

## **Interview of Ara Palamoudian, Chairman of the Armenian Community & Church Council of Great Britain, with ‘Greetings London’ internet Newsletter and Website:**

### **Greetings London:**

- *In most of our smaller communities in the Diaspora, the setup of the Churches, around which the community structures are constructed, typically consist of a democratically elected Diocesan Council (Temagan Khorhourt) comprising of lay delegates and clerical delegates, and an Administrative Council (Varchagan Khorhourt). What is the setup here in our community and why?*
- *What are the responsibilities and role of the Communal and Church Council and how is it formed? To whom do they answer?*

### **AP:**

I would like to answer your first two questions together:

One needs to know the structure of each of the three Armenian churches that function in the UK so as to understand the current structure of the Community.

The oldest of the three churches is the Holy Trinity Church of Manchester. The church is owned by a Charity Trust but is managed by a Committee of Wardens who are elected by the members of the community in Manchester and surrounding areas. The Trust is autonomous and whilst the church functions under the jurisdiction of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin, the Trust and trustees have full rights and control over the church property and assets.

The St Sarkis Church in Iverna Gardens, in Kensington is also owned and governed by a Charity Trust which was set up by the Benefactor, Calouste Gulbenkian. The trustees are not elected by the community, and any new trustee is invited into office by the existing trustees. A trustee can remain in office for life. The trustees are not answerable to anyone for their decisions, and have full control of the St Sarkis Church property and its other assets. The Trust has its own capital and also receives contributions from the “St Sarkis Trust” which is another Charity Trust set up by Mr Gulbenkian.

In the late 1950's and early 60's, there was a large influx of Armenians mainly from Cyprus and Iran, and some other Middle Eastern areas, and the community number rose to a few thousands, and the Community Council of the time felt there was the need for a church managed by the community, for the community. They therefore decided to lease a church building from the Church of England, initially in St Johns Wood and later the St Peters Church in Cranley Gardens, Kensington. The Community Council was renamed the “Community and Church Council of Great Britain” (ACCC) and so as to fund the running expenses of the community's church and also all the other functions carried out by the ACCC, a community “community contribution” was introduced. So as not to create the burden of a “compulsory levy” upon the community, the community contribution has always been a voluntary one. Naturally it is hoped that every adult member of the community would recognise his or her responsibility and make the minimal payment which is currently £20 per year.

For some 20 years the community leased the St Peters Church for a nominal rental from the Church of England. The church building was aged and in need of extensive renovation which the community could not afford. Luckily, the well known benefactor, Mr Vatche Manoukian, came forward and purchased the property from the Church of England and renovated the church to the splendid standard which it is in today, and having renamed and re-consecrated it the “St Yeghiche Church”, Mr Manoukian made the church available again to the ACCC for the community's church services.

Mr Manoukian established a Trust to look after the building of the church and we are most grateful to him that apart from providing the church building, his Trust also pays all the maintenance expenses of the church building such as cleaning, heating and electricity. I must stress that although the Manoukian Trust maintains the church property, it does not in any way involve itself with the running or management of the church in its ecclesiastical sense, which is the responsibility of the ACCC. That is to say, the ACCC is responsible for the functioning of the community's church and responsible for paying for its clergymen and all other church functioning expenses.

I read the Editorial Column of your issue which was published last Thursday, 19<sup>th</sup> November, and the impression you give about St Yeghiche may be inaccurately construed. Whilst the St Yeghiche church building does belong to the Manoukian Trust, Mr Vatche Manoukian has remained faithful to his word when he purchased the building, and he has returned the free use of the church to the Armenian Community & Church Council, and the ACCC has full and

complete authority over the management of the community's church. Naturally, as with all churches, in all ecclesiastical matters, the church and its clergymen are under the direction of the Primate of the Armenian churches in the U.K.

