

A young girl with light brown hair and bangs, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, sits in a church pew. She has her hands clasped under her chin and is looking upwards and to the left with a thoughtful expression. The church interior is visible in the background, featuring wooden paneling, a large cross on the wall, and a man in clerical attire (Rev. Nishan Bakalian) standing near the altar. There are Christmas decorations, including wreaths and candles, on the altar.

WHEN SMALL IS BIG

Armenian Evangelicals Render a Century and a Half of Service

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

Numbering only 50 to 70,000 around the world, Armenian Evangelicals are among the most organized, visible, and active of the world's eight million-plus Armenians. Despite their small numbers and their periodic conflicts with the Armenian Apostolic Church, the legitimacy, value and mission of the Armenian Evangelical Church has become indisputable over the last century and a half. Just the fact that it is politically incorrect to call them Protestants – they're Evangelicals – attests to a change of attitude and acceptance; they are no longer seen as "protesters" but as believers genuinely involved in Christian mission and evangelization.

History

The founding of the Armenian Protestant church goes back to the 19th century during the “intellectual renaissance” that took place among Armenians within the Ottoman Empire. Historians agree that a separate Armenian Protestant denomination was “imported” and “implanted” by European and US missionaries but are divided over the causes and affects of events which led to their establishment.

The first Protestant missionaries sent to the Ottoman Empire were from the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England in 1818 and later by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1831, William Goodell, the first American missionary to arrive in Constantinople, founded the Mission of the American Board for the Armenians of Turkey. Two years later, two native Armenians, John Der-Sahakian and Paul Minassian, joined the mission. Der-Sahakian was appointed general superintendent of the Mission’s high school in Pera. However, in 1837 the school was forced to close due to pressures from the Patriarch Mateos of Constantinople, the Armenian ethnarch in the Ottoman Empire and head of the Armenian Apostolic Church – the “Mother Church.”

Despite the opposition of the Patriarchate, the evangelical movement made considerable headway with a following of about 500 people. The Mother Church protested the activities of the missionaries among the Armenians. Eventually, the confrontation led to a formal excommunication of Protestants by the Patriarch and even persecutions by the Ottoman government authorities.

The missionaries in turn were critical of the Armenian Church. In a report, Goodell wrote, “Like all the Oriental churches, the Armenian [church] had become exceedingly corrupt. It was almost wholly given up to superstition and to idolatrous worship of saints, including the Virgin Mary, pictures, etc. As with all rigid formalities, the weightier matters of the law and the gospel are considered of small account compared with the punctilious performance of religious rites and ceremonies.”

The Protestants stated that their “supreme endeavor was to help the Armenians work out a quiet but genuine reform in their church,” but their gradual attack on the established Apostolic Church lead to fierce confrontations.

Eventually the Protestants sought the protection and intervention of American and European governments to defend their “rights.”

By May 1846, the Evangelicals were



Stained-glass in the sanctuary of the United Armenian Congregational Church, Los Angeles.

authorized to resume their “normal” life as Protestants. This ended the civil persecution of the Protestants.

But a few months later, on the occasion of the feast of Ejmiatsin, Patriarch Mateos issued an encyclical of perpetual condemnation and anathema against all Protestants to be publicly read at every annual return of the festival throughout the churches. Thus, “the reformers,” originally a group within the church, now excluded from the church’s fellowship, formed a rival organization outside the church – the Protestant community.

A constitution was drawn up for the Armenian Evangelical Church, which provided a model of government halfway between Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. On July 1, 1846 the constitution was formally adopted by the evangelicals of Constantinople and the First Armenian Evangelical Church of Constantinople (with a total of 40 members) began.

Within months, a meeting of the “Protestant Nation” (millet) was called in Constantinople and an executive committee of four was appointed to represent the community in its external relations. This committee submitted a petition to the local governor requesting separation from the Armenian community and the granting of a charter. Four petitions were sent to the Sultan in the space of a few months. However, it was only through the intervention of British diplomats

that the first imperial acknowledgment was issued on November 15, 1847, recognizing the Protestants of Turkey as a separate community and granting them freedom of conscience and worship. In 1850, again through foreign diplomatic efforts, the rights and privileges of the Protestant community were permanently defined by an imperial *firman* (edict) and the Protestants were authorized to elect a civil head. Stephen Seropian was the first person chosen for this position.

By the end of 1860, the Protestant Church had grown to 23 mission stations; 65 outstations; 50 missionaries and 50 female assistants; 40 evangelical churches, with a total membership of almost 1,300.

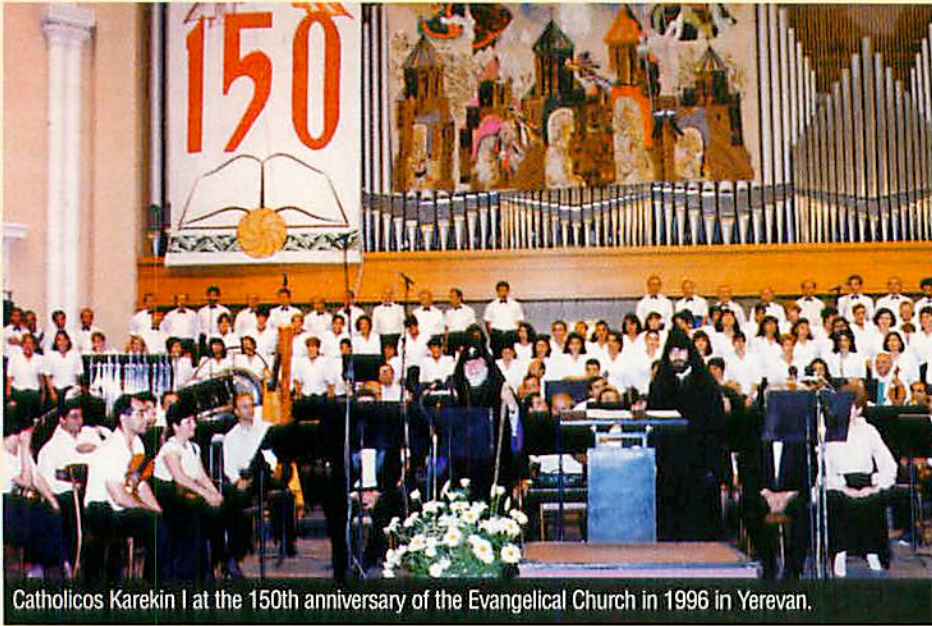
Within three decades, however, the relationship between the Apostolic and Protestant Armenian churches was cordial enough to permit the collaboration on a modern Armenian New Testament, which was published under the Armenian Patriarch’s imprimatur in the 1890s and freely circulated among the Armenians. (Goodell had published the first Bible for Turkish speaking Armenians in 1842 and Elias Riggs published a modern Armenian Bible in 1853.)

The Evangelical Church has come a long way since the controversies surrounding its establishment. As Vahan Tootikian, a prolific minister who resides in Michigan, who currently heads the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America, writes, “When every criticism has been made, and every allowance recorded for the imperfection of the Armenian Evangelical Church, the fact remains that she worked her way into many corners of the life of the Armenian Nation. Obvious faults and weaknesses must not hide the deeper significance of the Evangelical Movement, because measured by its effects, it proved itself a potent force among the Armenian people.”

The Church in the Diaspora

The massacres of Armenians (1895 to 1908) and the 1915 genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire resulted in the loss of Protestant Armenian leaders as well. The American Board liquidated its 100-year interest in Turkey and withdrew from the field. Armenian Protestant congregations began to scatter around the world.

