

Transitioning From a Dues Membership System To a Pledge Membership System

By Dr. Michael Shahnasarian

Membership in St Hagop Armenian Church

My brothers and sisters in Christ, in this epistle I speak to you about a weighty endeavor your parish council undertook 4 years ago: redefining St. Hagop Armenian Church membership and, by extension, the implications for stewardship - in particular, at St. Hagop.

Those an Armenian priest baptizes – regardless of their ethnicity – are members of the Armenian Church. Like many Armenian Churches, St. Hagop has required a monetary payment (specifically, annual dues of \$125 for adults, and \$50 for ages 18 to 24) for recognition and rights as a church member, a distinction beyond being an Armenian Christian. This payment has entitled members to voting privileges in our annual assembly elections and the right to run for an office in the church’s governance.

Candidly, there have been times – including during my service on the parish council – when I was unaware my dues as a St. Hagop member lapsed and, technically, I was not a church member . . . until I discovered my name’s absence from a roster announcing dues paid members! I trust this also may have happened to you. My naiveté led me to unconsciously assume my church involvement – including making monetary contributions to assorted church causes, making plate contributions, and participating in church leadership – along with my self-identification as a member of St. Hagop Armenian Church, sufficiently qualified me as a church member. In short, my definition of being a church member was not based on the sole requirement of making a timely dues payment.

My reaction during these revelations was initially to recoil and say to myself: “What! St. Hagop is my primary place of worship, and I make financial contributions to it beyond paying membership dues, including giving the church my best efforts to facilitate its development. Yet, I am not a church member because I am delinquent in paying my dues???”

Your parish council’s discussions during the past 4 years, our 2015 parish survey, and St. Hagop’s stewardship committee (composed of Fr. Hovnan, David Kazarian, Chuck Sarkisian, and me) have led to a determination that membership in our church is much deeper than paying annual dues. Simply submitting to a specified monetary payment at a specified time, we believe, diminishes the meaning of being a church member, likening it to membership in other organizations in which rights are extended for a fee - such as a fitness center or social club. After all, anyone can pay a due to join an organization; being a member of a church is much, much more.

After considerable analysis, deliberation, and prayer, St. Hagop has committed to transition from a dues-paying membership system to a pledge system. This will involve a paradigm shift in how we both think about being a church member and monetarily commit to it.

Church Membership and Stewardship

Two tenants – one ecclesiastical, and the other predicated on the economic reality of living in a free market world - undergird our premise that making a monetary commitment to a church is an element of being a member of it. Proverbs 16:3 instructs us *Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established*. Christian principles teach us stewardship is an ethic that embodies the responsible planning and management of resources, especially those we allocate to God.

The man-made reality that, as an organization generating expenses associated with pursuing its missions and responsible to the greater secular community in which it has the privilege to exist, St. Hagop has operational costs. This, of course, also drives our need to ask parishioners to make monetary contributions that enable us to do the work God desires.

Accordingly, after much discussion, analysis of membership definitions at other churches (both within our diocese and beyond) and their stewardship practices, prayer, and reflection, your St. Hagop stewardship committee has adopted the following definition of membership in our church:

Members of St. Hagop Armenian Church are baptized Christians, committed to incorporating our Lord's teachings in their lives, and have made a monetary gift to support the church.

One objective in transitioning from an annual dues system to a pledge system is, in part, to debunk parochial fee-for-service thinking that permeates secular society. That is, monetarily valuing membership in a church like one would if shopping for groceries, paying a tip for service at a restaurant, or otherwise seeking to pay fair value for items selected and consumed. Gifts to God cannot be predicated and valued in terms of tangible benefits we derive.

The differing connotations of the words “due” and “pledge” also undermine our efforts to implement the paradigm shift we seek. A due, imposed by an external source, is an obligatory amount owed; a pledge, deriving from one’s heart and soul, is a choice and promise to make a financial gift. When the pledge is to a church, the promise takes on even more meaning: it becomes a covenant with God, furthering our efforts to incorporate Christian practice in our lives. Membership in a church defies something you can purchase and tangibly consume.

Additionally, a pledge incorporates elements of planned and disciplined giving, assisting us to live as practicing Christians – namely, reminding us that all we have, both monetary and nonmonetary, is a gift from God (John 3:27 *A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.*), and He commands us to give a portion of our treasure to Him. Making an annual pledge and regular giving to our church helps to instill Christian practice in our lives.

Why Make an Annual Pledge to St. Hagop?

