

PASTOR'S POSITION PAPER ON ST. JOHN'S ARMENIAN CHURCH

The working relationship between the Pastor of St. John's Armenian Church and a few members of the Parish Council has been weakened by lack of confidence and appropriate communication between the several parties that it has become exaggerated into a personal vendetta. Those members of the Parish Council who have differences with the Pastor have inflated in a negative way the normal day-to-day problems that are normally involved in administering a parish the size and complexity of St. John's. It is my hope that by explaining my own position and demonstrating that these exaggerations on the part of a few members of the Parish Council do not reflect the views of the great majority of the members of the parish, nor of our church leaders, I can restore the confidence of the Primate and Diocesan Council in the essential good health of our parish.

The most frequently heard complaint is that the visitation program of the parish has suffered through neglect. This complaint must be seen in the proper context of parish work. First and foremost, in a parish the size of St. John's, which has a membership of over 1,000 families and several times that number who communicate and associate themselves in church-community life, it is almost a physical impossibility to visit these people

on a regular basis unless it were done over a several year cycle. Furthermore, because of the great distances involved, St. John's not being the parish of a particular segment of the city but rather of a whole great metropolitan area, the problem of time consumption in travel must always be considered.

It is also something of a problem to visit all those people who are in sickness and need, not because of unwillingness on the part of the Pastors to visit the sick, but only because of a lack of knowledge of who is ill and where. No one who has phoned the church to report a friend or relative ill has failed to see that friend or relative visited. It is only when we are unaware of the sickness or need of a member of a parish that the person is sometimes not visited. It is quite impossible to keep track of the thousands of people associated with our church without these people themselves making an effort to communicate with the church office. The major complaint, which is grossly unfair, is "my family is so close to the church that the Pastor should have known." Without communication, it is sometimes impossible to know.

My few critics forget the great Parish Visitation program of 1968 in which over 90 trained "parish visitors" and I contacted and visited over 1,100 families in our community. The follow-up program, developed by the chairman of the visitation, was submitted to the Parish Council for administration. The follow-up

was never carried out.

The Parish Council has often alluded to my work with the Torch Bearer as my excuse for not making parish visits. There is no question that the Torch Bearer was one of my heavy responsibilities, and I must admit that I am very proud of its high quality and content. On the other hand, certainly my heavy pastoral duties encompass more than the publication of that journal. There are baptisms, confirmations, engagements, weddings, funerals, visitation of invalids and the sick, counseling, preparation and execution of church services, publication of the church bulletin, visiting and receiving those who have personal problems, preparing certificates of character, helping people with immigration problems, helping those in need to contact civic agencies, explain our church and its doctrine to our own people and visitors, church auxiliary and other meetings, and many other things of this type which preclude the either casual or systematic visitation of homes without a specific reason or concern. Following are some statistics illustrating this work:

Statistics for 1970

Christenings, including adults	- 65
Engagements	- 8
Weddings	- 28
Funerals	- <u>75</u>

Total Services: 176

Visitations and counseling were made upon request and need, including emergency cases, worship, ceremonies and sermon every Sunday and on special occasions according to the liturgical season such as Lenten Period, Holy Week, Five Great Tabernacles, memorial services at cemeteries, were all planned, coordinated and executed by the Pastor.

One of the problems with some of these few members of the Parish Council is that they are not intimately familiar with the church or its real work. They take a relatively superficial view of parish affairs, being concerned mostly with finances, and from lack of experience do not realize or recognize the myriads of spiritual and administrative affairs with which a Pastor must concern himself.

On occasion I have heard criticism that the Torch Bearer and the church bulletin have been instruments of the Pastor against certain persons in the parish. This accusation is quite ludicrous on the face of it and needs no reply. All one has to do is to read the Torch Bearer and bulletins over the past several years to realize that such a comment is totally without foundation.

In particular I have heard criticism of my address to our last Parish Assembly. I attach a copy of these comments for your perusal. I think you will agree with me that they are in perfect order and speak to very central needs of our church

in modern society, both spiritually and organizationally.

Much criticism has also been leveled at me because of my activities in the community, in the Detroit Council of Churches, with other Council of Churches, with church and civic leaders. The people who level these criticisms do not remember when a few years ago the members of our church were abused in newspaper and public accounts as being "pro-Communist," "Communist controlled," or generally a church which had no place in the main stream of religion in America. Over the years we have fought hard to establish ourselves in the community, to become respected, to become understood, and to become loved and appreciated. Now that we have reached these goals over many years of hard work, I am not myself willing to take the responsibility to have these labors be in vain. Our prestige has risen to such a point that it is others today who invite us to participate. We frequently receive requests from civic leaders, church leaders, and business leaders to attend conferences or meetings, to give invocations and benedictions, lectures, and the like.