Starting in 1923, Armenian Evangelical churches were established in Syria and Lebanon through the efforts of preachers and later in Iran, Greece, Egypt and Cyprus. Churches in America were established much earlier, in the late 19th century, as Armenians from the Ottoman Empire had come to the



Catholicos Karekin I at the 150th anniversary of the Evangelical Church in 1996 in Yerevan.

“new world” for better opportunity. The first Evangelical church (just as the first Apostolic church) in North America was founded in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Today, there are about 100 Armenian Evangelical churches around the world.

“The Armenian Evangelical Church doesn’t have a hierarchy,” says Rev. Movses Janbazian, Executive Director of the Armenian Missionary Association of America (AMAA).

Unlike the Apostolic and the Catholic Churches, the Evangelicals do not have a supreme head or central headquarters. It is only in

recent years that the AMAA, the mission arm of the church, has become the de facto “center” of the church, not through “election” but by acclaim and in recognition of its work on behalf of the Evangelical community. Indeed, at the first ever Armenia-Diaspora Conference last September in Yerevan, where for the first time representatives of the Armenian nation gathered under one roof, Rev. Janbazian represented the Evangelical Church and was seated along with the heads of the Armenian Apostolic and Catholic churches.

The Armenian Evangelical Church is a

loose association of five unions (North America, Near East, France, Armenia, Eurasia) and one fellowship (South America) and more recently, another in Eurasia (see chart, next page.) In turn, each Union is an association of local churches in a given geographic area. Membership in a Union by a local congregation is entirely voluntary. The Unions do not dictate over member churches, which are ecclesiastically autonomous and independent. Rather, the Unions coordinate, organize and define conduct for the enhancement of the church’s various ministries.

For example, the constitution of the Near East Union is different from the North America Union, where there is more focus on cooperation than administrative authority. “In the Near East, the Union is more centralized in terms of links between churches, while in North America it is decentralized,” explains Rev. Megerdich Karageozian, President of the Near East Union.

Various Unions have different constitutions and modus operandi and each member church has its own administrative model. “Union bylaws draw from both Congregational and Presbyterian models, but they focus on the Armenian context and the specifics of Armenian communities,” says Rev. Karageozian.

The Union in France presents yet another model. Unlike all other Unions, the French concentrate more on mission than administration. “They have a very good system of exchanging pastors and coordinating their services,” explains Karageozian. In France,

WORLDWIDE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH

UNION OF NORTH AMERICA

Established 1901 (East and West coasts merged in 1971)

28 Active Clergy
25 Congregations

COUNTRY/STATE/CITY	CONGREGATION
US & CANADA	25
California	10
Illinois	1
Massachusetts	3
Michigan	1
New Hampshire	1
New Jersey	1
New York	2
Pennsylvania	1
Rhode Island	1
Montreal	2
Toronto	1
Cambridge	1

UNION OF THE NEAR EAST

Established 1924

25 Active Clergy
26 Congregations

COUNTRY	CONGREGATION
Egypt	1 Alexandria
Greece	2 Athens
Iran*	3 Tehran
Lebanon	6 Beirut 5, Anjar 1
Syria	11 Aleppo 5, Kessab 4, Damascus, Homs
Turkey	2 Istanbul
Australia†	1 Sydney

* Also serves the Assyrian Evangelical congregation.

† Included in the Near East Union as the origins of the congregation is from the Middle East.

UNION OF FRANCE

Established 1924

7 Active Clergy*
12 Congregations

CITY	CONGREGATION
Alfortville	1
Bourg-Les-Valence	1
Decines	1
Issy-Les-Moulineaux	1
Lyon	1
Marseille	4
Montelimar	1
Paris	1
Pont D'Aubenas	1

* All pastors are born in France.

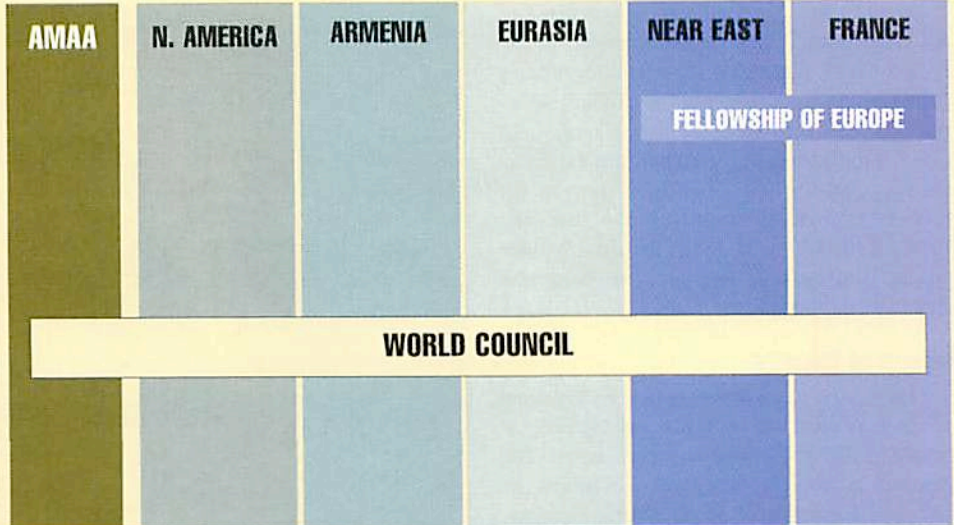
every seven to 10 years, pastors go through a mandatory rotation, a procedure not practiced, for example, in Lebanon.

Like other churches, the Armenian Evangelical Church has also experienced decades-long internal and external problems.

Externally, since its establishment, relations with the Armenian Apostolic Church have not been always smooth. While cordial relations were maintained on the formal level, the Armenian Apostolic Church had always seen the Evangelical community as the "separated brethren," and along with the Catholics, did not consider them "fully Armenian." In recent years, however, with the changes of circumstances in the Armenian world and as the Evangelical leadership has reaffirmed the place and role of the Apostolic Church as the "Mother Church," a better atmosphere and spirit of cooperation has been established.

For religious nationalists, one can not be Armenian and Protestant at the same time. The term Protestant – together with all its distorted mispronunciations: "Porot" for Protestant, "Bereder" for Brother – is still used in a derogatory sense by some. Still, those who use these divisive terms are unaware that such "national" heroes as Soghomon Tehlirian, who assassinated Genocide architect Talaat Pasha, was a Protestant.

"The distinction between our 'Armenian' and 'Evangelical' identity was more emphasized in the Middle East by the Apostolics," says Zaven Khanjian, a



The Armenian Evangelical Church is a loose association of five Unions and one Fellowship. Each Union is an association of local churches in a given geographic area. The World Council is made of representatives from all Unions and affiliate organizations, including the Armenian Missionary Association of America.

Southern California real estate broker who is active within and outside the Evangelical community. Most recently, Khanjian has taken on the presidency of Armenia Fund Inc. of the Western US. "But in reality the Armenian Evangelicals did not even think about this duality. They were and felt as Armenian as anyone else," he continues, tracing the roots of the derogatory distinction in the Middle East to Patriarch Mateos's anathema in the late 19th century.

But, in North America, it is different says Khanjian. "While we are aware of this identity

paradox, this is not unique to the Evangelicals, it applies to all Armenians. The fear of assimilation is not a denominational issue."

Full rapprochement is not anywhere near, but in recent years the Apostolic Church hierarchy and laity have increasingly accepted the legitimacy of the Armenian Evangelical Church. On its part, the Evangelical Church has made it clear that its mission is not "converting" Armenians to the Protestant faith, but the overall spiritual, moral and mental well-being of the Armenian people regardless of their creed.

Perhaps, the most significant endorsement

Armenian Evangelicals around the world: 50,000-70,000

UNION OF ARMENIA

Established 1995

18 Active Clergy
50 Congregations

Including Yerevan, Vanadsor, Gumri, Stepanavan and others.

