

Bishop Hovakim Manukyan

Remarks at ACT UK AGM

14.01.18

Navasartian centre, London

Dear Trustees, Donors and friends,

It is with a great joy that I greet you today. As it is also the first day of the New Year according to old Julian calendar and it is the first time that we meet today, I would like to wish you a Happy and blessed New Year.

This meeting is slightly overdue. We were planning to hold it in November 2017, unfortunately it was delayed due to unforeseen circumstances. We intend to set a tradition to meet every year at the beginning of November to see where we are and where we are going. Thank you all for coming to our belated but an important meeting.

There is a parable in the Gospel of Mathew (25:14-30) about good stewardship: “a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. The servants who were faithful to small things were given honour and much properties. ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ This parable indeed is about our life as a gift of God and how we deal with it. At the same time, it is a good metaphor for all of us to ponder on and think in the context of today’s meeting. The ACT UK is also a household, a household created to support the mission of the Church and implement projects in the community life.

Where are we and where we are going? I’d like to concentrate on this subject.

I came to this country in 2015 and was warmly welcomed by the community. My main aim was and still is the development of an active, supportive diocese, supporting and being supported by the community.

After spending some time understanding the existing setup and community I created a mission statement and set the following objectives.

- Diocesan Life

To create a strong and cohesive diocese with its infrastructure, bylaws and relevant tools that will serve the best interests of the Armenian faithful in the UK and Ireland. The Diocese shall strive to bring together and build nurturing communities based on the teachings of Christianity and in the context of the rich Armenian cultural heritage.

- Parish Life

To ensure that the diocesan Parishes have pastors or visiting priests and that the life of the parishes develop in accordance with the canons and traditions of the Armenian Church taking

into account the special circumstances in the Diaspora. The Parish is a community of people who share and uphold common Christian Armenian values that enrich their personal and collective lives.

- Wider Community Life

To ensure that the Church fosters unity in the community and cooperates with all Armenian organisations of the UK and Ireland in order to promote the spiritual and collective cultural identity of Armenians, and to advocate for the just causes of the Armenian people.

- Ecumenical Life

To continue an active engagement in ecumenism, especially given the unique opportunities that exist for ecumenical and inter-Church relations in the UK and Ireland. Ecumenism is active involvement in local and national efforts of Churches to promote Christian unity and cooperation and to engage in advocacy for justice, peace and human dignity.

Why I'm talking about all this at this meeting. Today we are making the ACT UK presentation. According to its constitution the ACT-UK is a charitable company limited by guarantee established to advance the Christian faith in accordance with the doctrines of the Armenian Church in such ways and in such parts of the United Kingdom and overseas as the Trustees may from time to time think fit. Its objectives are set by the Trustees, who are the representatives of almost each of the parishes in the UK and Ireland. The beneficiaries of the funding are usually the parishes in the UK and Ireland, thus the community in general.

We implement projects such as Mission Parish Outreach, Spiritual Formation/Deacon's Training, the Primate's Office and information services (including a weekly e-newsletter and maintenance of the Diocesan website, Social media), Armenian Street Festival, ACYO, pilgrimages, promoting ecumenical relations, organising lectures and workshops and other events.

During the last year we have done three major projects outside UK and Ireland and a number of other projects in the UK and Ireland.

Last year we undertook fundraising appeal for Jerusalem (restoration of the Holy Tomb in Holy Sepulchre), two other major projects were done, one in New York (St. Nerses Seminary) and another in Armenia (Karekin I International centre). This involvement helped ACT UK to secure some funds for its own expenses in UK. Restricted funds donated were used to implement the projects with the help of our legal advisers. However, considering the demand of the faithful, ACT UK has limited its activities within the boundaries of UK and Ireland. Since 2017 we have not been involved in any major projects outside the UK.

