



AMMA

NEWS





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Fidelity to the Mission of Renewal

By Hrach Tchilingirian, Ph.D.*

One of the most impressive characteristics of the Armenian Evangelical Church is the fact that, despite being small in numbers among Armenians worldwide, this 175-year-old church is one of the most active, visible and organized institutions in the Armenian world. Today, the mission, value and legitimacy of the Armenian Evangelical Church is indisputable, even as there had been periodic conflicts with the Armenian Apostolic Church in the past and after Armenia's independence.

Throughout their history and ministry, the Armenian Evangelicals have shown fidelity to the original mission of the church: the spiritual renewal of Armenians, the "Christian renaissance" of the Armenian nation. It is not a coincidence that the Armenian Protestant Church was established in the 19th century during the Armenian "intellectual renaissance" in the Ottoman Empire. Historians agree that a separate Armenian Protestant denomination was "imported" and "implanted" by European and United States missionaries but are divided over the causes and effects of events which led to the establishment of a separate church movement.

As Rev. Dr. Vahan H. Tootikian, a minister and prolific author of many books, describes, "submission to Christ's commandments is utmost priority for the members of the Armenian Evangelical Church." The preaching of the Gospel and complete commitment to Christ have been visible and indispensable aspects of the Armenian Evangelical Church. Yet, upholding Armenian religious, cultural and patriotic traditions in community life and pursuing the rights of the Armenian people have been equally important.

The "national mission" of the Armenian Evangelical Church was described most profoundly by the late Rev. Dr. Movses Janbazian, a charismatic leader, at the first Armenia-Diaspora Conference in September 1999. During his official



Haigazian University, Beirut, Lebanon.

address as representative of the worldwide Armenian Evangelicals, Rev. Janbazian communicated the Evangelical community'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 strong 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. At this unprecedented national gathering, rather than a narrow denominational understanding, Rev. Janbazian 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."

Among the many contributions to Armenian life, two main areas of great impact stand out: *education* and *Christian charity*. While Christian education is part of the church's core mission, the Armenian Evangelical Church is well known for its network of high quality public schools throughout the Armenian world. They have 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 Evangelical schools are not only well known for the quality of curriculum, teaching staff and administration, but for the values and moral fortitude they instill in the students. The fact that most of their students come from non-Evangelical families is a testament to their success.

The crown-jewel of the Armenian Evangelical Church's commitment to education is the founding of Haigazian

College (later University) in Beirut in 1955. It remains the only Armenian institution of higher education in the Diaspora and is accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education of Lebanon. It is a member of the Association of International Colleges and Universities and offers over 20 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Historically significant, the University is named after Yale University graduate Dr. Armenag Haigazian (1879-1921), former Principal of the Jenanian Apostolic Institute in Konya, Turkey. A respected educator and community leader, during the Genocide, Haigazian died on the road to exile in Kharpert. His family in the United States donated seed money for the establishment of the school.

Perhaps the secret of the success of the Armenian Evangelical Church is its decentralized nature and the fact that it does not have a hierarchy. Unlike the Apostolic and the Catholic Churches, the Evangelicals do not have a supreme head or central headquarters. The more liberal, consensual and accommodating organizational model of the Armenian Evangelicals gives them an advantage to operate effectively in the globalized 21st century. Arguably, 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.

It is only in recent decades 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. The AMAA's mission focuses on charity, education, financial assistance and "the spiritual growth and development of the Armenian people." Since the 1988 earthquake and especially since Armenia's independence, the bulk of the AMAA's resources and contributions have gone to Armenia and Artsakh, where they have established permanent offices. Many times, the AMAA and its affiliates have punched above their weight and provided enormous amounts of assistance that belie their small size and capacities.

During the last nearly two centuries, the relations of the Evangelical Armenians with the "Mother Church," the Armenian Apostolic Church, have not always been smooth. But the late Catholicos Karekin I (Sarkissian) of All Armenians, at the 150th Anniversary celebrations in Yerevan, praised the ministry of the Evangelicals in the life of the Armenian nation and "prayed for the Armenian Evangelicals to become stronger and spread their spiritual values among [the] nation, together with the Armenian Apostolic Church."

Commitment to the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, commitment to education and the well being of the Armenian nation, and commitment to doing charity work where needed are defining values of the Armenian Evangelical Church. "When every criticism has been made, and every allowance recorded for the imperfection of the Armenian Evangelical Church," wrote Rev. Tootikian, "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 clear mission and vision set 175 years ago will, no doubt, continue for many generations to come. The Armenian Evangelicals are small in size but significant in their impact. □



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