UNION OF EURASIA

Established 1995

6 Active Clergy [excluding Armenia]
8 Congregations [excluding Armenia]

COUNTRY	CONGREGATION
Armenia	See Armenia
Georgia	6 Tbilisi 3, Akhalkalaki 2, Sukhumi 1
Russia	2 Moscow, Sochi

FELLOWSHIP OF ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES OF EUROPE

Established 1998

COUNTRY	CONGREGATION
Belgium	1 Brussels
Bulgaria	4 Sofia, congregations in Plovdiv, Russe, Varna
England	1 London
France	See France
Greece	See Near East
Turkey	See Near East

There are less than 5,000 Evangelicals in all of Europe.

SOUTH AMERICA

All are Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking congregations.

COUNTRY	CONGREGATION
Argentina	1 Buenos Aires
Brazil	2 Sao Paulo and Ferraz de Vasconcellos
Uruguay	1 Montevideo

ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL WORLD COUNCIL

Established 1986

Consultative body made of two representatives from each of the five Unions and the European Fellowship, two AMAA representatives and one representative from the Stephen Philibosian Foundation.

SOURCE: ARMENIAN MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, AIM RESEARCH

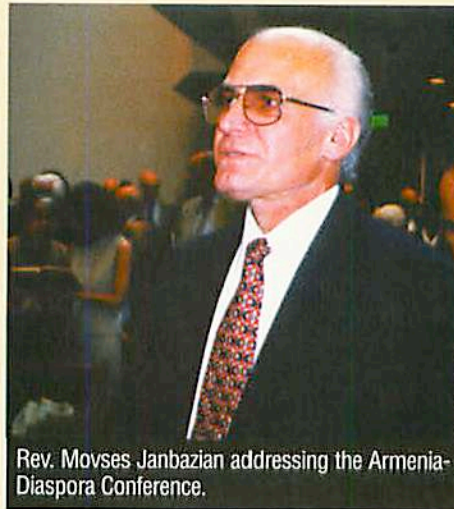
came from the late Catholicos Karekin I of All Armenians when he participated in the Evangelical Church's 150th anniversary celebrations in Yerevan. The Catholicos praised the ministry of the Evangelical Church in the life of the Armenian nation in the last century and a half and "prayed for the Armenian Evangelicals to become stronger and spread their spiritual values among [the] nation, together with Armenian Apostolic Church."

Issues of Identity

Internally, local and regional Evangelical congregations have not always agreed on doctrinal, theological or national issues. The freedom of each congregation to follow its own theological and administrative course, has made it virtually impossible to establish a common Armenian Evangelical identity.

"There are Armenian Protestants who do not wish to be called Evangelicals," explains Khanjian, "because they associate the term with Christian fundamentalism. They'd rather be called Presbyterians or Congregationalists." Yet, he continues, "The founding fathers of the Armenian Evangelical Church consciously chose to be called Evangelical (literally 'of the Gospel', or *Avedaranakan*) because it best described their belief and mission."

For years, Khanjian has been one of the strongest supporters of preserving the Armenian identity of the church. He was among those who first pushed for the idea of an Evangelical School. Today, the Charlotte and Elise Merdian School in Sherman Oaks, California,



Rev. Movses Janbazian addressing the Armenia-Diaspora Conference.

COURTESY OF AMAA

is the only Evangelical Armenian day school in North America and some 300 students (most from non-Evangelical families) are taught the standard California curriculum, Armenian language and history, as well as religion.

Still, in some areas, some congregations have completely lost their Armenian character. In Argentina, "the Church has lost its Armenian and Evangelical image," says Rev. Janbazian, who served in Brazil as pastor in the late 1970s. Now a Greek colleague ministers to the Armenian community in Sao Paulo.

"They are aware that they are Armenians. They don't speak the language very well, yet they feel Armenian. As a visitor you wouldn't know that they are Armenians, but they identify themselves with Armenians. The Sao Paulo church was one of the first to mobilize

aid after the earthquake, they organized volunteers to go to Armenia," says Janbazian.

In France, worship services are conducted in French and Armenian, and some churches are attended by non-Armenian members.

There are also varying degrees of "Armenian consciousness" among the congregations in North America. Some have assimilated into local Protestant denominations, preserving only the "Armenian" in the name of the church. Others have a mixture of both Armenian and non-Armenian members and preserve a "balance" between the two "cultures." Still in other churches English is used exclusively as the language for services and preaching. In what is possibly the largest US congregation, the United Armenian Congregational Church (UACC) in Los Angeles, California, earphones were installed in the sanctuary and simultaneous interpretation was instituted as a way of appeasing both Armenian-Americans as well as newcomers from the Middle East.

The US-born Rev. Ron Tovmassian, 43, senior pastor at UACC, doesn't see any problems in living with two identities. "Armenian is one's nationality and Christianity is a person's choice and faith," he says.

Of the Union's 28 active clergy in North America, half like Tovmassian, are in their 40s or younger. "Our church serves two purposes: primarily to propagate the Gospel of Christ and to do that ministry in the context of our Armenian heritage," explains Tovmassian whose father and grandfather were also ministers in the Armenian Evangelical Church.

"AMAA has always emphasized the preservation of the Armenian heritage, including language and culture," says Janbazian. Yet teaching the Armenian language is not part of the church's ministry in the US, although some churches such as the Armenian Presbyterian Church in Paramus, New Jersey, do have Saturday Armenian classes.

Apart from the issue of language, Rev. Janbazian considers "loss of Armenian identity" as one of the major issues facing the Armenian Evangelical churches. The other two he mentions are "loss of spiritual zeal" and "a decline of strong sense of commitment to mission of the Armenian Evangelical church."

The comments of Michael Agbabian, 29, a television and film producer, stand in stark contrast to Janbazian's concerns, however. Agbabian, the grandson of two pastors, is active in the Evangelical community. "I feel more comfortable in that environment. It's more casual. It's in plain English. I get the message," he says. His involvement does not end with the church, either. "The younger



The United Armenian Congregational Church in Los Angeles is one of the largest communities.

ERIC JANBAZIAN

people in the Evangelical community are usually in that circle only. I am more involved in other things as well, such as the AGBU and the Armenian Assembly," says Agbabian, continuing, "but I am not the norm." Still, he says he has noticed "there is a growing group of junior high/high school aged people coming to [the United Armenian Congregational Church] who are active in youth programs. I think that is cool."

This more liberal, consensual and accommodating organizational model of the Armenian Evangelicals can be considered one of the most significant elements of their success. At the beginning of the new millennium and in the age of globalization, the Armenian Evangelical Church seems to be ahead of all other Armenian organizations: organizationally decentralized but unified in mission. This is in contrast to other religious, political and civic organizations with very strong chains of command.

The Armenian Evangelicals have also been among the pioneers of education in post-genocide Armenian communities, especially in the Middle East. The establishment and support of schools is part of the Armenian Evangelical "culture." The fact that most of their students come from non-Evangelical families has been a factor in the improvement of relations between the Evangelical and Apostolic communities.

AMAA

Contrary to popular perception, the Armenian Missionary Association of America, the AMAA, established in Worcester in 1918, is not a church, but an association which implements the "common mission" of the evangelical churches. It's supported by congregations in other countries, as well.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenian Evangelicals have kept step with the times. With AMAA's help, three new unions were founded to better serve the needs of their congregations: the 50 church and fellowship Union of Armenia, the Union of Eurasia, which includes congregations in Russia and Georgia, and the recently established Fellowship of Armenian Evangelical Churches of Europe, embracing congregations in Eastern Europe.

