

# Journey Through Eight Decades!

by Ruth Bedevian

Helen (Heghineh) Abajian, Gadar Aljian, Vartouhi Marootian, Manoosh Mazejian, Nemzoor Sahatjian, Hannah (Hanoum) Shahinian, Munoosh Soghomonian, and Sophia Turpan are smiling angels today. Yes, these women led the way! Did they hold a vision that day, when they met in Helen's home on September 1, 1928 to establish the Ladies' Aid Society, that fourscore hence the 80th anniversary of the founding of their mission would be celebrated with a membership that totals 120? Did that vision also foresee that their fledgling group would take an honored place in the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church as one of the first Women's Guilds to continuously thrive?!

Although the title, "Ladies' Aid Society" has changed over the years to "Women's Guild," the Armenian title remains clear-cut as "Church-loving Women's Union" (Dignants Yegeghetsasirats Meeyootiun). In the beginning energy focused on ways to raise money in order to purchase and ultimately build a church for the Armenians of Paterson, New Jersey. In 1932, four years later, due in large part to the women's spirited cultivation of the community, the immigrant Armenian families of Paterson purchased St. Luke's Episcopal Church at 135 Bloomfield Avenue.

From the onset women have worn many hats in the Women's Guild. They sing in the choir, prepare the mahs and maintain the altar cloths and vestments, teach in the Sunday and Armenian schools, cook for the annual bazaars, hantesses, picnics and generally support all aspects of parish life. St. Leon parish history is so well knitted into the history of its women that it is, at times, a dilemma to unravel parish events from Women's Guild events.

## 1930s

St. Leon women struggled along with all of America during the Great Depression. With traumatic childhoods from the 1915 Genocide, this generation invested itself in hope. That meant immersion and continuity in their cultural heritage and church life. Women's leadership in this decade was of immeasurable value to the foundation of the St. Leon parish because there was no full time priest until 1936 when Father Hovhannes Kavookjian arrived (serving until 1938). In 1937 the Ladies' Aid Society organized a 'bazaar' (now known as Food Festival) which emerged into a major source of annual income. The annual bazaars and church picnics were Women's Guild sponsored events! It is only in the last twenty years, as demands on manpower have grown, that the Parish Council has taken over the sponsorship of these two major fund-raisers. In 1939 Bishop Mampre Calfayan (to become Archbishop in 1945) answered the call as parish priest (until 1941 and again 1953-1954).

## 1940s

World War II brought rationing and demanded sacrifices from 123 million Americans, and St. Leon women kept faith with the nation – which was, for most, their adopted country. Members saw their sons off to war and an unfortunate number did not see their sons return. The decade saw the establishment of the United Nations and the hope stirred in the Armenians living in the United States, asking the question, “Could Armenia one day be independent and join this great institution for world peace?” All the while, the Ladies’ Aid Society tended to its church family and life continued at 135 Bloomfield Avenue in Paterson, in the care of Father Vahan Jelalian whose leadership stabilized the parish life from 1941-1947. The women worked tirelessly and joyfully.

## 1950s

The 1950s brought “suburbanization” to America and the Armenian families of Paterson began moving to surrounding towns as the ‘second’ generation married and started their families. The community was growing under the able leadership of three priests who served pastorates during this decade: Father Shnork Kaloustian, (who later became Bishop in 1955, then Archbishop and ultimately Patriarch of Istanbul) served St. Leon as parish priest from 1948-1951; Archbishop Mampre Calfayan (1953-1954) and Father Arten Ashjian (1951-1952 and 1972-1975). The silver anniversary of the Ladies’ Aid Society was celebrated on Sunday evening, June 7, 1953. It was held at the Robin Hood Inn in Clifton and Archbishop Mampre Calfayan delivered the Invocation. The spotlight was on eighteen women who were presented with crosses for their consecutive twenty-five-year memberships: Lucia Bakalian, Vartouhie Bakalian, Azniv Bazazian, Vartanoush Dishian, Makrouhi Dishian, Fanny Dishian, Elizabeth Hachigian, Arek Jerahian, Maritza Giragosian, Manoosh Mazejian, Vartouhi Marootian, Victoria Noorigian, Hannah (Hanoum) Shahinian, Nevart Sahatjian, Nemzoor Sahatjian, Mary Tilbian, Elsie Vahanian, and Mary Vartanesian. From 1955 to 1957, Father Vartan Der Assadourian was serving as resident parish priest until Deacon Antranig Hallajian came as Deacon-in-charge in 1958. Following his ordination (1960), Father Carnig Hallajian became the parish priest to the growing community (serving until 1972). The older women embraced him like a son, and under his youthful leadership brighter days were on the horizon.