Speaking about the St Yeghiche Church, I may have agreed with your arguments in your Editorial had the situation been that the Manoukian Trust appointed the church pastor and became involved in the management of the "church" in its "ecclesiastical" sense, however, clearly that is not the case, and I am convinced also, that it was never Mr Manoukian's intention for it to be so. We are most fortunate and grateful to the benefactor for free use of the church building - with heating, cleaning and lighting all paid for – the ACCC does not receive financial support from Mr Manoukian for the management of the church and it is up to the ACCC to find the funds to pay for our share of the Primate's stipend, the pastor for church services and all other church running expenses, which, by the way, amount to about £45,000 per year. The ACCC has no hidden sources of funding and unless every member of the community who attends the community's church and makes use of its services, pays the small annual contribution request of them, then the community's church and the other functions organised by the ACCC for the community could not continue to be maintained. To support the ACCC is a community duty, and I would like to appeal to every member of our community not to neglect their responsibilities.

The structure of the ACCC is as follows:

Every four years those members of the community who have registered themselves with the ACCC and have paid their Community Contribution elect seventeen persons to serve on the Community's Council.

The Council appoints its Executive Committee which normally comprises some members from the Council together with volunteer members of the community. The Executive Committee is entrusted with the day to day business of the community and it is responsible for the proper functioning of the community's church, collection of the Community Contributions, etc. To assist the Executive in its duties, the Executive appoints various sub committees and the unusual ones are (a) The Church and Pastoral Committee, (b) the ACCC's Ladies Committee, (c) the Heritage and Cultural Committee, (d) Community Contribution and Membership Committee and (e) the "e" Committee which deals with Information Technology and has just assumed responsibility for the ACCC's new website, [www.accc.org.uk](http://www.accc.org.uk) .

Apart from its responsibility for the functioning of the community's church, the ACCC also deals with all matters in the interest of the community. The ACCC has a close interest upon the K. Tahta Armenian Community Sunday School which was started by the ACCC and the ACCC appoints the school's trustees. We also, pursue all matters of national interest such as campaigning for recognition of the Armenian Genocide and also of course we do all we can within our limited resources to support and maintain relationships with Armenia and the Armenian Embassy in London.

You will see that the structure of the ACCC is very much in the lines of the "Diocesan Structure" you describe in your first question, although its remit is much wider since it functions as a universal representative body of the British Armenian community, and within its sphere of responsibilities is of course included the community's church.

The Armenian Community & Church Council is the only body which is democratically elected by the registered members of the community, and naturally, as in all democratic systems, the Council is answerable to its electors, the community. Every registered and contribution paying member of the community is entitled to question the actions of the Council and is entitled to exercise his or her democratic right to elect the Council and also to stand for election to membership of the Council. All the rules and regulations are clearly defined in the Constitution of the ACCC and a copy can be emailed to anybody who asks for it by emailing [info@accc.org.uk](mailto:info@accc.org.uk) .

- *What are the main problems and concerns that the C and C council has, taking into account the multicultural and multiethnic country in which we live?*

We are extremely fortunate to be an ethnic minority in the United Kingdom since as you say, we live in a multicultural and multiethnic State and as British Armenians, we enjoy complete freedom to cultivate our ethnic culture and traditions and to enjoy freedom of speech and worship. Concerns naturally exist, as in all similar societies throughout the World, about dangers of assimilation and gradual loss of our national identity and culture.

- *The widespread use of English and parallel to that the dwindling numbers of adults and young persons who use Armenian in their homes and in between themselves is a worrying trend. What are we doing to stem the tide? Are the measures we have taken effective?*

The concern you express about the diminishing use of the Armenian language within the younger generations is a most serious one and the problem exists throughout the World except in Armenia. Communities in countries where the national culture and religion has been vastly differing to ours, for example in non-Christian societies, the Armenian community has had the need to congregate around its church, schools and clubs, and the use of the language has been somewhat preserved. However, as we all know, in the USA and Europe, the battle is being gradually lost due to the pressures of modern life, and indeed, even the need for advanced levels of education which can only be obtained in the language of the host country.