The AMAA's mission focuses on charity, education, financial assistance and "the spiritual growth and development of the Armenian people." And not just the Armenian people. "When there is a major disaster with great tragic consequences, we as a Christian organization and as an organization of a people who has suffered a lot and enjoyed the assistance of others in the past, show solidarity with other



Among its various international outreach efforts, the AMAA supported an orphanage in Mozambique.

nations' disasters. Thank God we can do it; we can help others because we are well off now," says Janbazian and cites recent assistance to earthquake and flood victims from Colombia to Nepal to Cameroon.

Colleague agencies present the AMAA with requests for funding and "we participate with one time gifts," explains Janbazian. The cooperation doesn't stop there. In the spirit of Christian reciprocity, "they help us with projects in Armenia," he continues.

But there is no argument that the bulk of the AMAA's resources go to Armenian causes, and to Armenia. Since the 1988 and especially after Armenia's independence, the Armenian Evangelical Church, through the AMAA has sent about \$1.5 million in aid to Armenia annually, according to Janbazian. To enhance its long term commitment to assisting Armenia, it has established an office in Yerevan where some 38 local and Diaspora staff members implement the church's projects, which concentrate on humanitarian aid, relief, education, and construction. One of the largest projects of the organization is the sponsorship of 2,100 orphans who are given food and clothing on a regular basis (see AIM, February 1998.)

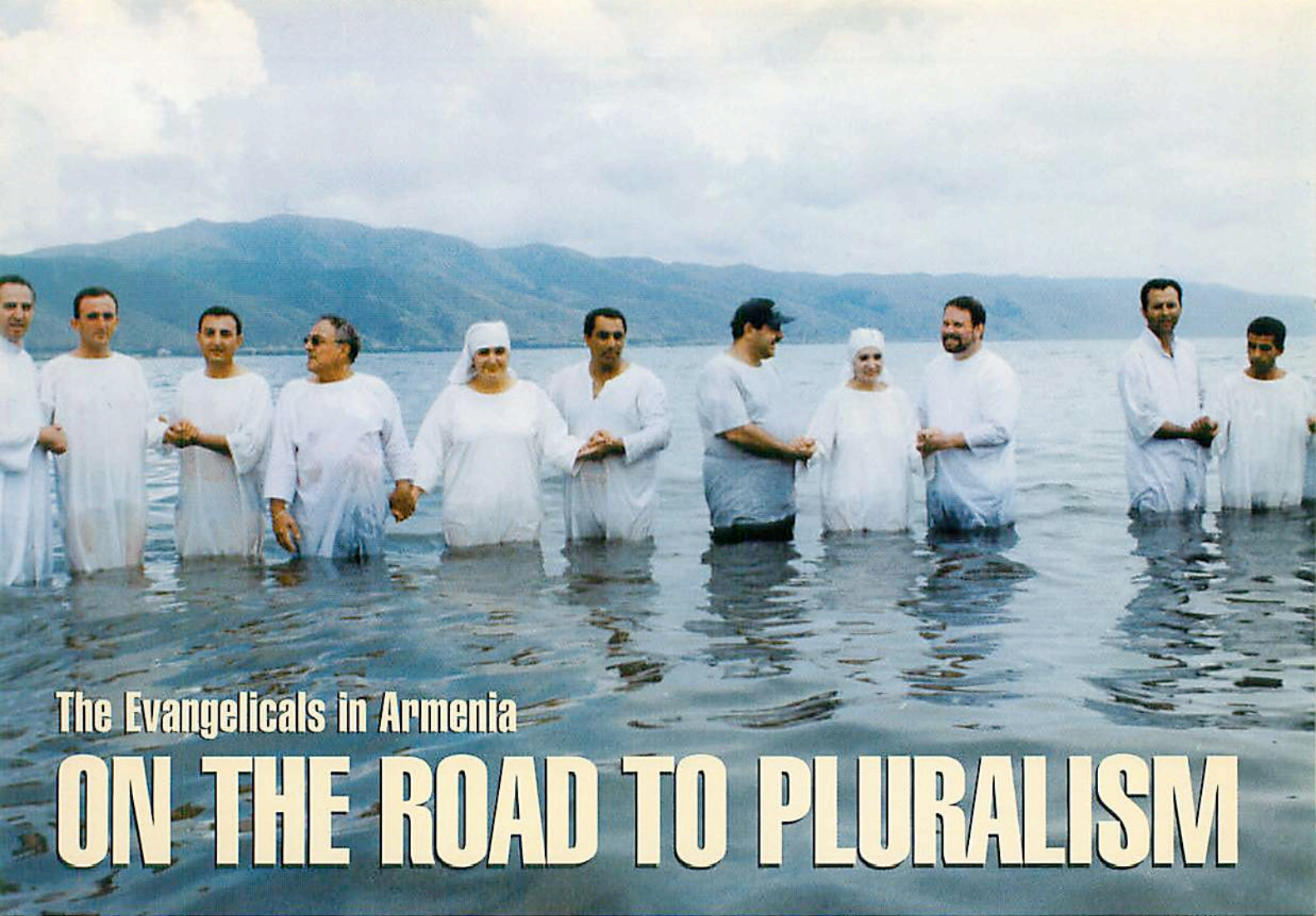
"Our people is a responsive people, no matter what their walk of life. If you explain things to them clearly, with a clear project, they respond. We don't have problems raising funds for Armenia," says Rev. Janbazian. The AMAA's budget this year is \$5.2 million. It's met largely through income from endowment funds and investments. The rest comes from donations.

If anyone still had doubts about the "Armenianness" of the Evangelical Church,

Rev. Janbazian's statement at the Armenia-Diaspora Conference last September tried to put the issue to rest once and for all. He expressed the Armenian Evangelical Church's wish and support for Karabakh's liberation and independence, for the defense and security of Armenia, for the creation of conditions for political stability and a democratic system of government in Armenia, for a vitalized Armenian economy, for reform and modernity in Armenia's educational system and for Armenian genocide recognition by a greater number of nations and international bodies.

Mission Continues

This combination of patriotism and national aspirations could have come from either of the Apostolic church leaders present at the Conference. What made Janbazian's speech "typically" Evangelical was his call for a return to the "former spiritual values" and "the faith" of the nation's ancestry. Rather than a narrow denominational understanding, he gave a wider, ecumenical definition to the mission of the Armenian nation. "In 301 AD, our forebears made a covenant with Jesus Christ. If we fulfill our commitment to that covenant, then God will abundantly bless our small but precious nation, and He will make our nation a source of blessings not only to its sons and daughters, but also to its neighboring peoples and to all humanity. We believe this is our nation's reason for being; this is our people's mission in the world; and this is the God-ordained destiny of our Haigazian [Armenian] race."



The Evangelicals in Armenia

ON THE ROAD TO PLURALISM

COURTESY OF AMAA

Reverend Movses Janbazian of the Armenian Missionary Association of America reminisces about his various relief missions to Armenia.

"In 1994, we received a call to send infant formula. We coordinated it with Harut Sassounian of the United Armenian Fund, we put forward a large sum and found about 160 tons of baby formula. I went to Europe and it was air lifted from there in eight airlifts.

"The Minister of Health had called volunteers to download the products. Armenia was freezing and it was cut off from the world. The first day I saw these thin people working hard without eating. On the way back to Amsterdam, I asked the pilot to bring more sandwiches from the airport catering service. He brought a lot of them. We distributed them to the workers. I saw that an old man put one in his pocket. I said to him, 'why don't you eat it?' He said I have a grandson at home. The thin, old man working in the snow, cold, hungry, saved the little sandwich for his grandson. I will never forget this."

It is stories like this that explain the Diaspora's continuing humanitarian assistance to Armenia.

In that huge endeavor, the Armenian

Evangelical community has a well-defined niche.

