

ANNUAL PARISH ASSEMBLY
1997
ST. JAMES ARMENIAN CHURCH
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

The Annual Parish Assembly is a special time to reflect on the accomplishments as well as the weaknesses of our ministry, together as a family, and in patience, and to strive for the betterment of our community both financially and spiritually.

Here are the main activities that our community was enriched in 1996:

The year 1996 was a year of youth in the Armenian Church of America. Aram Topjian was elected in the ACYOA Central Council. There was a need of a young adults group in Richmond. Therefore, I organized a small group of young adults of St. James and we had various activities. The participation of young adults in the Armenian Church has always been an important issue. Unfortunately, we are losing them easily. They are being attracted to other denominations (because they have something to offer) or they are becoming completely inactive. In order to solve this crisis it will take us to discuss at least an hour. But as a community I urge you to take this issue seriously. I heard their concern and anxieties towards the Armenian Church. Somehow we need to teach and especially encourage them that our community is their home and it is not an odd environment. Armenian language should not be a barrier for them. We must not degrade them for not speaking in Armenian but encourage them to attend Church and assist them patiently to understand our rich church traditions and raise their pride of identity.

As a community, we need to reflect on our future as a Church in Richmond and ask a simple question: What would happen to us after 20 years? The answer in my mind is still vague. But I am certain that we must do something. There is something which is making them inactive and we should solve it immediately. The president of the United States stated many times in his speech to walk together as one nation and cross the bridge of the 21 century. As an Armenian community are we ready to cross this bridge together? Therefore, I decided to concentrate this year more on the participation of the young adults. I have already been asked by some volunteers to organize a large group of young adults. Hopefully, we will accomplish this dream this year.

This year, we continued our Bible study classes with the assistance of Ginna Dalton. Unfortunately, there was a lack of attendance. Therefore, Ginna and myself decided to cancel the classes with the consent of the participants.

In October 96, our church secretary Ginna resigned from her position due to her weak health condition. She was very instrumental in organizing the secretary office and publishing our Sevan Newsletter. Publically, I would like to thank her for

a fine job she fulfilled in our Church.

I would like to thank our choir members. They learned many new songs and hymns. I'd like to thank our altar servers as well. In September 96 Diran Arslanian and Gagig Suleymanian were elevated to the rank of stole-bearer. This year our altar servers recieved Yekmalian Award for their excellent participation on the table of the Lord, by the Armenian Church Choir Association. I thank Sussana Arnold for coming deligently every Fridays and Sundays to play the organ. We are also happy that David Livingstone was elected on the Board of the Armenian Church Choir Association.

The Armenian School is one of the successful organization. We have 25 students. In May 96 they sponsored Mother Day celebration. I extend my appreciation to Dr. and Mrs. Diran Bezirjian and Mrs. Ann Markarian for supporting the Armenian School financially and morally. I'd like to thank all the teachers who are educating our children to teach them Armenian. In August, Hovig Suleymanian went to New York to participate in a summer conference organized by the Diocesan Armenian Lab and Resource Center. Hovig will be teaching Armenian language in 97. There are many other children who should be encouraged to attend Armenian School by the parents and grandparents.

In 96 I started Armenian Language Class for Adults. I have young professionals in my class who are eager to learn and speak Armenian.

We continued the gatherings of our Seniors Group until July. My sincere appreciation to Rose Soghoian and Victoria Jamgochian, for leading and organzing the group successfully. Unfortunately, Rose is unable to continue leading the group anymore due to her mother's weak health condition as well as the full responsibilty for taking care of Donna's baby. But she is willing to assist anyone who would take the responsibility in organizing 97 activities. I must also recognize that Rose and Mrs. Shnorig are the only people who are in the Church before 10:30 a.m. every Sunday.

My sincere gratitude is extended to the members of the Parish Council. Working with them is a pleasure. We have understanding and wise members in the Council. The Parish Council always supports my ideas and they are a great asset in my ministry.

