendar. Our parish newsletter HOPE has continued to serve as an education medium, albeit in a small way. We had to reduce the number of issues in order to cut down the cost. I am compelled to single out the Bible and language program and state that the attendance is not as desired, despite the fact that much care and planning bring out programs characterized by high quality. We are aware that the church is competing with other involvements people have, nevertheless, we know "where there is a will, there is a way"!

Some of our children have benefitted from summer educational programs offered by St. Nersess Seminary, the youth and Christian Education Departments as well as the Armenian Language Lab, all outreach arms of the Diocese.

Our Culture Committee-continued its service to the parish through the annual holiday sale of books and art objects with George Omartian and Nevart Kuntashian in charge. When our facilities get expanded, this committee can create a renewed enthusiasm in various aspects of Armenian culture and civilization.

Our Building Project-while being guided with competence has suffered a few setbacks and delays within the last year, primarily because of widespread concern and decision for building material, architectural plans and guidance, as well as the perennial problem of finance. The mild winter has allowed more site work than normally possible and it is expected that the foundation will be laid soon and the project will proceed. In order to make the progress incessant, a renewed fundraising program will get under way in the near future. By God's will and grace, we hope to complete the project by May 1998, at least ready for consecration.

Now I'd like to focus on a program that should become the financial lifeline of the parish, namely the Stewardship Pledge Program. Years ago when we started this program, we had only a handful of participants. The idea and the importance of stewardship soon became familiar to many more and now we have 118 families who pledge annually for the support of the church's mission and ministries. However, the total income from the stewardship pledges is not closing the gap in our budget.

The idea of stewardship, while it has the spiritual connotation of joyfully giving a fair share of our time and talent to God through the church, its tangible implication must reflect our rich faith and caring commitment. The Stewardship Committee recently sent out an appeal for the current year asking parishioners and friends to pledge according to their means and conscience. It is a known fact in many denominations that the stewardship pledges should cover at least one half of the annual budget. So far, ours has barely reached one third. The more generously we all give, the less we will have to toil with money making functions, which sometimes don't leave time or energy to participate in the more important programs and ventures of the church - religion and culture - which are the most important experiences of the church.

There is an urgent need for all of us to take part in the care and concern for a balanced budget you have given to the Parish Council to worry about. It has been suggested by some, that like some other parishes that each family give about 2% of their annual income.

There are many fortunate families in our parish who are richly blessed by God and can afford to give a minimum \$1,000 annually to the stewardship program to balance the budget. In the near future, a special appeal will be made to such families. We hope and pray we will all open our hearts and purses generously. Our income from functions is anticipated to be somewhat decreased because of the restraint of space during this interim period. It is that much more urgent that we increase our giving considerably. Let this be our challenge and commitment this year, so that we will be able to provide all the ministries and services to all of our people. This is what our parents have taught us by action - to give our best to God through the church in the spirit of stewardship. We are thankful to all who have regularly pledged and paid. Please, please let us rise to the occasion of showing our sincere concern for our church family by meeting our budget. God loves and blesses cheerful givers by granting them blessings thousand fold.

To make this report complete, my last in this building, it is my pleasure to express my thanks and ask God's blessings upon all who have helped to make this a fruitful and productive year in their respective involvements. Gale Perzigian, our church Secretary; Elmas Davidian, our Bookkeeper; Anahid Chookhachian, Armenian School Principal, Maralle Cachoian Schanz, Superintendent of the Sunday School; Raffi Sevadjan, our Choir Director; Marguerite Sagatelian and Meline Kasparian, our Organists; Deacon Mark Kapikian and Altar Servers Edouard Zakharian, James Najarian, Stephen Mekenian, Arsham Antreasyan, Garo Kapikian and Armen Salbashian; Elizabeth Derderian, Chairperson of the Women's Guild; George Guendjoian, Chairperson of the Hye Steppers; Belinda Aksu, Chairperson of ACYOA; Aram Dodakian, Chairperson of the Choir; Richard Papalian, the new Building Project Coordinator; Ara Momjian, the Fundraising Committee Chairperson; Ara Ishkanian, Parish Council Chairperson; Paul Keyishian, Coordinator of the Rug Sale and with Irene Shadoian, Co-chairpersons of the Stewardship Committee; Mike Guroian, Picnic Chairperson, Lisa Kouzoujian, Chairperson of the New Year's Eve Celebration; Louise Yacobian Garofalo, Ara Ishkanian and Mike Pisani, Co-chairpersons of the 50/50 raffle; Alyce Vakassian, Chairperson of the Tag Sale; Nevart Kuntashian and George Omartian, Co-chairpersons of the Culture Committee Book Sale; Martha Gurahian, Chairperson of the Interior Design Committee of the new church complex and all who have served our church in various capacities and contributed to its present well-being and future growth.

Special thanks and appreciation to Mr. Suren D. Fesjian, gnkahayr of St. Hagop Parish for his continued support and guidance.

I conclude thanking and praising our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for granting me and my spiritual family of St. James another year of success and growth. I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to inspire us all to become more active participants in making our parish even more dynamic and vibrant for the glory of God, the strengthening of our spiritual and cultural life and for the challenge of setting a good example role model for our children to follow.

*Fr. Karekin Kasparian*  
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