My request for a full-time executive secretary has been much misunderstood by certain members of the Parish Council. I have never requested a "personal" secretary, but only an administrative secretary to overlook many of the complexities of our office operation. The present office workers give much

of their time to the administration of the building, to bookkeeping practices, and to maintaining the pledge lists. If one realizes that these secretaries are not assigned entirely to church activities, but rather to the maintenance of our large church and cultural center complex, it could be better understood that there is very little time left for contribution directly to church administrative activities. Furthermore, my request is not for an office worker, but rather for an executive secretary who can take responsibilities upon herself to organize and maintain purely church affairs in order to free the Pastors for more direct contact with the public. A part-time secretary, who is attached to the church, works directly for the Church School and her time does not accrue to any other aspect of church work.

When because of the many responsibilities and obligations, and in the face of the fact that a secretary had been promised me for church use and that promise later rescinded, I found it impossible to continue to give direct leadership in the publication of the Torch Bearer. The editorial board at the time decided that without my leadership they could not continue to do the work that was expected of them and they notified the Parish Council that they would have to resign. Now that the

Parish Council has found a new editorial board, I will be glad to give direction, within my limits of time, to the new editor.

Because of the inability of the present office staff to accomplish those things which must be accomplished in order to maintain the parish, there has on occasion been a sense of frustration developed within the Pastor and within the members of the office staff. This type of discomfort would be alleviated were the office properly staffed with the appropriate type of managers. As a matter of fact, it would be certainly suitable to have a business manager to manage our several-million-dollar complex with a budget of over \$160,000 to see that everything is done in good working order.

Over the past couple of years, since certain members of the Parish Council have organized a vendetta against the Pastor, there is no question that many people feel frustrated after various types of meetings. Many people come to me and say how unhappy they are to see certain individuals carrying on in an irresponsible, self-seeking way. From my vantage point I see that the great majority of participants at meetings are aware of the dilatory tactics of these individuals, and they express great sympathy for our situation and my burden.

Over two years ago I drew up an organizational plan for the improvement of the parish and presented it at a Parish

Assembly. These outlines are reflected in my address to the last Parish Assembly. Were my recommendations appropriately considered and had they been put into effect, there would be no criticisms leveled at me today for not giving leadership. Apparently what these few people expect is for leadership to be given without any followers to follow.

These critics who have lately raised their voice about the deterioration of the situation in our parish do not recognize that this deterioration is perfectly correlated with their membership on the Parish Council, not with my service in the parish:

February, 1958 -- ordained for Detroit parish (Fr.

Arnak Kasparian at that time Pastor until Fall, 1961)

Ordination to 1961 -- Associate Pastor here and visiting

Pastor Cleveland, Waukegan, East St.

Louis, and summer of 1959 in Watertown.

1961 -- parish moved to new location.

1961 - 1965 -- role of pastor-in-charge.

1965 - 1969 -- Fr. Yeghishe Gizirian came in to help administer the large parish.

1969 - present -- Fr. Paren Avedikian came and assumed the primary responsibilities of Church School and youth group.

One can see by the dates aforementioned that it was during my presence in the parish and, in particular during my personal administration, that the parish grew to the size, extent, and quality that these people claim from which it has begun to fall. It stands to reason that if it was during my term that the parish was built to great heights, and it is during their term that it has begun to deteriorate, that the fault lies not with me but with them. They sometimes allude to the Church School as a case in point.

St. John's Armenian Church School was built up over the years by Deacon Levon Zenian who contributed almost full time to his difficult assignment. After his resignation because of advanced years, the Church School began to flounder under temporary leadership. I, along with the then chairman of the Parish Council, Martin Apkarian, called upon Prof. Dennis Papazian to restore the situation. After rebuilding the Church School (up to 700 students and 75 staff members), he was forced to resign because he could not afford the great time commitment. Fr. Yeghishe Gizirian then took up administration of the Church School. Then the Parish Council brought in Deacon (now Father) Nersess Jebejian as superintendent. Not being satisfied with his work, the Parish Council forced his resignation. After his departure from the parish, Deacon Nersess was replaced by Fr. Paren Avedikian. Thus, it can readily be seen that since

the resignation of Dr. Papazian, the Church School has not been my direct responsibility and I cannot take the credit or the blame for either its success or failure.

I have tried and succeeded to avoid allowing these few people to make their personal vendetta a parish issue. In trying to do this I have not brought my case to the people, nor talked about the situation to excess, nor organized my friends to present their point of view to the Diocese and administration. It seemed better for me to suffer in silence and to avoid parish dissention. The fact that the friends of the church are quiet has made these few antagonistic voices sound very loud. It is important for the Diocese and Council to realize that these men, who for the most part have not been intimately associated with the church for any number of years at all, and some of whom who only joined the church shortly before they were elected to the Parish Council, do not speak for the vast majority of the members of our parish. The fact that it is only these few who show themselves again and again indicates that they and only they are the causes of dissension.

I feel a personal obligation to St. John's Armenian Church, having helped it grow and develop over the years, and I would feel it a dereliction of my duty to leave the parish in the hands