Thanks to all Women's Guild members. In 96 Nominating Committee was unable to find nomintees to run for the executive board of the Women's Guild. Therefore, Lilly Thomas led the group until the new election which took place in Arpil after two ettempts. Malaine Kerneklian was elected as a Chairperson, unfortunately family responsibilities did not allow her to continue as a Women's Guild Chairperson. On February 2, 1997 a new members were elected. This group already planned 97 activities. The chairperson is Mrs. Elizabeth Tootelian. We are also happy that Lilly Bouroujian Thomas was elected on the Women's Guild Central Council.

Sona Pomfret was very instrumental in directing the Sunday School. I am happy to assign Sona as the superintendent of our Sunday School for one year. We are fortunate to have young adults teaching the Sunday School. Melaine Kerneklian was able to bring together few young adults to teach the classes. In August 96 Ann Norris went to New York to participate in the Mardigian Institute. Thanks for all the teachers. Thanks to Mrs. Isabelle Vranian for supporting our Sunday School fianancially.

With the assistance of Bedros Bandazian, a committee was formed for the commemoration of the Armenian Martyrs Day. On April 24, we had an ecumenical service. Thanks to Ginna Dalton for organizing this event. This year we will do an ecumenical service again. On Sunday, April 28, we had luncheon in memory of 1.1.5 million Armenians. Our Attorney General was the honorary chairman. Thanks to the committee chair Bedros Bandazian and for all those who assisted in organizing a successful event.

In September 96, our Primate visited our community to celebrate the 40th anniversary of our Church. On this ocssion, I organized a group of young adults. They had lunch with Surpazan. They organized an open panel discussion with our Primate. On Sunday, our primate consecrated the new altar and the picture of St. Gregory and presided the 40th anniverary luncheon. There were guest clergy from different denominations.

In 96 St. James Armenian Church joined Virginia Council of Churches. Some of the Cabinet members came to our Church to meet with the Parish Council members. St. James Armenian Church officially was recognized in November during the Annual Cabinet meeting. Ann Norris is our lay representative. Ginna Dalton was elected as the Preseident of the Virginia Council of Churches.

By the order of our Primate, I have visited North Carolina and performed Badarak in Durham and Charlotte. Thanks to the choir members and the altar servers for coming with me. The Armenian community in Charlotte became a mission parish. I will not be visiting Charlotte anymore.

In July 96, I escorted 22 College students for Armenia. This was a mission program organized by the Diocese.

In December 96, I successfully completed my studies at the Union Theological Seminary. This year I will be concentrating on writing my dissertation. I am planning to graduate and get my doctrate in May 98.

Special thanks to all those who are supporting St. James. Our Church needs your financial support. There are only few people who always give. Thank God we do not have poor people in our midst. We are all capable of giving and offering. I feel embarassed when my professor tells about his community. He tells me proudly

that 10 percent of his salary he gives to his Church. St. Gregory of Datev, our last saints in the 14th century, says: "First, we should offer a portion of everything we own to God. As a human being has a soul, a body, and belongings, our souls should offer God prayer, our bodies should kneel before Him, and a portion of our wealth, or belongings, should be offered to Him." If our people give their share of 10 percent to our Church, then we will be able to accomplish more and more. Our Church lives only through your generous donations.

The sense of responsibility and belonging in the Armenian Church should be taken seriously. We must cherish our community and hope for the bright future. The future belongs to your children. This is God's House and I am His unworthy servant. It is my task to prevent our community from various endangers and through your assistance to enrich our community. We must work together as a team having the love of God in our hearts. If we accomplish this simple task then we will be the most powerful parish in the Armenian Church.

May God bless our community and grant us all wisdom so we may continue to do God's work. May His Spirit help us to embrace all the inactive members of St. James. May His Divine presence always enables me to continue His mission.

Pastor
J. Nareg Baberian