Soon after Armenia's independence, the remnants of the only two Armenian Evangelical communities in Soviet Armenia – the Baptists and the Evangelicals which were forced to merge and register as one community in the Soviet period – came out into the open and began to reorganize. In 1994, they formally registered with the government and in 1995, they established the Union of Evangelical Churches in Armenia with some 50 churches and fellowships and almost two dozen native clergymen.

The Pentecostals are not part of the Union and are affiliated with their "home" churches in the US and Sweden. They also have theological differences with other Evangelicals, such as the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian. Many Pentecostals believe that "administrative cooperation" with other churches or a Union would imply theological compromise and impede their autonomy.

The organizational model for the Union in Armenia "is a mixture of the Unions in the US and Lebanon," says Rev. Rene Leonian, 48, who is AMAA's representative in Armenia and President of the Union of Eurasia. "The

Church in Armenia is loosely centralized, but each local community is autonomous," he says. It is centralized in general organizational issues and in determining the criteria for ordination of clergy, but each congregation is "autonomous in theological issues" and has "total freedom" in conducting their internal affairs, explains Leonian.

The Union coordinates the church's Christian education program for all ages. It offers weekly programs for youth in sports, arts, crafts, choirs, musical bands and Bible studies in 35 centers throughout Armenia where thousands of children take part.

The Union also helps local congregations become self-sufficient with worship places and resources to conduct their ministries. The majority of the congregations in Armenia rent buildings for worship. The first church building erected after independence was in Stepanavan, a northern town severely damaged during the 1988 earthquake.

"We help in the organization of communities and make sure they have acceptable conditions to have qualified clergy with proper theological education," says Leonian, who has been serving in Armenia since 1994.

Indeed, in order to provide qualified min-

isters for the church's ministries in Armenia, in 1997 the Union established a theological seminary in Yerevan, with a four-year Bachelors degree program and a two-year Masters program. There is also a two-year Christian Education program for both male and female students.

Currently some 40 students, mostly natives of Armenia and some from Georgia, study the Bible, theology, history, psychology and sociology. One third of the faculty are from Armenia and two-thirds from the Diaspora – Lebanon, France and the US. Recently, one student was sent to the Fuller Theological School in Pasadena, California, and another to the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon, to further their education.

Rev. Leonian, who holds a doctorate in theology from the University of Lyon, France, and a second doctorate in education, is the dean of the seminary, and draws upon his decades-long pastoral experience in the courses he teaches. Ordained at the age of 22, Leonian served Armenian congregations in Lyon and Paris for 19 years and was the chaplain of the largest prison in Paris. From 1993 to 1994, Leonian was chief of staff at the Armenian Embassy in Paris and was instrumental in the establishment of the embassy. His pharmacist wife, Sylvie, also serves in Armenia at the church's medical clinic in Yerevan.

"In view of the many social and moral problems in our society in Armenia, Christianity should become a part of family life again," says Rev. Leonian, who preaches every Sunday at a rented hall on Bagramian Street in Yerevan, where on average some 300 worshippers attend the services. Some pastors preach in Eastern Armenian, others in Western. All try to make religion relevant to people's lives.

"We need to explain not only what religion is, but what faith is. People are thirsty for spiritual nourishment," says Leonian.

But he warns that Christianity should not be presented as another "belief system." "The Soviet system collapsed and with it went an ideology that people upheld; if Christianity is presented as another ideology then people will reject it. They want to be free in their faith relations, they want to see sincere leaders who practice what they preach, not just nice talk, or clergy who do not believe what they are preaching," explains Leonian.

"When people see your kind and sincere faith, they become more convinced of the values you preach than what the cults are offering," he adds.

To teach about religion and faith, Bibles and devotional literature are offered to the public. More than 700,000 pieces of scripture publications alone have been distributed, and, every year, 66,000 children's Bibles are passed out to all first graders in Armenia and Karabakh, upon the request of the Ministry of Education.

To demonstrate their commitment to improved quality of life, the AMAA operates medical and dental clinics in Yerevan, Vanadsor and soon in Stepanavan. Shipments of milk formula for infants with special nutritional needs continue to be made through the United Armenian Fund, and around 750 children benefit. Regular food stuff and fuel assistance goes to orphanages and schools. School buildings are renovated, various schools are sponsored, with every need from repairs to textbooks covered by the AMAA, 6,000 undernourished children and orphans from Armenia and Karabakh attend a week-long summer camp program.

All aid is not in the humanitarian sphere. The Polytechnic Institute, now called the State Engineering University of Armenia also receives help from the AMAA.

In the past, they even invested in a renewable energy program. It has since been turned over to the Engineering University. The AMAA has also sponsored the establishment of a pig farm in Goris. The farm, which provides employment for six families, is now run by the local collective. In Vanadsor, it's a chicken farm. In Gumri, it's a carpet weaving operation. Everywhere, the focus is helping people and demonstrating the Evangelical community's commitment.

It's the same in Karabakh where the AMAA has a permanent office with a staff of two. There, they run a summer camp, a medical clinic, a milk program and orphan sponsorship just like in Armenia, assist schools in Shushi and other regions, sponsor the village of Gichan where the AMAA did everything from bringing water to the village to renovating the school.

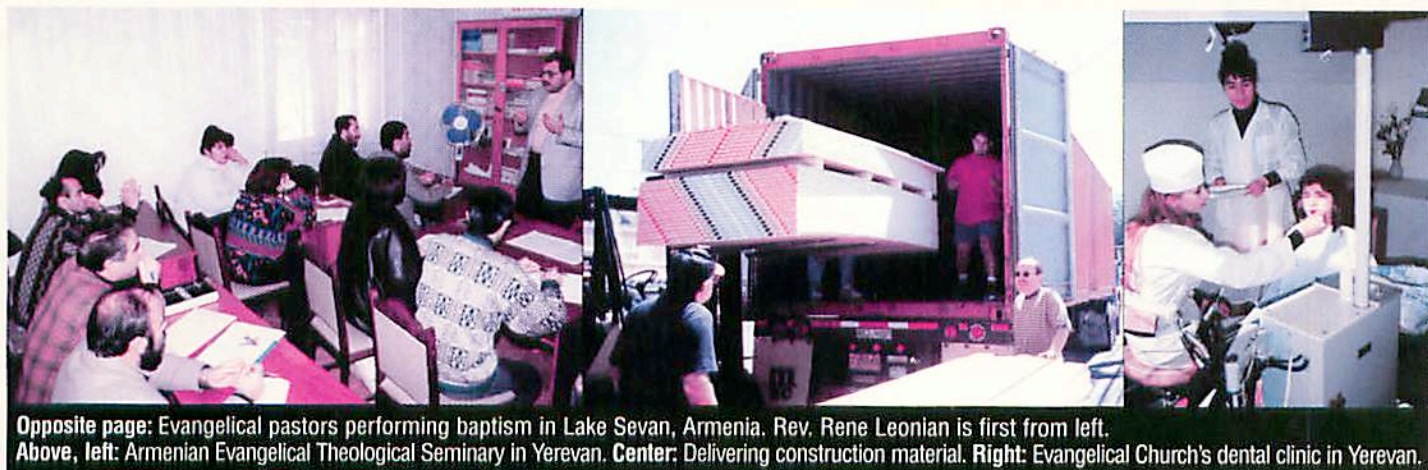
And always, Bibles and religious texts are distributed to the public.

As part of its educational campaign, the Union has distributed not only material about its own faith, but also 10,000 brochures cautioning people about the "wrong" teachings of new religious movements or "cults" in Armenia, especially the Jehovah's Witnesses, the fastest growing group in Armenia with an estimated membership of 16,000 "according to official sources," says Leonian.

Leonian believes that the cult situation is cause for concern "but not dangerous." He enumerates several possible responses toward their spread. One is "indifference on everyone's part," another is "fierce struggle against them," or "active preaching by all churches, Apostolic, Catholic and Protestant."