We have made considerable progress in our work here. One of the successes is the organised work of the Primate's office. Those who are involved in running an administration can imagine how much time and energy consuming it is to organise daily work, meeting the needs of diverse communities. One of my objectives is to have a digital presence in the life of our community. We achieve this by publishing weekly newsletters and by explaining and informing the faithful of events in the community and give them a spiritual food by explaining the traditions of our Church. We also help our community by informing people what is happening in their respective organisations. Our newsletter has more than 3000

subscribers in the UK, Ireland and abroad, Armenians and non-Armenians, representatives of other Churches also do receive them. We produce, Audio visual material, maintain a website and social networks. This is much important work since it helps us to reach out wider community members who are scattered across the country and do not have possibilities to attend services often. I have also plans to start monthly newsletter in Western Armenian.

I should also mention that I have restricted funds to carry on this and other projects, such as children's services and more disadvantaged parts of the community. There is much to be done to strengthen our plans and we can't continue growing and developing without funding.

We now have a group of young people who joined the Armenian Church Youth Organisation to help me with youth Ministry; though the work with youth, one can compare with the tide in and tide out. This is the most important work considering the secular nature of our societies. We have a group of young people from 18-30 who venture to help me with youth projects. We continue with good traditions that my predecessor Bishop Vahan was doing; Christmas and Easter Basket deliveries, Christmas carols, we also organise lectures and presentations aiming at introducing our culture, traditions and basic Christian values to our youth. Last Year we had youth retreat in Romania and I took with me two young ladies from Manchester and London. In July this year, we will make a pilgrimage to Armenia and Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin and we intend to take more young people with us; it is essential to strengthen the faith, love of homeland in our young people and also to network with worldwide Armenians. In 2016 we received for one-day conference the youth from European countries with their Primates at St. Yeghiche Church, which made our day full of grace and enthusiasm. However, the existence of ACYO does not limit my work with other youth organisations. Personally, I am thankful also to our pastors who help us in this regard.

We want to start other programs for young people and children. We have also started a course on Christian apologetics with Ani Shanhenian from Oxford University and we want to start Christian education programs with Lenna Keleyan from Cardiff (originally from Aleppo). We are planning this and hopefully we will start it during the year ahead of us.

One of the achievements of our work at Primate Office was the publication of New Bibles for Weddings, Baptism and General Use. A newly baptised child and newlywed couples receive a copy. When I distribute them after each service I give the following message - to learn Armenian and to live according to the Bible. Last Year we have printed 500 copies of the English translation of St. Gregory of Narek and distributed them to our faithful as well as many universities in the UK. In addition, we produced the replicas of the icons of the Holy Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide, distributed them to all our Churches and consecrated them in a solemn celebration.

We achieve these by spending less financial resources but with much volunteer work. However, along with relying on our volunteers, I do believe in professionalism and it is necessary to rely on the work of professionals. If time and resources allow us we will have much more and better-organised work. There is a possibility of starting Armenian theological review in English and publishers from Armenia to produce articles on Armenian Church, history and ecclesiology in this and upcoming years. We were also able to help Kevorkian Theological Seminary to publish the "The Ecclesiastical History" of Eusebius of Caesarea, about 500 copies for the seminarians, which was requested by Fr. Garegin Hambardzoumian.

As part of our Deacon training programme, we train young people. This year we did special blessing ceremony for 3 young Armenians who serve on the altar on the feast of St. Stephan on December 23rd. We continue to train them and I hope their number will grow. It is a question of vocation and I do believe that we have a good and sustainable start. Last summer we also welcomed two deacons from Holy Etchmiadzin. Both attended language schools, served on the Altars of our Churches and made presentations to our young people.

During the past year I continued to visit our established and new parishes and communities; I visit Dublin at least 4-6 times per year. I visit and celebrate Liturgies once a year for our young people in Oxford at Pembroke College and twice a year in Cardiff. We do have a nice community in Birmingham, where I visit few times per year. However, they need support and help to strengthen the communities. They need permanent spiritual care and also financial support for a few years.

We are planning and hoping to reach all the fragmented communities all over the UK and link and unite all of them.