## 1960s

The Vietnam War escalated and brought turbulent social and spiritual changes to America. The Women’s Guild, deeply rooted in its traditions, remained loyal to its mission. The second generation actively sought ways and means to build upon the foundation of their mothers and by 1965, the parish had moved to its present location at 12-61 Saddle River Road in Fair Lawn. A nostalgic article in the Lradoo archives states: *St. Leon Moves to Fair Lawn. Last Badarak on Bloomfield Avenue Celebrated on August*

*15 with Blessing of the Grapes Taking Place on New Church Grounds in Fair Lawn. September 19 – New Church Edifice on Saddle River Road is Consecrated.*

In 1965, the Ladies' Aid Society entered its 37th year of existence. The "35th" anniversary was celebrated with a banquet and program held at Casino De Charlz in Totowa on May 16. The program's cover displayed the rendering of the new church whose construction in Fair Lawn was nearing completion. Helen Mazoujian offered musical selections. The Very Reverend Yeghishe Gizirian (now Archbishop) was the guest speaker. That same year the membership at its monthly meeting modestly recognized the 5th anniversary of ordination of their young parish priest, Father Carnig Hallajian.

Energized by the new church and growing membership from the suburban towns of Bergen County, the membership spread its wings, holding its first Luncheon Fashion Show at North Jersey Country Club in Preakness, on April 21, 1966, the proceeds of which went to finance the new church kitchen. An archive in the Lradoo states that the ticket price was \$5.00! In 1967 "Shower of Fashion," a luncheon-fashion show, was held at Montammy Country Club, Alpine, and in 1968 the Women's Guild held a "Dessert and Fashion Show" at Arnold Constable (a famous landmark department store in Hackensack). A Lradoo archive states: Tickets \$1.50! These years also saw the women participate annually in the Bergen Mall Charity Festivals, a major income producing event. White Elephant and rummage sales, also, realized income as high as \$675! These events required hard work, good organizational skills and beneath all the toil, a deep and abiding love to keep the "oil lamps burning in one's church!" Cultural awareness was not overlooked. An archive in the Lradoo states: "Family Movie Night! Sponsored by St. Leon's Ladies' Aid – Friday, May 17, 1963! Church Hall. 7:30 PM! Premier Showing of Two Armenian Films, 'Song of First Love' and 'Erevan Today.' Adults \$1.00 Children \$.50!"

Cross generational relationships, a hallmark of St. Leon Women's Guild, deeply developed in these years as the women worked together for a common cause. The older generation, although still active, was preparing to pass the torch. It was in the latter part of this decade that Anne Marootian stepped up to the plate and supervised the kitchen activities. (She did this for many years until Edna Tungrian assumed the responsibility.) The younger members have sharpened their culinary skills under both Anne and Edna's guidance. (It can be fairly stated: All I ever really needed to know about Armenian cooking, I learned in the St. Leon kitchen!) Siranoush Boyajian was still making the mahs with her committee. How many years she did this are not recorded in the archives, only in the hearts of those who worked by her side. Grace Pinajian took over the responsibility for several years until the torch was passed to Rose Kirian.

