

# 5 Signs of a Healthy Church Culture

Session 1-Introduction to Healthy Church Culture & Why It is Important

Prayer that God bless this Lent and this study....Իմաստողութիւնն Յոր Յիսուս

## 1 WHY LENTEN STUDY?

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Thank you for joining us in church and via livestream for our sermon series 5 Signs of Healthy Church Culture. I love Lent and I love our Lenten Sermon Series. I always tell you that there is no other season like Lent in the year. It is a sacred time and space that if we allow it, and if we put the work in, God gives great blessings. A big part of allowing God to form and grow us during Lent is to reflect on where we are on our Christian journey as individuals and as a church. Remember that the regular way we imagine our lives, that we are physical, mental beings who are also sometimes spiritual, is the reverse of the reality our scriptures make us aware. We are fundamentally and foundationally of the Spirit, creatures of God, who also happen to be en fleshed, physically, mentally emotionally. Put in a pithy way "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience." Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Lent reminds us of this, and this Lenten series is based on that assumption that the deepest, most significant part of ourselves is our Godliness, and just because it lays hidden beneath the surface, like an iceberg, this does not lessen its importance.

## 2 WHY THE TOPIC OF CHURCH CULTURE?

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Culture, the topic of this sermons series, is another thing that-like an iceberg-lies mostly beneath the surface, but has a strong influence on people's faith lives. The series draws from our common experience together, a decade and a half that we have together thought, prayed and experimented about what an ideal Armenian Church should be in the eyes of God and for us members. We have done some great work together, I am excited to continue forward! It comes from a year working on Bishop Daniel's committee to implement his vision of Building the Body of Christ, asking how we reform our churches so that everything we do, programs, organizations, people and events all serve the Armenian Orthodox Church's founding and primary mission to nurture and equip dedicated followers of Christ.

As our committee has struggled to try and plan and program this reform, we quickly realized that his vision cannot be realized by any single person, program, or

organization, because the changes we are all looking for are cultural changes. Those can only be done by the grace of God, and the slow prayerful participation of the majority of people in the majority of our parishes. In order for our churches to grow in faith, mission and numbers, we have to develop and grow our church cultures.

You can have all the vision, the programs, the people and the events in the world, but culture trumps all of these. In the words of organizational culture guru Peter Drucker, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” So to move our church more to what God and we most deeply hope to become, we must prayerfully develop our culture; programs, strategies, visions, events, etc. will follow.

### 3 SO WHAT IS CULTURE? BRAINSTORM OF EXAMPLES

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Culture is a very complex concept indeed. We could say culture is the attitudes, customs and practices by which the church (or any other organizational body) functions. It is the ethos, the collage of spoken and unspoken messages. In a very simplified manner, you could say that culture is found behind the statement ‘this is how we do things here.’

#### 3.1 QUESTION: WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF ATTITUDES | CUSTOMS | PRACTICES IN ST. HAGOP OR OUR ENTIRE DIOCESE?

*Solicit and brainstorm the ideas of the participants*

**Ok, these ideas are great, to focus examples here a few customs of our church involving Worship, which we will talk more about next week**

- We do not worship God in the spoken language of our people, we worship God in ancient Armenian. The worship is high & holy, but perhaps less approachable.
- We are relatively formal in worship (mostly silence, ritual greetings, no clapping, professional choir and altar, formal dress)
- We don't use modern music or instruments in worship, only traditional worship
- We are more penitential in our tone of worship than celebratory
- Only priests are to bless, give communion, lead worship, give pastoral care, etc.
- We try to warmly welcome newcomers by name...yet we don't actively seek worshippers from our neighborhood to join

So this is just worship, there are a million more examples. Notice please, I was careful not to add analysis and judgement on these aspects of our culture. Because church is

like family, and these matters are deeply held and personal, I want to approach this in a measured and objective way, not rushing into any why, because, right and wrong. Let's first stick to the facts. 'We worship God in ancient Armenian.' That is a fact of our church culture. The historical why is complex. The effects of worshipping in Armenian are complex. And you will get 2 different opinions from every one person on if this helps worship, hinders worship or is a mix of both. We will get to this, but fair process is very important when discussing values, identity and truth among such a diverse group as us.

But while we aren't rushing to judgments and are trying to be as objective as possible, that does not mean we aren't going to try and talk about controversial things. The language of our liturgy, the diocese/prelacy split, only men on the altar, women wearing veils are fraught, so we tend not to talk about them. But it is precisely the difficult things that need to be talked about. Perhaps to prayerfully find better solutions, but at least so that people of differing deeply held opinions feel respected and heard. Also, some people feel you can't even talk about tradition because it is somehow sacred. But of course we know that if anything is sacred it is made sacred by God alone. And God never discourages us, on the contrary He encourages, to come to Him with all our questions and concerns.

## What is Culture? A Case Study

But now let's take one example of a fact of our culture as a test case, analyzing its background and effect on our culture. I think this will reveal just how powerful culture is and why its is worth spending time uncovering it. Because just as we said about our spiritual lives, the same with our church culture; like an iceberg, it works most powerfully beneath the surface.

### A Case Study: Dues membership

Ok so part of our culture in many Dioceses of the Armenian Church and of St. Hagop until recently, is that we were a church with dues paid membership. This is an attitude, custom and practice of our church, so it fits our definition of culture.

And like many aspects of culture, it is sort of an inherited tradition, we just tend to take it for granted; 'this is how we do things around here.' But a few years ago, we started asking question of dues membership. We 'talked back to the tradition' we came to realize that like all parts of our culture, this was developed, formed and created over

time by leaders of our churches, just as we create, shape and maintain the culture of St. Hagop and our Diocese now.

