

ST. JOHN'S ARMENIAN CHURCH OF GREATER DETROIT

The history of St. John's Armenian Church of Greater Detroit spans more than 75 years and reflects the inspiring growth of a small, weak flock into a great and thriving community. While there were Armenians in Detroit before the turn of the century, it was not until 1909 that an Armenian community as such could be recognized. The Detroit Armenian community, which numbered some 3,000 in 1915, has since grown to become one of the larger Armenian communities in the United States, with an estimated 30,000 members.

For many years the community could worship in their own tradition only periodically, at such times as an Armenian clergyman might visit Detroit and offer the Divine Liturgy in a church building borrowed for the occasion. Finally, in 1913, the Very Rev. Sahag Vartabed Nazaretian became the first permanent pastor of the local Armenian community. Still the Armenians had no church building, and it was necessary to accept the hospitality of St. John's Episcopal Church, whose pastor offered their sanctuary for use by the Armenians on Sunday afternoons.

Sahag Vartabed Nazaretian's tenure as Detroit's first pastor was ended by his death in 1922. Subsequently, the community was served well by the Rev. Bedros Mampreian (intermittently from 1922-1930), the Rev. Khachig Kroozian (1922-24), the Very Rev. Vahram Vartabed Nazaretian (1924-1928), and the Rev. Atig Dsotsigian (1930-1934), through whom the parish joined the Detroit Council of Churches.

In 1928 the first Church Building Committee was formed and, after many months of difficult work, it succeeded in purchasing a site on Oakman Boulevard near 14th Street in Detroit. The time for a building project could hardly have been less opportune as the Great Depression was sweeping the country. Yet by considerable sacrifices on the part of the community, a new church building was completed in 1931, and it was consecrated by the soon-to-be-martyred Primate of our Diocese, His Grace Archbishop Leon Tourian. By 1935, due to the strenuous efforts of the leaders of the congregation, the mortgage on the church building was paid in full amid great rejoicing.

Now the congregation conceived of a new building project. There was the realized need for a cultural center with facilities for a sorely needed church school and various community activities. Those who use the Cultural Building include the Parish Council, the Women's Guild, the Komitas Choir (our church choir), the Church School, (Sunday School), The Armenian Church Youth Organization of America (ACYOA), Detroit Junior and Senior Chapters, the Men's Society, the Armenian Heritage & Culture Lyceum. Many Armenian-American groups also use the facilities.

From the very beginning it was hoped that the new site would provide space for several community buildings. The first to be built was the Armenian-American Veterans Building, a memorial to those members of the Detroit community who gave their lives for their country in World War II and the Korean War. This building contains meetings room, game rooms and a gymnasium. The second building, following the construction of the new church, was the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) Alex & Marie Manoogian School, which is currently undergoing a major expansion.

THE CHURCH WITH THE GOLDEN DOME

The capstone of the new building program was to be our new church. Mr. Suren Pilafian, FAIA, the architect, was joined by Mr. Edouard Utudjian, DPLG, as architect-consultant, in preparing a design worthy of the dreams and aspirations of the Detroit Armenian community. The final plans represented many long years of development. Mr. Pilafian traveled to Armenia in order to be inspired at first hand by the architecture of his ancestors; and Mr. Utudjian, one of the world's great experts on Armenian architecture, brought to the project his wealth of knowledge and experience. The vast undertaking of building the new church was inspired and led in particular by Messrs. Alex Manoogian and Edward Mardigian, whose generous contribution to the entire building project was exceeded only by the time and effort they so selflessly gave in their determination to endow the Armenian community and the people of Greater Detroit with something of lasting value.

The dedication and consecration of "the church with the golden dome" was performed in a solemn ceremony on Sunday, November 20, 1966, by His Grace Bishop Torkom Manoogian (now Patriarch), Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, assisted by several clergymen and dignitaries. On that occasion Bishop Torkom stated to the people of our parish, "We bless all the contributors and workers and pray in the very murmur of supplication of our fathers: Have mercy upon church builders, benefactors, those who pray, those who serve, and those who have gone to rest under the shelter of the Holy Church."