Before the decade finished, the 40th anniversary of the Ladies' Aid Society was celebrated on Sunday September 14, 1969, following *Badarak*. The venue had now

changed to the church hall (not the Community Center whose construction followed a decade later, but the present educational wing beneath the sanctuary). Twenty-eight members were honored and gifted with a silver-plated candy dish, etched with the image of the church. An archive from the Lradoo states: "Dinner tickets: Adults - \$2.50 and children \$.50." Helen Mazoujian sang again as well as the St. Leon Choir, and a teenaged Andrea Tilbian (now Halejian, a future Women's Guild chairman) delivered a "Tribute to Mothers." Candle Lighting donations raised \$1130.10!

## 1970s

The Vietnam War ended. A severe recession forced individuals to protect their own self-interest that would eventually dub the decade as "The 'Me' Decade." Albeit this "Me" national mindset, the decade opened new vistas of outreach for the women of St. Leon with the burning of its mortgage in 1975. The Women's Guild membership took bolder and larger steps. In the same year, the parish welcomed Father Paree Metjian (who served from 1975-1985) as its new priest.

All the while the Fish 'n Chips dinners, rummage sales, Chinese auctions, and the Lever Brothers project (initiated by Violet Voskian) continued to keep the checkbook in the black. (The annual bazaar, still under the sponsorship of the Ladies' Aid Society realized a profit of \$4,500 in 1971. By 1976 the total reached an all time high of \$10,000!) The advent of guest speakers on health, social, cultural and educational issues began to emerge more frequently at the monthly meetings.

The 1970's saw the formation of the Primate's Women's Advisory Council, a small volunteer committee that organized major Diocesan events, among them, the first Women Saints' Day commemoration which has become a yearly tradition. Two members of the St. Leon Ladies' Aid Society – Dovie Tilbian and Lucy Dabagian - served continuously on this council until the Women's Guild Central Council (WGCC) became its replacement by election in 1986. Officially the Ladies' Aid Society became known as Women's Guild and the by-laws of the Central Council governed it along with all guilds in the Diocese. [Lucy Dabagian became the first WGCC chairman.] In 1973 the Guild participated in the inaugural One World Festival sponsored jointly by the Diocese and the City of New York. The event occupied a weekend in September and was held in the Diocesan neighborhood in New York City. It brought together many of the city's ethnic organizations featuring an ecumenical service, an art show, and among other events, cultural cuisine. St. Leon women faithfully participated for fifteen years until the Festivals came to an end. Participation required hours of preparation, transportation, and servicing the booth. In the same year during a monthly meeting, Father Arten Ashjian, was honored informally for his 25th anniversary of ordination.

In 1974 under the chairmanship of Varsen Torosian all past chairmen were honored with a small ceremony at the annual Armenian Christmas meeting. Each

honoree was gifted a round silver pin which bore a raised gavel in the center. The perimeter was engraved, St. Leon Armenian Church. Among the honorees were two mother/mother-in-law and daughter teams: Nevert Sahatjian and Alice Yazmajian, and Dovie Tilbian and Mary Tilbian. On April 29, 1979, Women's Guild marked its 50th anniversary at the Marriott Hotel in Saddle Brook. The Guild recognized four women for fifty consecutive years of membership: Hannah (Hanoum) Shahinian (also a charter member), Elizabeth Hachigian, Nevert Sahatjian and Maritza Giragosian. Helen Abajian was honored as a charter member. Also recognized for 44-year memberships were Arshalous Dishian and Yeranuhe Vartanesian.

## 1980s

The '80s witnessed the devastating earthquake in northern Armenia in December 1988 which galvanized the Armenian communities throughout the world and St. Leon Women's Guild put forth its share. When CASP (Children of Armenia Sponsorship Program) was organized, the Guild sponsored two children and has renewed this pledge yearly as new children replace the ones who have come of age to leave the program. A Gala Fashion Show to benefit Earthquake Relief at the Woodcliff Lake Hilton on September 14, 1989 netted over \$11,000!