I cannot accept any argument put forward in the lines that in larger Armenian communities, there are flourishing Armenian schools. Firstly, even the students of those schools turn to speaking English, French etc as soon as they are outside the school gates, and secondly, I am aware of only one or two educational establishments which teach to University level. Therefore, of necessity, every young Armenian must be proficient in the language of the host country and therefore also of necessity, Armenian will inevitably be the young person's second language. Most regrettably, my opinion is that we must reconcile ourselves to these realities. However am not saying that we should succumb to these pressures, but must do our utmost that our children become either bi-lingual or at least attain a satisfactory command of Armenian as their second language, and I am convinced that however hard we try to teach the Armenian language in our full-time schools and Saturday or Sunday schools, there is the absolute need to instil within the young person the Armenian identity, and that can be achieved only by our youth spending time in Armenia as young students, charity workers, in summer camps especially arranged for the youth, etc. I am certain that the whole mind-frame of a young Armenian changes and he or she assumes pride in being Armenian once he or she visits Armenia and witnesses the fact that everything around him or her is "Armenian", and that it is OK to be "Armenian" and to be proud of being one.

In reply to the final part of your question, the measures taken thus far have not been fully effective for the reasons I have stated, but they were the best possible under the circumstances. Now that Armenia is freely accessible, I am optimistic that the tide will gradually turn and our younger generations, because of their contact with Armenia, will want to be bi-lingual, and indeed, also more energetic and active members of the Armenian community, wherever they live.

- *In London, we have branches of nearly all our national organisations: cultural, spiritual and political. How would you characterise the relationship of these organisations with the Council? And how would you assess their work?*

The Council not only wishes to encourage the activities of all Armenian organisations, but we would be very happy to maintain good relations with all of them and to assist if at all possible. The Council is elected democratically by the community and therefore any person with whatever political conviction could be elected to serve in the Council. The Council is non-political, and it represents all the members of the community without discrimination. As you say, there are a number of political organisations, cultural and charitable organisations, and also religious, and if their work is for the benefit of the community, then we wish them well. It is our duty to support and encourage and respect all, and we hope that the courtesy would be reciprocated.

- *Just recently, Turkish President Gul, the president of a country occupying a fellow EU state, Cyprus, the president of a country repressing all kinds of civil liberties and so on and so forth, was honoured and awarded a prize for his alleged work in promoting international relations. Yet not a single cry of protest was made by us. How do you explain this and do you justify our silence?*

The ACCC is mandated to look after the interests of the British Armenian Community and in that capacity we pursue the generally accepted issues which interest the Armenian Nation in general and British Armenian community in particular.

- *Although, quite a sizable community, our community has not managed to acquire or establish even an elementary school of her own. What are the reasons for this and how does this affect the upbringing of our youth and their feelings of a national identity.*

We are a microscopic community of a few thousand within a metropolis of over 10 Million and Armenians are dispersed over many hundreds of square miles which comprise the London Metropolitan area. Although there is a fair concentration of Armenians in West London, I think that when it came to reality, we would not be able to muster a sufficient number of students. Secondly, as I mentioned previously, the level of education in such a school would need to be of a very high standard, and the cost of purchasing and maintaining a school with the qualified staff that would be needed is way beyond our means, and the number of students we could muster would probably not be sufficient to qualify for government assistance. However, in due course, I hope our aspirations will be realized, and we will be able to establish the first full-time school in London. In fact, with the recent introduction by the Government of independent Academies, it would be prudent to make appropriate study of the possibilities. In the meantime, in London we have two one-day-per-week schools, one on Saturdays and one on Sundays, and I would encourage all parents to take their children to these schools where the Armenian language and culture and heritage is taught to a high standard.