In honor of the same occasion, Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, of blessed memory, former Primate of our Diocese (1944-1953) wrote, "Our new church in Detroit is the latest pride of our people in America. It will stand as one of the most beautiful models of our heritage, which is so dear to us, as one that has a particular place among the great achievements of great peoples."

Archbishop Sion Manoogian, of blessed memory, former Primate of the Diocese (1958-1966), who has since 1946 been closely associated with the work of our parish, wrote in honor of the consecration of the new church: "Truly joyful is the Armenian Church, happy is the American Diocese of the Armenian Church, for almost simultaneously as the cornerstone of the Cathedral of our Diocese is being blessed in New York, there is taking place the dedication and consecration of the newly-built, stately St. John's Armenian Church in Detroit, the church of the largest parish of the Diocese."

CONSECRATION OF THE ALTAR

The consecration of the new church did not end the building project. The interior of the new church was not completed. An artist of genius, Zobel Kachadoorian agreed to paint the altar picture and the altar itself was still being constructed in Italy. When the altar arrives, it was decided that it should not be consecrated until His Holiness, the Catholicos, should visit America once more and personally perform the ceremony. The dream of having the new altar consecrated by the head of the Armenian Church was realized on Sunday, May 12, 1968. On the occasion of the visit of the Catholicos in Detroit, the following message was penned to welcome His Holiness:

“The events of this holy consecration will be a fitting consummation of the noble building project that has engaged our parish over the past several years, a building project which was inaugurated by His Holiness himself when he presided over the groundbreaking ceremonies for our cultural center in 1960. They will also give proper recognition to the role that St. John’s Armenian Church of Greater Detroit and the members of our community have played in the support of the Armenian Church and the Armenian people throughout the whole world.

“Since the Middle Ages up to modern times many Armenians have been deprived of a national homeland and have been forced to live in the diaspora. During the period the Armenian Church has served as our national refuge, and the Catholicos of our church has always been both its real and symbolic head. Holy Etchmiadzin, the place where the Only Begotten Son of God descended, has always existed as the font and center of Armenian Christianity. The visit of His Holiness can only serve to bind us closer to our spiritual home.”

The weekend of the visit of the Catholicos was filled with many solemn and festive events. His presence renewed in the hearts of the Armenians of Detroit their determination to carry on the culture and traditions of which they are the proud heirs, and to make a distinctive contribution to their homeland, the United States of America.

THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC SOCIETY: Story of Church Building

The story of church building is an ancient and noble one. In former times only kings, princes and magnates were privileged to build Armenian churches, schools and charitable institutions. Later, as wealth became more widely distributed, craft guilds and wealthy merchants were added to this small number. Nowadays, people in general are better able to participate personally and financially in these worthy tasks. Yet, as with all important projects, little is accomplished without wise and generous leaders who not only show the way but involve themselves personally in the difficult day-today work. It is leaders such as these who make up the Armenian Apostolic Society and its executive board.

Officially Organized

Because of its building mission, the Armenian Apostolic Society has always been intimately involved in the ongoing life of the church. It was organized on November 18, 1938, in our old church on Oakman Boulevard, to replace the School Building Committee of the church which had become inoperative due to the difficulties of raising large sums of money during the depression years. Pursuant to a resolution adopted at that first meeting, Articles of Incorporation for the Armenian Apostolic Society, Inc. were filed with the State of Michigan on January 3, 1939, and the organization began its legal and formal existence. The first executive board of the organization was under the honorary presidency of the church pastor, The Rev. Vahan Jelalian, and included the following officers: Mr. Alex Manoogian, president; Mr. Mugurdich G. Shekerjian, vice president; Mr. Nishan Nalbandian, treasurer; Mr. John P. (Onnig) Tabibian, assistant treasurer; Mr. Vahram Dadrian, secretary; and Mr. Hagop S. Derderian, assistant secretary and legal counsel.

War Clouds

The first project which these energetic young men decided to undertake was to build next to the church a structure which could serve as a school and cultural center. War clouds were on the horizon, however, and their plans could not be realized immediately. America had to organize her resources, human and material, to fight the enemies of

freedom who threatened not only Europe and Asia but our own country as well. The Armenian community of Detroit was alerted to participate in this great struggle to defend their homeland, and the young people took important war jobs or entered the armed forces. Projects on the home front had to be held in abeyance; and although the remaining members of the Apostolic Society collected some funds and made some plans, the actual building could not begin.