On Sunday, November 6, 1988, the Women's Guild marked its 60th anniversary in Abajian Hall. Father Arshen Aivazian (who served from 1985-1992) individually named seventy-five deceased members during the *Hokehankisd*. Those honored for over fifty years of service were: Helen Abajian (charter member), Maritza Giragosian (60 years), Arshalous Dishian (55 years), Pergrouhi Simonian (55 years), Dikranouhi Nakashian (55 years), Margaret Semonian (55 years), and Siranoush Boyajian (50 years). Posthumously honored were Nevert Sahatjian (60th year) and Nazelie Jamgochian (50th year) who passed into their eternal rest in April and June respectively. [Among the guests listed in the committee's minutes was: Deacon Richard Bohajian, Seminarian!]

In these years Women's Guild also began preparing monthly dinners for families at Eva's Shelter, an outreach which continues to the present day – nearly twenty-five years of service, following the calling in the Gospel of Matthew 25:45, "...In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Preparing meals for homeless men at St. Paul's shelter in Paterson soon followed.

In 1986 – Women's Guild held a "Strawberry Festival" to benefit the St. Nersess Summer Study Youth Conferences and St. Vartan Camp. In 1984, the Women's Guild participation in the St. Leon parish's hosting of the 82nd Diocesan Assembly was fundamental to its success.

With the completion of the construction of the Community Center (1981), Women's Guild undertook the hosting of the first Diocesan sponsored Spiritual Renewal

Conference, “Living the Liturgy,” in 1983. Also in 1983, the first Military Bridge was sponsored, realizing a profit of \$1200! The first Women’s Guild retreat in its history was held at St. Nersess Seminary in 1982, followed by succeeding annual retreats. In 1980 St. Leon women, under the chairmanship of Elsie Donigian, hosted May Fellowship Day, sponsored by Church Women United; theme for the day was, “The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me,” (Isaiah 61:1) and in the same year Father Patee Metjian was honored during a monthly meeting for his 10th year anniversary of ordination.

## 1990s

The decade opened, fulfilling the yearning that ached in the breast of every Armenian. In 1991, the Armenian flag was hoisted at the United Nations following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Armenia joined the free, independent nations of the world! Joyful for independence, but mindful of continued suffering, St. Leon Women’s Guild invited Caroline Hebard, a member of the volunteer search team to show slides of the team’s work in Armenia. She brought with her the specially trained dogs who ‘sniffed out’ earthquake survivors. At another meeting, Carol DerBoghossian was invited to speak to the membership, making an appeal to “Love the Children of Armenia” on behalf of the Armenian Health Alliance, requesting medical supplies and food for earthquake victims. The membership responded with money, first aid kits and clothing.

Membership Drives became active in recruiting younger women to join St. Leon Women’s Guild. Several ‘Membership Buffets’ were hosted in members’ homes. Sixteen new members were initiated in 1993. This decade witnessed a shift in the venue of the December meeting with visits to St. Nersess Seminary to decorate the tree, sing carols, and enjoy fellowship with the seminarians. In 1995 the Women’s Guild hosted Women Saints’ Day for the first time, organizing the program and preparing the Lenten meal which was held in Abajian Hall, accommodating members from five New Jersey regional Women’s Guilds.

When Father Vahan Hovhannessian came as parish priest in 1993 (serving until 1999), he introduced an expanded use of computers, creating the St. Leon Internet Service and Website. Quickly, Women’s Guild embraced the technology and produced its first comprehensive manual for its membership in 1995.

Beginning in 1994, a series of *choreg* sales produced lucrative income under co-chairs, Anne Kachigian and Katherine Ohnikian. With their crew of helpers that numbered over two dozen women, they baked over 90 dozen *choreg* in one day, several times a year. Fourteen years and over 100,000 *choregs* later, *choreg* bake sales (now supervised by present co-chairs, Lynn Beylerian and Mary Ann Mozian) continue to yield excellent income to help Women’s Guild do its good works. In addition to visiting the bereaved, the sick, organizing the Christmas gift and Thanksgiving Day food drives for needy families, visitation to the residents of the Armenian Home in Emerson,

conducting an annual Blood Drive (under the direction of the Bergen Community Regional Blood Center), the Guild continued during this decade to honor its senior citizens on the occasions of Mother's and Father's Days with luncheon programs.