Some people didn't like us asking these questions. Hey that's breaking our tradition, our bylaws. This is how we all do things, who do you think you are? But we just asked questions of our culture, as we will ask questions this entire sermon series. It doesn't mean we want to change everything. We simply want to prayerfully examine whether each part of our culture is relatively helpful or unhelpful in becoming a better Christian of the Armenian Orthodox way. The opening quote from a book assigned to all our clergy last year is helpful here: *'Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.'* (Mahler) Is dues membership, or any aspect of how we do things, worship of ashes or is it preserving the fire?

Well we found this about dues membership. It isn't very old. It isn't very Armenian. And it's definitely not Biblical. (I could expand on this, but out of scope here). So why do we do it? Even though it's not ancient, not Armenian and definitely not Christian? Because that's how we do things around here, that's the power of culture for better or worse.

We also found that it has been abandoned by most all other churches. And we found this because we are blessed in this church to have many members who have experienced other church cultures in addition to ours. This is a great benefit. It is a great benefit in better seeing our own church culture, because it is really hard to know what your church culture is like and what you take for granted, until you have been a guest in another church culture. With no perspective, we will have no way of knowing what gives glory to God in our church culture and what needs improvement.

Well you might say, ok so what. It's just dues and administration and money; right or wrong, it's not that big a deal. Well it is a big deal for the reason that culture doesn't just stay on the surface as a practice. It works powerfully below the surface, shaping the values and assumptions of each generation.

How does a dues paid culture shape the ethos and values of all the people who encounter it? What does it say without saying a word? It says:

- The church is a membership club with annual dues. You pay in, you get benefits
- You are a good, church going Christian simply if you pay your dues
- Your voting in an annual meeting is your highest 'right' as church member
- Giving to church is not a deep part of who you are, it's just another bill
- Giving to church is an obligation, not a transformation

So I am picking on dues membership here. But I have no judgement on parishes who practice it, because of course I and we led, shaped and maintained this culture for many years. Moreover, as we will talk about in week #4, though we may be ahead of the curve on a better culture of giving and stewardship, we still may have a way to go.

The point here is simply that a process of prayerful reflection on our culture reveals whether or not it supports or hinders our mission. This, I believe warrant us spending the next 4 weeks on this, and I pray will yield fruit in the coming years.

## 4 WHAT WE WILL DO FOR THE NEXT FOUR WEEKS

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As we go forward in the next four weeks and beyond, examining our culture to help reveal the church we are called to be, we will need three tools; prayer, participation and priorities. Let's start with prayer.

### **Prayer**

Though culture trumps everything when it comes to our strategy and planning, God's plans of course trump all of ours. If anything positive is to change in our church and us as individuals, it will only be by the power and grace of God by which we live move and have our being. This is how we differ from a business or a sports team. We aren't just an organization; we are a living organism which is animated by God. Lent is the special time of year when we focus and turn again to the will of God.

But though prayer is the beginning, it is not the end. A key phrase that I think Armenian Orthodox basically agree with, but never said so concisely is St. Thomas Aquinas' phrase 'Grace Perfects Nature.' This means that although all things come from God and are ultimately powered by him (grace), we are perfected by our open heart, will, and efforts for God (nature). So we should pray to God for everything in our lives and our church. But it is also up to us to cultivate the best conditions to invite his grace. That is what we are doing by meditating on culture.

### **Participation**

So we need prayer these four weeks. We also need participation. The important thing about a cultural perspective on our church is that it exposes the lie that there is just one leader of the church (me) or a group of leaders (the PC). It forces us to see that, in all the important things, everyone is a spiritual leader of this church because church culture, Armenian Orthodox Christianity, is caught more than taught. The more of us that are aware of our priorities as a church, and reflect on our strengths and

weaknesses, the more God pleasing our culture becomes and the more it is caught by us members. That's the importance behind the simple but powerful 5 question 'survey' that some of you have already taken (show if hands). It asks each of you to bring your unique voice to this ongoing spiritual conversation on church culture. I will consult and share these anonymous responses, beginning next week, to engage us all in this process of becoming the church and people we are called to be. Please do submit your answers if have not already, the link is in your eblasts and FB. I also have printed a few copies for those without internet access, please fill out and hand in after fellowship or next week.

## **Priorities**

On the survey, you will find the '5 signs of healthy church culture.' These are our priorities to become the church we are called to be, and form the topics of each week of our study. These are:

- 1. We Seek Communion With God in Worship**
- 2. We Practice Hospitality & Forgiveness**
- 3. We Discern Our Calling to Growth & Ministry**
- 4. We Invest in the Church & Its Ministries**
- 5. We Witness to the Armenian Orthodox Way**

Where did these goals come from? Well from God, our scriptures and our church tradition. These are the foremost goals of any church and any Christian. I also believe they are the priorities of this Diocese, because they are a condensed form of Bp. Daniel's vision and challenge to our parishes to be single minded in building the body of Christ, the ultimate reality and calling of all churches, including our St. Hagop church. To be clear, the survey, the words, ideas are all mine and ours, not the Bishop's or the Diocese's. But I am confident that we are faithfully engaging his vision in this discussion.

## **5 THANKS & INVITATIONS**

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Thanks for listening here at St. Hagop and online. I hope you will continue to reflect and ask questions after this. I hope you will engage this more with the survey questions on church culture. And for anyone who wants to discuss these issues in a more interactive smaller group format, our first discussion group will meet this coming Wednesday on Zoom from 7:30-8:30 PM. You need to pre-register to get the link, that pre-registration link is in our eblast. The link may require a quick download of zoom software on your phone, tablet or comp, which should happen automatically when you press the link.