Advent of Peace

The advent of peace in 1945, which freed human and material resources for civilian use, offered the opportunity for money to be raised and plans to be finalized. Construction began in 1946 when ground was broken by Bishop Sion Manoogian (of blessed memory), who at that time was Midwest Vicar of the Diocese and in charge of the parish. The project was completed in 1947, at a total cost of \$175,000, just in time to welcome our returning servicemen. The new building, The Armenian Cultural Hall, served to revitalize the life of the Armenian community of Detroit and became the hub of expanding community activity. A church school was organized, the Armenian School was reactivated, and young people's organizations came into being. For many years after its completion, the new building was considered the most beautiful and modern among Armenian church centers in the U. S. The quality of building was due in large measure to the talent of its architects, Messrs. Frank Levon Baylerian and Ross Henderson, with Suren Pilafian as consulting architect. Mr. Baylerian remitted his share of the architect's fee to the Church.

Reorganization

In 1949, Bishop Sion proposed that a parish house be built next to the church and cultural building to provide a needed facility for our local clergy and church workers. The idea was readily accepted and the Apostolic Society was reactivated at a special meeting held on June 12, 1949 under the auspices of Bishop Sion. A new executive board was elected consisting of some former members as well as new ones. Bishop Sion Manoogian was honorary president; Mr. Alex Manoogian, who had been so instrumental in the building of the Armenian Cultural Hall and who was to play so important a role in the design of the new church, was elected Chairman of the board; Mr. Edward Mardigian, who was to inculcate a youthful and aggressive spirit into the organization, was elected President. Other officers were: Mr. John P. Tabibian and Mr. Howard Atesian, Vice Presidents; Mr. Hagop S. Derderian, Secretary and Legal Counsel; Mr. Kirk Horigian, Treasurer; with Mr. Tabibian also serving as Assistant Treasurer (later to be Treasurer). Two years of hard but pleasant work elapsed before it was possible to collect the estimated \$60,000 needed. Picnics, moonlight boat rides, banquets, bazaars, and personal solicitations were the means used to raise funds. In the meantime, however, religious and community activities had so expanded that there was a pressing need for substantially more space. In particular, the church school had tripled in size and more classrooms were a necessity.

A New Task

Realizing that the community was in dire need of more facilities than a parish house could provide, the members of the church decided to abandon the project in favor of a more ambitious one, that of building an entirely new church and cultural center. Not only had the Armenian population and church membership grown rapidly after the war, but new families were moving into the suburbs. Since most of our parishioners were congregating in the northwest area of the city, it was decided to look for a new location for the project in that section.

For the next few years the Armenian Apostolic Society, under the leadership of Mr. Manoogian and Mr. Mardigian, occupied itself with finding a proper location for the new community center, making plans, and raising funds. Choosing a site presented the first of many problems that had to be overcome. Either they were too small to allow for future growth, too far from the center of the Armenian population, or too distant from the city to be practical. Finally, the present fifteen-acre site in Southfield, across from the Northland shopping center, was located by Mr. Harry Berberian; and Mr. Howard Atesian, who had also been actively seeking sites, was assigned the task of making the purchase. On November 11, 1954, the purchase was made at a cost of \$132,000, with Mr. Atesian remitting his share of the brokerage fees to the church.

Ground Blessing

Construction plans for the new building were delayed, revised and finally halted because the Michigan State Highway Department could not decide how much of the property it would need for construction of the interchange of the Southfield and John C. Lodge expressways. When the decision was finally made in 1959, Mr. Suren Pilafian, our talented architect, finalized plans for the cultural building, and a contract was signed with the Lerner-Liden Construction Company.

The ground blessing ceremony for the site was a historic occasion. The activities were presided over by His Holiness Vasken I, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, on Sunday, June 19, 1960. This was the first trip to America ever made by the Supreme Head of the Armenian Church, and the Detroit community welcomed him with great enthusiasm and many festivities.