"Of course," he adds, "I prefer the third option."

Nevertheless, despite the Evangelical church's strong and consistent presence in Armenia, "People and government officials are not familiar with us and do not know who



Opposite page: Evangelical pastors performing baptism in Lake Sevan, Armenia. Rev. Rene Leonian is first from left. Above, left: Armenian Evangelical Theological Seminary in Yerevan. Center: Delivering construction material. Right: Evangelical Church's dental clinic in Yerevan.

we are and what we're doing. There is still a learning process there. When they compare us with cults I smile, instead of explaining the whole thing. It hurts when people who are supposed to know, don't know about us," explains AMAA's Janbazian.

The general confusion both among the population and the established churches is due in part to the intolerance of the Armenian Apostolic Church on the one hand and the state's imprecise (and at times contradictory) laws on religion, on the other.

In April 1995, an armed band attacked all non-Apostolic religious groups in Armenia, including the Armenian Evangelicals, and caused extensive damage to their properties. (The Catholics were spared the havoc, reportedly because of Armenia's diplomatic relations with the Vatican).

AMAA's Yerevan offices and the Evangelical Baptist Church were subjected to unlawful entry, search and seizure of property by Armenian government officials.

International human rights groups and the US government lodged an official protest with then President Levon Ter-Petrosian regarding violence against the Evangelicals and other religious groups such as the followers of the Hare Krishna (ISKCON). There are some 40 churches and "sects" officially registered by Armenia's State Council for Religious Affairs. The Interior Ministry apologized for the "hooligan" actions against these groups and launched a criminal investigation. To date, no one has been punished for these illegal activities.

The attack on the Evangelicals was a major embarrassment for the Armenian government, especially in view of the enormous assistance that the AMAA and its affiliate organizations provide to Armenia. Since then, however, rela-



Rev. Leonian, the AMAA representative in Armenia.

tions between the government and the Evangelical community have improved.

"Many government people and clergy do not understand people's spiritual needs," says Leonian. "The state should come up with fair laws. Law on religion should be clear and just. Freedom of religion and conscience must be guaranteed by the state," he says, adding that rules and regulations should be instituted through discussions with various groups who are affected by them and in consultation with all religious groups in Armenia.

For example, the law on humanitarian assistance by religious groups, and for that matter all charitable organizations, are unclear. Humanitarian assistance is taxed in Armenia. "Laws are vague; sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's very difficult to clear customs for humanitarian aid. We've discussed some of these problems with the authorities," explains Leonian. "Generally, we do not have

difficulties, because whenever we face a problem we deal with it through dialogue with the right channels."

Despite perennial hurdles, Leonian is resolute. "We shall maintain our presence and witness everywhere in Armenia and no one can forbid us doing so."

Indeed the current state-church relations in Armenia make the Evangelicals nervous. Unofficially, the state favors the Armenian Apostolic Church by granting certain legal privileges to the "Mother Church."

The Evangelical Church in Armenia has relatively harmonious relations with the Holy See of Ejmiatsin and the Armenian Church in general. And despite "ill will" by certain clergy of the Apostolic Church, they cooperate in some projects.

The late Catholicos Karekin I "respected and honored the Armenian Evangelical Church," affirms Leonian, "Perhaps because he was from the Diaspora, he had had close contacts with the Evangelicals and was very familiar with our work. He greatly appreciated the Evangelical contribution to the life of the nation."

It remains to be seen how Apostolic-Evangelical relations will evolve during the tenure of Catholicos Garegin II. "We hope the new Catholicos will, in his own way, find the right path of cooperation in a constructive way, which would strengthen the Apostolic Church as well," hopes Leonian.

Ultimately, "our intention is not to convert Armenia to Evangelicalism but to preach Christianity and the Gospel to Armenians," says Leonian. "Indeed, the Apostolic Church could benefit from this mission as well. We would like to see the Apostolic Church – and all churches in Armenia – preaching and working together for the spiritual welfare of our people."



Left: Armenian Evangelical children's camp in Armenia. Right: Soup kitchen for the elderly.



The Armenian Evangelical School in Anjar PROVIDING A BRIGHTER FUTURE

HARRY KOUNDAKJIAN

Ara (not his real name) was four years old when a social worker brought him to the Armenian Evangelical boarding school in Anjar, the Armenian village in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. The school was already in session and the principal insisted that Ara should come at the beginning of the following year. But the social worker could not take Ara back. "You wouldn't send him away if I told you where this child comes from," pleaded the desperate social worker. Ara was very quiet and looked disturbed, says Rev. Nersess Balabanian, 40, who is in charge of the school. "The child's father is a drug addict, his mother is a prostitute and he lives in a tiny room with two other little siblings," explains Balabanian, "we couldn't possibly return this child to that place." They took him in.

"Within a week, this child was transformed. He was running around, playing, screaming, laughing," continues Balabanian. "He opened up again. He was such a positive kid, there was nothing wrong with him except

the environment he came from." In fact, the school did not even need to solicit the services of a psychologist. "The school environment 'healed' him," says Balabanian with a satisfied smile.

That was two years ago. Ara, now six, is one of 120 boarding students at the school, 80 percent of whom come from troubled families, the majority of them in Beirut. But the school's student body is mixed. Unlike orphanages or other "special" schools, this school also caters to some 200 local Anjar students.



HARRY KOUNDAKJIAN

The Evangelical church in Anjar was established in 1939 when some 5,000 Armenians fled Musa Dagh to escape Turkish atrocities and were relocated in the area by the French army. The school started in 1940.

In 1947, the "Angel of Anjar" Sister Hedwig Aenishanslin of the German-Swiss Hilfsbund (Helping Bond) Missionary organization came to Anjar from Greece to help Armenian orphans. The Armenian-speaking Sister Hedwig and two other sisters were part of the Armenian mission, which was established in 1896 by Pastor Ernst Lohmann of Frankfurt in the wake of the 19th century Armenian massacres in the Ottoman Empire.

"We are here as the representatives of the Christian Hilfsbund in the Orient, a joint German-Swiss Mission," explains Gottfried Spangenberg, the current director of the mission in Anjar, who has been there for 15 years.

For over a century, the little known Hilfsbund has served the Armenian people in various parts of the world. Spangenberg explains that "Pastor Lohmann had heard

about the Armenian massacres in an American magazine. He published articles about the situation of the Armenians in German church magazines. There was a very quick response to his appeal and through the help of various other smaller organizations, they were able to take care of Armenian orphans and widows affected by the Ottoman massacres."

The Hilfsbund mission set up schools and vocational classes. After the 1915 Genocide, the German-Swiss missionaries cared for 500 to 700 orphans. Later, they ran a hospital and a boarding school in Marash, Turkey. However, in 1932 the Turks expelled the missionaries. Between the two world wars, they had started relief work for Armenians in Greece, Varna and Plovdiv, Bulgaria. After World War II, they moved their relief work to Anjar.

"Currently, our work is primarily in Lebanon and Syria," says Spangenberg, adding that the organization is in the process of reassessing its mission. "We are in a transition to hand over our operations to the Armenian community," he explains. "This handover is spread over a 10-year period, so that the transfer is smooth and without major problems." Starting in 2001, the annual financial grants of Hilfsbund to the school will decrease by 10 percent until it is phased out by the end of 2011. Meanwhile, all real estate and other properties have been officially transferred to the Armenian Evangelical community of Lebanon.

Since the 1988 earthquake in Armenia, Hilfsbund has also sent material help to Armenia. "For the last six years, we have two people in Armenia helping the Zadik orphanage in Yerevan," says Spangenberg.