We continue to have good relationship with our sister Churches; we have hosted many ecumenical meetings and gatherings. Last Year I attended two international gatherings one in Geneva dealing with the question of Christian minorities in the Middle East and the other in Dublin for the International Dialogue between Anglican and Oriental Orthodox Churches. We have re-activated the works of the Council of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, Oriental Orthodox and Anglican and Oriental - Orthodox and Catholic forums. We meet twice a year in the Oriental Orthodox and Catholic and Anglican settings respectively and discuss questions related to the pastoral work, Christian education and Christian advocacy. We work closely also with Anglican and Oriental Orthodox Churches association as well as we are trying to keep good contacts and fraternal relations with all Churches. At the moment we are planning to have joint celebrations of sister Churches in the Armenian context May 26, 2018 and joint football match in October 2018 for our youth at the Coptic centre. We are also planning bilateral visits of our youth and exchange programs. More details will be communicated in due course.

I would like also to thank here the ladies committee of the Primate and everyone who support us. They do a valuable job. They help me also to organise pilgrimages. We made a pilgrimage to Holy Land with a small group of people. In autumn they helped me to organise a pilgrimage to Wales, St. David's and celebrate together the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Khachkar at the Peace of Temple which was organised by local community and Ladies Committee. Ladies committee also organise the Eastern Luncheon and it has become a tradition to celebrate Easter together as one big and extended family. This year we will celebrate the Mother's day also honouring those who served in our communities.

The showcase remains the Armenian Street Festival. A strong group of volunteers and sponsors support this project. It is an event that ACT UK's ASF Committee is organising in cooperation with all parishes and Armenian organisations under the auspices of the Primate on the grounds of the beautiful Armenian St. Sarkis Church and Iverna Gardens. However, we might change the venue this year and it is entirely up to the committee and the trustees to decide upon it. The objective of this event is to unite the community in celebrating Armenian culture and heritage, enjoying Armenian music, food, drinks introducing it also to a wider public.

Last year I worked with our community organisations and tried to help them as much as possible with my presence, words and blessings. I also attended the 6th Armenia -Diaspora conference and together with two representatives of our Church to Armenia and Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin for the Church-Representatives assembly in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Both meetings were important as we were discussing important questions related to our Church and the Country.

This year my main priorities are focusing on Youth and solving the question of diocesan centre. I will seek your advice on how to proceed on this matter with the view of finding an amicable solution to this issue. We are currently considering all available options including new premises for a diocesan centre (Առաջնորդարան), where we can locate our offices and have a place to do a youth ministry as well as have a residential part.

I inserted this special paragraph, on the church structure in my report as I feel that there is still confusion in the community in understanding it. As you know since 2012 we have a new system in our Church and we are conforming to new structure.

The Churches are now known as parishes and are run by elected Parish Councils, the Trusts which used to run the Churches are becoming entities who maintain the properties or become Landlords. They continue to support the Parish but do not have any direct links with the Primate. In other word, we do not have the luxury that we used to have and now it is up to the community to maintain their Churches. We now have parishes and are in process of forming a legal Diocesan structure. It is the way that the Church works everywhere in the world. The Parishes will contribute to the Diocese and future Diocesan Council will make its own fundraising, manage projects and work in the best interests of the community.

For completeness I would point out that work on Diocesan Bylaws is well advanced and I remain optimistic that an agreement can be reached in the near future.

Currently, the ACT UK is supporting the Primate. The parishes are able to cover only 17 % of expenses. St. Sarkis Managing Trust is currently helping me with accommodation. However, there are a number of constrains, the main one being that we can no longer use the premises as Primates offices both for practical and other legal reasons. St Sarkis Managing Trust has its own financial needs. This is why we considering all options. We need to move forward and ideally create a new centre for our Church which will have facilities to do youth ministry and help other Armenian organisation. In other words, as one of my friends would say we need a hub. Our diocese needs an official Diocesan Centre (Ազգային Առաջնորդարան). It is first of all a place to work and serve the needs of our community; day to day operations, meetings, youth ministry and Bible studies in an area where most Armenians are concentrated. We envisage it to be a place where the Armenians will be welcomed with open doors with their needs and concerns I can't achieve this vision without your support and need your contributions.

Finally, I like to take this opportunity to thank all our donors, sponsors, volunteers, ACT trustees former and present, executive committee, Ladies Committee, the Primate's office's staff members and everyone else for their continued support.