Pleasant Day of Recognition

Under the dynamic leadership of Mr. Manoogian and Mr. Mardigian, the beautiful one-million-dollar Cultural Building was completed within the comparatively short period of one year. It contains a chapel, twenty-two classrooms and meeting rooms, offices, and a large kitchen equipped with the latest facilities. This modern and comfortable building has been in almost constant use since the momentous day of its dedication by Archbishop Sion Manoogian on Sunday, September 10, 1961.

Veterans Memorial

During this time the Armenian-American Veterans of Detroit were planning to build a recreation center in memory of their compatriots who had sacrificed their lives for freedom during World War II and the Korean conflict. The Apostolic Society, eager to see the new land used for good purposes, offered the Veterans free use of a building site for their project. The Veterans agreed that their center should be an integral part of a larger religious, educational, recreational project; and, with community support, The Armenian-American Veterans Memorial Building was constructed in memory of the many young Detroit Armenians who had given their lives for their country. The building contains, a small kitchen, meeting rooms, game rooms and a gymnasium.

New Church

When preparations were begun for the new church, Mr. Alex Manoogian was given full responsibility for its design and construction. There was universal feeling that it had to be something special to represent the unique role that the Armenian-American community of Detroit was playing in the metropolitan area, to serve the spiritual needs of the parish, and also to be worthy of the great Armenian architectural tradition. Mr. Suren Pilafian was

again approached by Mr. Manoogian to prepare plans; and Mr. Edouard Utudjian of France, a well-known scholar and architect, was called in to serve as architect-consultant. Mr. Alex Manoogian, who from the inception of the project was active in the architectural concept and design of the new church, sent Mr. Pilafian to Armenia to familiarize himself more intimately with Armenian architecture and ancient Armenian churches.

After many years of intensive work and study by Messrs. Pilafian, Manoogian, Mardigian, Utudjian, and members of the committee, final plans were drafted for the uniquely impressive church. His Grace, Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, assisted by the pastor Fr. Diran Papazian, officiated at the ground breaking ceremony on Palm Sunday, March 23, 1964. The contract for the building, awarded to the Walter J. Couse Construction Company, was signed on July 6 1964 by Mr. Mardigian and Mr. Derderian on behalf of the church community. A few months later, on October 18 1964, His Grace, Archbishop Sion Manoogian blessed the foundation and laid the cornerstone of the new church — and the building of the superstructure began.

Throughout the years many people have served as members of the Armenian Apostolic Society, on its Executive Committee, and on its Board of Directors. For this service, the entire community is grateful. The executive committee which was active during the building phase was the following: The Very Rev. Yeghishe Gizirian and The Rev. Fr. Diran Papazian, pastors, Honorary Presidents; Alex Manoogian, Chairman of the Board; Edward Mardigian, President; Martin P. Apkarian, Howard Atesian, Vahram Kayabalian, Vahe Papelian, and Daniel Shahan, Vice-Presidents; John P. Tabibian, Treasurer; Haig Jizmejian and Hike Semerjian, Assistant Treasurers; Hagop S. Derderian, Secretary and Legal Counsel; and Arshavir Yeghissian, Assistant Secretary. **UPDATE NAMES.**

While all the members of the Executive Committee of the Armenian Apostolic Society deserve special recognition, space unfortunately does not allow for a full enumeration here of their many individual contributions. Mention must be made, however, of the unique work of Hagop S. Derderian and John P. Tabibian. Mr. Derderian, as secretary and legal counsel of the Society since its inception in 1939, has willingly and most ably handled all the minutes, records, correspondence, and the important, extensive and complicated legal matters necessary for the proper functioning of the organization. Mr. Tabibian, since 1933 a fund raiser for the church and treasurer of the Society (with the exception of only three years) from its very beginning, has supervised and personally managed with great dedication the intricate record keeping of the millions of dollars — much received in small amounts — that have passed through the hands of the organization over the many years of its collection and building program.