In the 1970s, the running of the school and the dormitory was divided between the Armenian Evangelical community in Anjar and the German-Swiss Mission. The Armenians assumed responsibility for the school. By 2011, the entire institution will be the Evangelical Church's responsibility.

The boarding school in Anjar is one of only two schools in the Diaspora that provide residential care and education to "orphans" and children from troubled families. The other is the Birds Nest in Jibel, Lebanon, run by the Catholicosate of Cilicia. (The other two residential facilities are regular boarding schools: the Melkonian School in Nicosia, Cyprus and the Armenian College in Calcutta, India.)

"We have children from divorced or broken families, children from very poor families, and some orphans," says Balabanian. "There are also some unwanted children. When one parent remarries, the new spouse doesn't want the children. We have victims of abuse, and even a few rare cases of sexually



Opposite page, top: Students at the Evangelical School in Anjar.

Opposite page, bottom: Entrance to Anjar. Above: Ecumenism in Anjar: (L to R) Rev. Raffi Misserlian, Rev. Nersess Balabanian (Evangelical church and school); Fr. Harutiun Karakashian (Apostolic Church); Fr. Jean Orchanian (Catholic Church) in front of the Musa Dagh Memorial Monument.

abused children," he adds.

Most of the children are brought to the school by social workers serving in the Jinishian and Karageozian social service centers in Beirut. But not all the boarders are disadvantaged children.

"We have students who come from very well-off families, whose parents pay full tuition and boarding expenses," says the Aleppo-born Balabanian who studied music and theology in Dallas, Texas. "Parents, for example from Syria, come and see our school and decide to send their child, because we are nearer and cheaper than the Melkonian School in Cyprus."

They also have a few students from southern Syria, near the Israeli border. "An Armenian shepherd, married to an Arab woman, has six children," explains Balabanian. "There is nothing Armenian around or near where they live. Their paternal grandmother was Armenian, but the kids did not speak any Armenian, they spoke Arabic. Currently we have four of the children studying at our school. One of them will graduate this year," he says.

Then there is an 18-year-old student from Bulgaria, whose mother was the principal of the Armenian school in Plovdiv. During the Gulf war, a few students came from Iraq and

Kuwait, as well.

"Last year, we even had an application from New York, a 16-year-old girl," says Balabanian. "Her grades were not impressive, plus, we thought a teenage girl raised in America would have difficulty living in the context and environment of our school in Anjar."

Visitors to the school and especially the dormitories are impressed by the immaculately clean living quarters of the children and the serene natural surroundings. The children have homemade meals three times a day. One day last fall, 300 dolmas were being prepared for lunch.

The annual tuition for kindergarten is about \$500 and as much as \$1000 for high school. "Even if every parent pays tuition, which they don't — only one third do — we still need to do fundraising," says Balabanian. "Only one third of our budget is generated through tuition paid by the parents. We have to raise the rest ourselves."

As the Diaspora's focus has shifted to Armenia, the school has been receiving very little from their "traditional" donors in the US. "We received about \$10,000 from the AMAA," says Balabanian with concern.

The school's non-teaching staff of 30 all come from Anjar, as do most of the 30 teachers,



Students and staff of the Armenian Evangelical School in Anjar, the Armenian village in the Bekaa Valley.

explains Rev. Raffi Messerlian, 31. Messerlian, born in Beirut, studied at Haigazian University and the Near East School of Theology and has been principal since October.

During Lebanon's nearly two-decade long Civil War, the school continued to operate, despite many shortcomings; they didn't even have a telephone. Today, they have cellular

phones, e-mail and an Internet connection.

But as with all Diaspora communities, there are also divisions in tiny Anjar – along denominational and political lines. The village's less than 2,500 residents have three churches: Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical.

In addition to the Evangelical school, there is another high school affiliated with the Armenian

Apostolic Church of Lebanon; it was established in 1970. While some teachers work at both schools, there is very little cooperation between them other than the celebration of national holidays. "We have certain official contacts but deep down we do not have a dialogue on mutual concerns," says Balabanian. Both schools have financial difficulties. Recently, there was some discussion on joining the upper grades. But, "this is only a wish at this point and nothing more," he adds.

The Christian character and context of the school is an important part of its work. The care provided to the students is based on the faith and mission of the Evangelical church.

In a 1996 message to the students, Rev. Dieter Schultz, General Secretary of Hilfsbund Mission said, "Even the little contribution of the Hilfsbund helps the children of the Evangelical School to become people who carry the praise and the love of God into the world. Especially, you all as Armenians have a great task from God to witness by your history that Jesus Christ stands beside a people even in need and trouble."

The Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East COPING WITH THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR

Established in 1924, the Lebanon-based Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East is one of the oldest among the five Unions that comprise the Armenian Evangelical Church. It is a union of over two dozen churches and congregations in seven countries in the Middle East and one church in Australia, as the origin of the Sydney church is traced back to Lebanon and Syria.

Each member church in the Union is autonomous in its internal affairs; however, certain Union-wide functions are centralized, such as the screening of candidates for the ministry. New recruits study at the Near East School of Theology, and at Haigazian University.

Unlike those in other parts of the world, the Armenian Evangelicals in Lebanon, as part of the Evangelical Denomination of Lebanon [*Taefa Protestant*], are one of the officially recognized communities in the country's sectarian political system.

"The Denomination has wide cooperation with the Armenian Evangelical community and is much closer to the Armenian

milieu," says Rev. Megerdich Karageozian, President of the Near East Union, "but legally and formally we are part of the Evangelical Denomination of Lebanon."

The Denomination is guaranteed one seat in the Lebanese Parliament. And since 1972 the "Protestant MP" has been an Armenian as well. In the past Antranik Manoogian and Nourjan Demirjian have served as MPs; currently Abraham Dedeyan represents the interests of all the Evangelicals in Lebanon.

"An estimated five percent of Armenians

in Lebanon are Evangelicals," says Rev. Karageozian. "Currently that is probably around 5-6,000 members."

Over the last two decades, thousands have left Lebanon depleting the human and financial resources of the church. Especially during the Lebanese Civil War, "50 percent of our congregation emigrated," says Rev. Karageozian.

The Union closed two schools in Zahleh and Tripoli due to lack of students and one school in Beirut was closed due to difficult

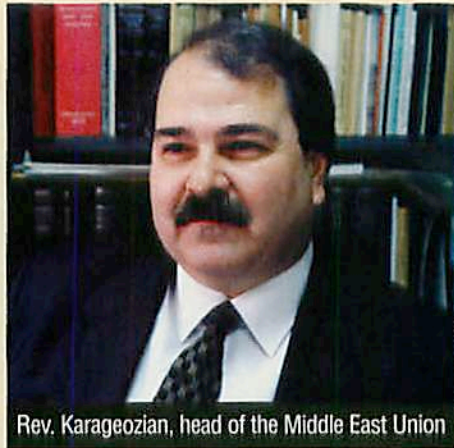


Left: The Karagehusian clinic and social service center. Right: The Evangelical College (high school).

financial conditions. But the community continues to educate some 1,600 students in three secondary, two middle and two elementary schools in Lebanon, with help from endowment funds. Before the beginning of the war, the Evangelical schools had more than 5,000 students in their schools. "The economic well-being of the population has been disrupted because of the war and emigration." He explains that the community expects the Union to provide scholarships and cover the cost of every student who attends their schools. "In the past, a \$100 scholarship meant a lot, but today an upper class student costs about \$2000," he explains.

But the pride of the Armenian Evangelical Church is the Haigazian University, the only higher education institution in the Diaspora (see story below).

In addition to education, the Union has a social service office and several joint projects with other Armenian charitable organizations. In cooperation with the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Evangelical Union is involved



Rev. Karageozian, head of the Middle East Union

with the operation of the Armenian infirmary in Azunieh, the home for the elderly and a center for the blind in Bourj Hammoud. The Union also cooperates with the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon and the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem.