Winston Churchill famously said *We make a living by what we get but we make a life by what we give*. This statement punctuates the notion that giving enriches us as humans and, by extension, as members in Christ's family. Romans 12:10 instructs us *Be devoted to each other like a loving family*. As members of St. Hagop's church family, our responsibility includes contributing to its ministries and operations, including its funding needs. The privilege of being an Armenian with access to a church where we can practice our faith and perpetuate our heritage comes with the responsibility to sustain it.

As Christians, we naturally think of our church as a sanctuary apart from the ordinary world and immune from many things we encounter in our daily lives – including bills and taxes. The reality, of course, is that all profit and nonprofit organizations, churches notwithstanding, incur operating costs. There are many expenses associated with operating a church. To name a few: clergy stipend, cleaning service, utilities, insurances, maintenance of church buildings and grounds, printing and postage costs . . . and many other things easy to overlook, such as the cost of candles, incense, food and beverages provided gratuitously at numerous events, and, yes, taxes!

For sake of reference, St. Hagop's 2016 annual budget is based on revenues of approximately \$200, 000. The Eastern Diocese, to which St. Hagop belongs, requires its churches to pay a per member fee of \$85 per year; in prior years, this amount was deducted from the \$125 annual St. Hagop membership due, leaving St. Hagop \$40. With approximately 175 annual donors of record in 2016 (excluding ticketed events like dances, picnics, etc.), membership dues alone, as you can see, have generated a fraction (approximately \$8,000) of the amount needed for St. Hagop to remain financially afloat. Congregation members, friends of the church, and many fund raising activities have made up the shortfall.

As a church community committed to our Lord, we seek to continuously rise to a higher level of spiritual development and service. St. Hagop is evolving from an establishment phase in its development, and is postured to develop and grow its ministries as our Lord pleases. God's grace enabled St. Hagop to establish a vibrant community in Southwest Florida – one that allows us to practice as Armenian Christians and perpetuate Armenian culture. In 2017 St. Hagop will celebrate its 10th anniversary and the 10th anniversary of Der Hovnan Demerjian becoming a priest. We will also host the 115th Eastern Diocesan convention.

It is not our place to specify or suggest an amount for you to pledge or give. That is a private matter, to be determined by you and your family. The amount, we believe, should be determined by your reconciliation of many factors, most importantly looking into your heart and assessing both your means and what you can afford, and prayer. Rather than mandate a specified, to-be-paid annual dues amount, the St. Hagop parish council has adopted the notion of proportionate giving; namely, parishioners' giving should be governed by their means and proportionate to their capacity to give, rather than specified by an external source.

I spoke with our diocesan primate, Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, in January 2016 about our planned conversion to a stewardship system that included a pledge component when he was in town to consecrate our church hall. He referenced other Armenian Churches that use this system, and gave us his blessings to proceed.

Pledge Conversion Logistics

Stewardship will be a prominent theme at St. Hagop during the upcoming months as we transition from an annual dues system to a pledge system. Among other things, you will hear sermons on this topic and testimonials from parishioners who plan to make a pledge. Additionally, John Shamsey, a parishioner and estate lawyer, has agreed to provide counsel to those considering leaving a gift in their will to St. Hagop (more information on this is forthcoming).

Our planned calendar to implement the transition is as follows:

- July through September 2016 – Sermons on stewardship and testimonials from congregation members
- September 30, 2016 - Pledge forms will be mailed to all parishioners
- October 30, 2016 - Pledge Sunday
- November 15, 2016 - Final deadline to submit pledge forms
- December 10, 2016 - Distribution of pledge envelopes
- January 1, 2017 - Beginning of pledge system at St. Hagop

Under the new pledge system St. Hagop will continue to owe the diocese an annual fee, based on donors of record. More logistical information on our conversion will follow.

Summary

St. Hagop is in the midst of an effort to impart a paradigm shift encouraging parishioners to view their church membership more spiritually. In this vein, the concept of proportionate giving – contributing proportionate with your means – via a monetary pledge is being encouraged. We hope to inspire you to look within your heart and soul to determine a contribution amount, proportionate with your means, that is right for you, and to inspire you to be cognizant of the importance of stewardship in your daily Christian lives.

In addition to an annual pledge, we pray your stewardship commitment to St. Hagop and its ministries will go beyond plate contributions. Many parishioners have, for example, remembered St. Hagop in their estates, and others are establishing endowments to fund various church ministries.

Please contact Der Hayr, me, or members of our stewardship committee or parish council with any questions. May God bless and keep you.