Archbishop Sion Manoogian served as an Honorary President of the Society from 1946-52 when he was associated with the work of the parish, as did Fr. Arnak Kasparian when he was pastor from 1951-62. Mr. Kirk Horigian, who had been Treasurer since 1949, resigned from that office in 1963 for reasons of health. He and the others, however, have always kept a keen interest in the society and its work and have continued to make various contributions.

Over the past 75 years many have served in the various community, church and cultural center building projects. Space, unfortunately, does not allow the mentioning of all these dedicated people by name. Yet, for their work, the members of the parish are truly grateful. In particular the members and leaders of the following organizations are to be commended: the Ladies' Auxiliary, the Women's Guild, the Komitas Choral Union (the Church choir), the Church Sunday School, the Armenian Church Youth Organization of

America — local Senior and Junior chapters, Men's Society; and Armenian American Veteran's Group. Special mention must be made of the members of the Parish Council who, in addition to their considerable financial contributions and participation in fund collection, have supervised the management of the Church and Cultural Building. The Parish Council, during our building stage, was under the chairmanship of Mr. Martin P. Apkarian.

Consecration

The dedication and consecration of "the church with the golden dome" was performed by His Grace, Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, Primate of the Diocese, assisted by several clergymen and dignitaries, in an ancient and solemn ceremony on Sunday, November 20, 1966. The consecration of the new church did not, however, mark the completion of the interior of the edifice. Zabel Kachadoorian, an artist of genius, was commissioned to paint the altar picture; and the marble altar itself was still being constructed in Italy. It was decided that the altar would not be consecrated until His Holiness, the Catholicos, could come to America again to perform the ceremony.

The vast undertaking of building the new church and cultural center was inspired and led in particular by Messrs. Alex Manoogian and Edward Mardigian, whose generous financial contributions were exceeded only by the time and effort they so selflessly gave in their determination to see to it that the community was to have something of enduring value and worthy of the noble Armenian architectural tradition.

Mr. Manoogian, who was given full responsibility for the design and construction of the new church, brought together the architects and consultants and worked with them — contributing major design elements and overseeing every minute detail. The final results of Mr. Manoogian's profound interest and rich contribution to the plans have produced for the metropolitan Detroit community an Armenian church structure which many people consider to be ONE OF the finest and most beautiful currently in use in the world.

Mr. Mardigian, with his vigor and youthful, infectious enthusiasm, led in the vast undertaking of raising the millions of dollars necessary for the building projects. Due to Mr. Mardigian's leadership, the cooperation of the members of the Society, and the generosity of all segments of the community, the several million dollar complex was fully paid for at its completion, making it unnecessary to burden the congregation with a mortgage. Mr. Mardigian, along with his fund raising activities, also took special interest in the progress of the design of the new church and cultural building.

Grateful Community

A grateful community decided that it was only proper to give public recognition to those who had been the leaders in this great building project. Accordingly, a great banquet was held on Sunday, March 10, 1968, to honor Messrs. Alex Manoogian and Edward Mardigian, the executives and leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Society, and all those who contributed to the undertaking. Governor George Romney of Michigan sent a special letter of greetings to the honored guests, saying: "Grateful appreciation and congratulations are surely in order for Alex Manoogian and Edward Mardigian for the generous contributions they have made to their community of Detroit, their church and to Armenian communities throughout the world."

On the occasion of the banquet, Jerome P. Cavanagh, Mayor of Detroit, issued a Proclamation appointing March 10 as Manoogian-Mardigian Day and commended their "outstanding humanitarian contributions to all citizens of the Detroit area, especially to the city's Armenian community." The guest speaker at the banquet was Mr. Dickran H. Boyajian, noted lecturer, author and attorney of Boston, Massachusetts. Mr. Martin P.

Apkarian, Chairman of the Parish Council, opened the festivities, and Dr. Dennis Papazian of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, served as master-of-ceremonies.

Archbishop Sion Manoogian spoke highly of the work of the Armenian Apostolic Society and its leaders, and Fr. Yeghishe Gizirian and Fr. Diran Papazian delivered greetings to those present. At the end of his talk, Archbishop Sion unveiled a plaque with portraits in bas-relief of Messrs. Manoogian and Mardigian, the names of the clergy associated with the building of the church, and the names of all the members of the Apostolic Society. The plaque was commissioned by a committee headed by Mr. George P. Keurajian.