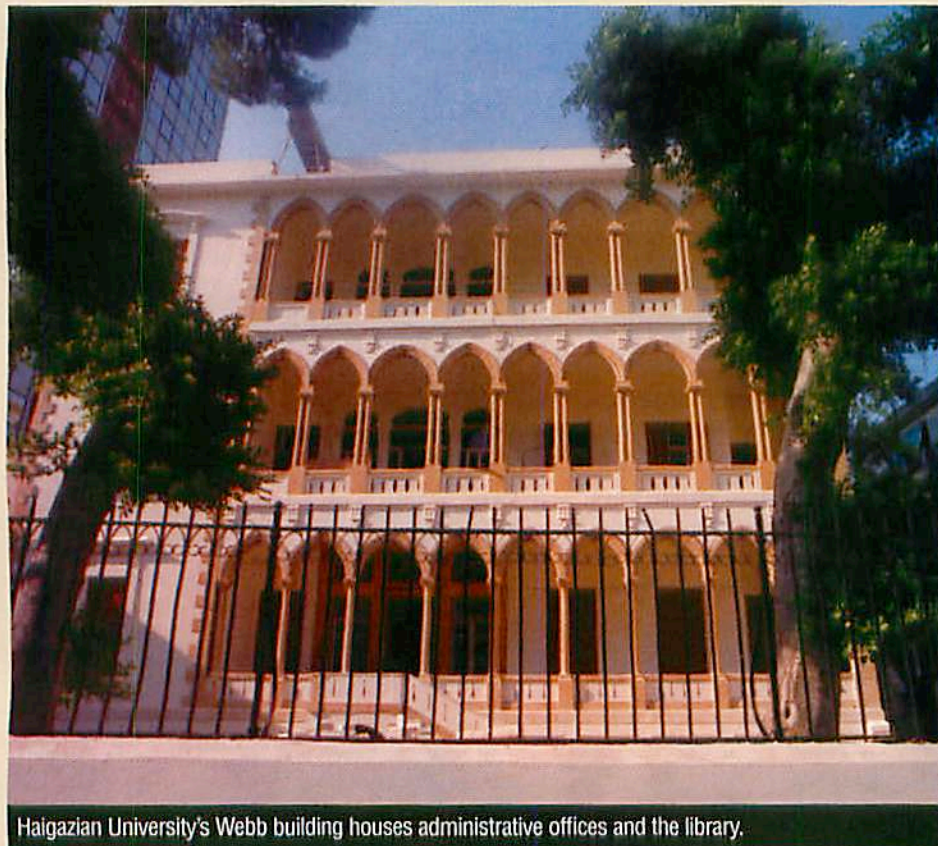
The fortysomething Karageozian is part of a new generation of Evangelical leaders

who have brought a new "thinking process" in the community. "We are 20-25 years late in instituting administrative reforms," he says, "probably because of the war in Lebanon. He mentions a case of embezzlement in the church, for example, and adds, "we should have had a system to prevent that." In general, "People recognize the need for reforms," he adds, "but we have a conceptual problem in reconciling professionalism with pastoral concerns."

In addition to organizational issues, there are many pastoral challenges. "There are new problems to deal with," says Rev. Karageozian and notes an "increase of divorce cases related to financial problems." And as a side effect of financial problems there is "increasing cases of drug use and gambling," he says with alarm.

The Union, under its new, younger leadership has started a process of reassessment and reorganization to better conduct its mission under changing times and circumstances.

HAIGAZIAN UNIVERSITY IN LEBANON



Haigazian University's Webb building houses administrative offices and the library.

One of the most valuable contributions of the Armenian Evangelical Church and its commitment to education is the establishment of the Haigazian University in Beirut. After four decades, it remains the only Armenian institution of higher education in the Diaspora. Haigazian – which has graduated over 1,600 students since its founding in 1955 – is accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education of Lebanon and is a member of the Association of International Colleges and Universities. It offers 19 undergraduate and four graduate degree programs.

The university is named after Yale University graduate Dr. Armenag Haigazian (1879-1921), the former principal of the Jenanian Apostolic Institute in Konya, Turkey. A respected educator and community leader, Haigazian died on the road to exile in Kharpert. His family in the US donated the seed money for the establishment of the school.

Haigazian, which had 550 students in 1999, is one of 13 universities in Lebanon and among the handful that offer classes in English, in league with the well-known, 4000-student American University of Beirut

(AUB) and the expensive, 4500-student Lebanese American University (LAU). About 58 percent of the students are Armenians and the rest Lebanese and a few foreign students. It has some 100 full and part-time staff and a mixed faculty of whom about 35 percent are Armenian.

In comparison with other universities, "We provide quality education," says Houry Mekhdjian, the university's full time recruiter and a business administration graduate of Haigazian. "We have a cozy, family atmosphere and each student gets personal attention. Students do not become just numbers," she adds.

If still not convinced, she mentions the most important incentive in post-war Lebanon, "Haigazian is much more affordable than other universities." Having gone through the university program herself, Mekhdjian introduces Haigazian to various Armenian and non-Armenian high schools in Lebanon and talks to prospective students with confidence as to how they can "depend on Haigazian for excellent education."

"We have a small campus, the students are much more disciplined and much more friendly," says Najoie Nasr, a professor and former Citibank executive who teaches statistics, marketing and management full time in the Economics Department. "Of course, other schools have a larger diversity of students, both within political and religious lines, that we do not have. But our administration and faculty are much more focused on the students. They care about their students."

As for the quality of education, Nasr mentions with pride that those of her students who have gone to AUB for Masters degrees "are doing extremely well."

Like other institutions, there are cultural, linguistic and political differences among the students, but "They are all Lebanese, whether Armenian or non-Armenian," says Nazim Nouiehed, a graduate of City University of New York and professor of mathematics since 1996. "Ultimately, it is the quality of education that matters," he adds.

Indeed, Haigazian does not have the conventional parochialism found, for example, at Catholic institutions. "It is incidental that Haigazian is Armenian, what's important is the level of professionalism that you have here," says Canadian-born Ailsa McLardy, Coordinator of Continuing Adult Education.

The high cost of university education, at least by Lebanese standards, remains a major

problem for many students and their families, especially in view of the still struggling Lebanese economy. Estimated annual full tuition is about \$6,000 at Haigazian.

"We attract the middle-class which is economically hit the hardest," Mekhdjian continues. "We're into the second semester this year and have some 300 students who have not paid their full fees yet."

Then there is the Lebanese social status factor. "Most of the guys study for future careers, but for most of the girls, university education is a status symbol," says Ara Sanjian, professor of history and cultural studies. "A girl from a wealthy family has less interest in developing a career, than those girls who go through great difficulties in paying for their education," he explains.

The university also offers a Lifelong Learning Adult Education Program coordinated by McLardy. Started in the early 1990s, close to 80 adults are enrolled in the university's two most popular programs: a continuing education for adults who never had a chance to study at a university and an in service teachers training program.



Houry Mekhdjian, Recruiter.

Last year 85 percent of all Armenian students in Lebanon who sought a university education applied to Haigazian. A significant number of them needed financial assistance and received various degrees of financial assistance from the university, which amounted to about \$300,000 in 1999. Haigazian president Dr. John Khanjian says 90 percent of the university's two million dollar budget is covered by tuition payments. "To be tuition driven is not healthy, especially if you are a not-for-profit organization," says Khanjian. Further development and expansion will require new endowment funds to preserve the competitive edge of the university. ■

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(818) 246-9962

207 South Brand
Boulevard
Suite 106
Glendale, CA 91204