## 2000 – 2008

Americans were devastated by the Terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon in 2001 and the Guild cancelled its September meeting to join the parish in a prayer service. As the War in Iraq and the rising price of oil shakes the nation, the St. Leon women press forward, drawing courage from the example of their mothers and grandmothers.

St. Leon's parish began the new century with a new priest when Father Diran Bohajian came with his young family (at the end of 1999). The years 2001 and 2007 witnessed two pontifical visits by His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians and St. Leon parish has been privileged to host him. Women's Guild has lent its support. For the second time, St. Leon Women's Guild hosted Women Saints' Day with a luncheon and program on March 24, 2001. The 75th anniversary of Women's Guild was observed modestly in the sanctuary following *Badarak* as Women's Guild Sunday was commemorated on June 13, 2004. One hundred-eighteen deceased members were remembered in the *Hokehankisd* service. Past chairmen received a carnation and blessing in the sanctuary from Father Diran Bohajian.

In December 2005 the Women's Guild made a day excursion to tour the Diocesan headquarters, capping off the day with "Tea with Khajag Srpazan." Archbishop Khajag Barsamian was overjoyed with the visit and said that St. Leon Women's Guild was the first guild to visit with him.

2006 was a busy year! In May, for the second time in its history, the St. Leon parish hosted the Diocesan Assembly (104th), and again, Women's Guild members did their share to help a very large committee. In March Women's Guild co-sponsored with the Men's Fellowship a film presentation, "The Genocide in Me." On Women's Guild Sunday, June 11, nine members were recognized for their 50-year memberships. Round gold pendants engraved with "St. Leon Women's Guild" and the number "50" in the center were presented to: Lucy Dabagian, Mary Dabbakian, Elsie Gamarekian, Anne Marootian, Emerald Noorigian, Margaret Semonian, Dovie Tilbian, Arpie Vartanesian, and Alice Yazmajian. In September Women's Guild sponsored "Hello Ellis Island," a premiere musical show for the parish and community-at-large. Also in September, to perpetuate Armenian culinary arts, the women "learned, laughed and made kufteh" during a class session sponsored by the Women Guild. More fellowship came with a bus trip to Gracie Mansion and dinner at Tavern on the Green in Central Park in October.

For the third time in its history, the Women's Guild hosted Women's Saints Day (recently renamed Sainly Women's Day) on March 10, 2007. The September 2007 meeting opened the fall season with the initiation of six new members. Quick to maximize its time and energy, Women's Guild turned to "CallingPost Communications," an electronic method by which membership is notified by automated voice messaging about meeting cancellations due to inclement weather and other urgent matters. Presently, Women's Guild is the only organization in the parish using this sophisticated system!

The decade is yet to close. With the acquisition of the land next door, the expansion of the educational/recreational building and necessary parking are near completion. The St. Leon parish is building upon its modest beginning and the Women's Guild is a vital link. Ladies' Aid Society, Women's Guild, Church-loving Women's Union – no matter its name - it remains steadfastly the dynamic dwelling place where women of several generations come together to embrace the essence of the Gospels, while at the same time strive to preserve and foster their own unique heritage. For some, this historical overview has been a first-time journey; for others, it is a warm return to familiar names and places. Whatever the reader's experience, it is a journey of church-loving women who share their faith and put it into action.

A NOTE TO THE READER: An exhaustive research has been made to compile a comprehensive history with accurate names and dates. Please forgive any human error, and do contact the Women's Guild chairman with any information, documents etcetera that may be in your possession or memory. RB