Proper Recognition

On the occasion of the banquet a booklet was published in which appeared the following essay expressing the feeling of the Detroit Community towards the great contributions made by Messrs. Manoogian and Mardigian.

"It is right and proper that the Armenian community of Detroit take this opportunity to honor and pay tribute to Mr. Alex Manoogian and Mr. Edward Mardigian. These outstanding leaders of our community and internationally-recognized philanthropists represent the highest and finest values of the ancient Armenian cultural tradition and of modern American ideals. They, by their constant dedication to good causes, have proven themselves to be worthy sons of their heritage, and by their personal lives and actions, have set a shining example for those who will come after them.

These men can justly be called community builders in the best sense of the word. They have personally rendered great service to the Armenians of Detroit, of the United States and of the whole world. They have increased their effectiveness by serving as symbols to inspire others and as rallying points around which others have gathered to the cause.

They have been the leading spirit and driving force in the construction of the Armenian Cultural Center of Detroit and of our magnificent church building. They have supported the Diocese of the Armenian Church in this country in its endeavor to extend the beneficent influence of our tradition into every Armenian parish no matter how small or how far from the leading centers of Armenian culture in the United States. They have extended great services to the Mother Church, aiding her mission to bring the light of Christianity to her children wherever they may be. Moreover, they have never stinted in giving either their time or money in supporting American and Armenian causes and charities throughout the world.

Mr. Manoogian and Mr. Mardigian have the wisdom to know that communities and cultures are not made up of buildings, but of human personalities. These men have sought to fulfill the spiritual needs and to develop the intellectual potentialities of their compatriots all over the world. They demonstrate in their personal lives the important principle that wealth and success lie not solely in the acquisition of material things, but in the wise and judicious application of these resources for the betterment of mankind.

We Armenians of Detroit can be proud of the role our people have played in world history, proud of the contributions that our people are making in various lands throughout the world today, and proud that our own native land, the United States of America, is the richer for our presence here. These successes however, do not come of themselves. They are the results of inspiration, dedication and hard work. Each of us can play a role in this noble design. Our successes, however, are due in large measure to the inspiration and example set by our leaders and co-workers. Mr. Alex Manoogian and Mr. Edward Mardigian are leaders of this type. They are true sons of a great and noble tradition. We are proud that they are members of our Detroit Community."

Dream Realized

The dream of having the new church altar consecrated by the supreme head of the Armenian Church was realized on Sunday, May 12, 1968, when His Holiness came to Detroit after his visit to New York to consecrate the new Diocesan Cathedral, St. Vartan. At this point, the Armenian Apostolic Society had reached a milestone in its work. The interior of the church was still to be completed and there was some thought of expanding the Cultural Building and of building a parish house, and of other projects, but a great and noble enterprise had been successfully concluded. The parish of St. John's Armenian Church of Greater Detroit and the members of the Armenian community now have worship and activity facilities which are the finest of any Armenian church in the nation, IF NOT THE WORLD. These facilities perpetuate the great Armenian architectural tradition and are a worthy contribution to the aesthetic environment of the metropolitan area.

THE NEXT FORTY YEARS – A REVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The initial period of development and growth of the parish of St. John's Armenian Church is a wonderful testament to the commitment and vitality of the Armenian community and its dedication and love for the precious faith-heritage of our ancestors. However, there was much more to accomplish and many new and important projects to plan and execute in the years following the construction of the cultural building and church edifice.

- MAJOR RENOVATIONS 1978-92
- EXPANSION OF RECREATION CENTER & KITCHEN
- NEW ENTRANCE CANOPY TO CHURCH
- INSTALLATION OF KHATCHKAR MONUMENT
- ALEX & MARIE MANOOGIAN MUSEUM
- EDWARD & HELEN MARDIGIAN LIBRARY
- NEW ORGAN
- NEW BELL CHIMES
- RENOVATIONS & ADDITIONS TO CULTURAL BUILDING 2002?
- INSTALLATION OF MOSAIC ICONS
- INSTALLATION OF LETTER "5"