- *The European Union encourages and supports efforts by minority groups to keep and develop their national identity. Most of our communities in the other EU countries receive incentives and generous contributions from the EU for maintaining national schools, newspapers, cultural activities and so on. Does this apply to the UK? If yes, then does our community use these facilities? If no, have we made representations through UK's EU parliamentarians to this effect?*

I am not aware of any assistance being received from the European Union by any Armenian school or organisation in the UK. I am certain that both schools would be glad to receive such assistance, and perhaps after they have read this interview, their governing boards will wish to look into the possibilities. The ACCC would of course assist and make representations on their behalf if we are asked to intercede or assist. The only assistance that I am aware of that the community's K. Tahta Sunday School used to receive from abroad was a grant of £4,500 from the multi-million Euro-rich Gulbenkian Foundation of Lisbon, and I am very sad to inform you that even that minimal contribution was cut off about two years ago, by the Armenian Section of the Foundation, with the feeble excuse that they are short of funds.

- *As Chairman of the Council, what is your vision for our community and what you would have liked to see there?*

In an increasingly strengthening secular world, and with the emergence of an independent Republic of Armenia, I am convinced that communities in the Diaspora should no longer exist as "religious groups". Each community should have a religious as well as a secular structure and therefore the community should have a democratically elected Community Council to represent it and to attend to not only the community's religious needs, but also to its secular and political needs. Such a community with a strong structure would receive proper acknowledgement from the authorities and would be able to command respect and influence. The Armenian Community and Church Council which has existed for over sixty years, is based exactly on such a structure, and what I would like to see is for every member of the community to have pride in its representative Council and to support it.

The annual functions to commemorate April 24 such as the Commemorative Evening and the Commemorative March are organised by committees of the ACCC. The annual Celebration of the Independence of Armenia is organised by a committee of the ACCC. The K. Tahta Sunday School was established by the ACCC and functions under our auspices, and as I mentioned previously, the ACCC appoints its Trustees. The Church Services at the community's St Yeghiche Church is the responsibility of the ACCC.

Behind the scenes, we become involved as the Community's Council in protecting and assisting persons of Armenian ethnic origin. As an example, we have made strong representations to the Government on behalf of Armenians who have been on the verge of deportation, and I am glad to say with success. Recent examples are our involvement in the prevention of a mother and daughter, and on another occasion, of a young man, of Armenian ethnic origin, from being deported to Azerbaijan and certain ethnic persecution.

The ACCC also actively supports charitable activities in Armenia and very recently raised in the region of £30,000 by its "Kashadagh Redevelopment Committee" for rebuilding homes in Karabagh.

The ACCC was instrumental in negotiating with the St Sarkis Church and the Holy Trinity Church in Manchester for the preparation of a Diocesan Constitution under which the three churches would for the first time come together to form a Diocesan Assembly of the United Kingdom and Ireland and would thus strengthen and consolidate the Armenian Church of the UK. The draft constitution has been submitted to His Holiness the Catholicos of All Armenians, and we are awaiting his ratification.

All these functions carried on by the ACCC are achieved by the voluntary work of the members of the Council and the ACCC's various committees. Nobody receives a salary. All that is expected from our brothers and sisters in the community is for them to realize their responsibilities, and to support their Council, first of all by registering as members of the community and of the St Yeghiche Church, and secondly but equally importantly, by making the very small annual Community Contribution which is expected of them. Registration is free and forms are available at St. Yeghiche Church and through the ACCC's website – <http://www.accc.org.uk> . Without those contributions the Council could not function. If every Armenian paid the £20 per year that is asked, then we would have sufficient funds not only to maintain the Church, assist our schools, and carry out all our other activities, but the Council could then look towards acquiring a suitable Community Centre which is so very sorely needed. If we could afford a Community Centre – even if one had to be rented initially – it would create the opportunity for the members of the community and especially the youth, to convene in an Armenian environment and create friendships and relationships with other young Armenians. An Armenian community anywhere in the world could not survive unless it enjoyed the benefits of a Community Church, a Community School and a Community Centre with cultural activities. All these are complementary to each other. All are achievable, and I hope that with the help of our community, the ACCC will be able to maintain those that already exist and achieve those that this community is still lacking.