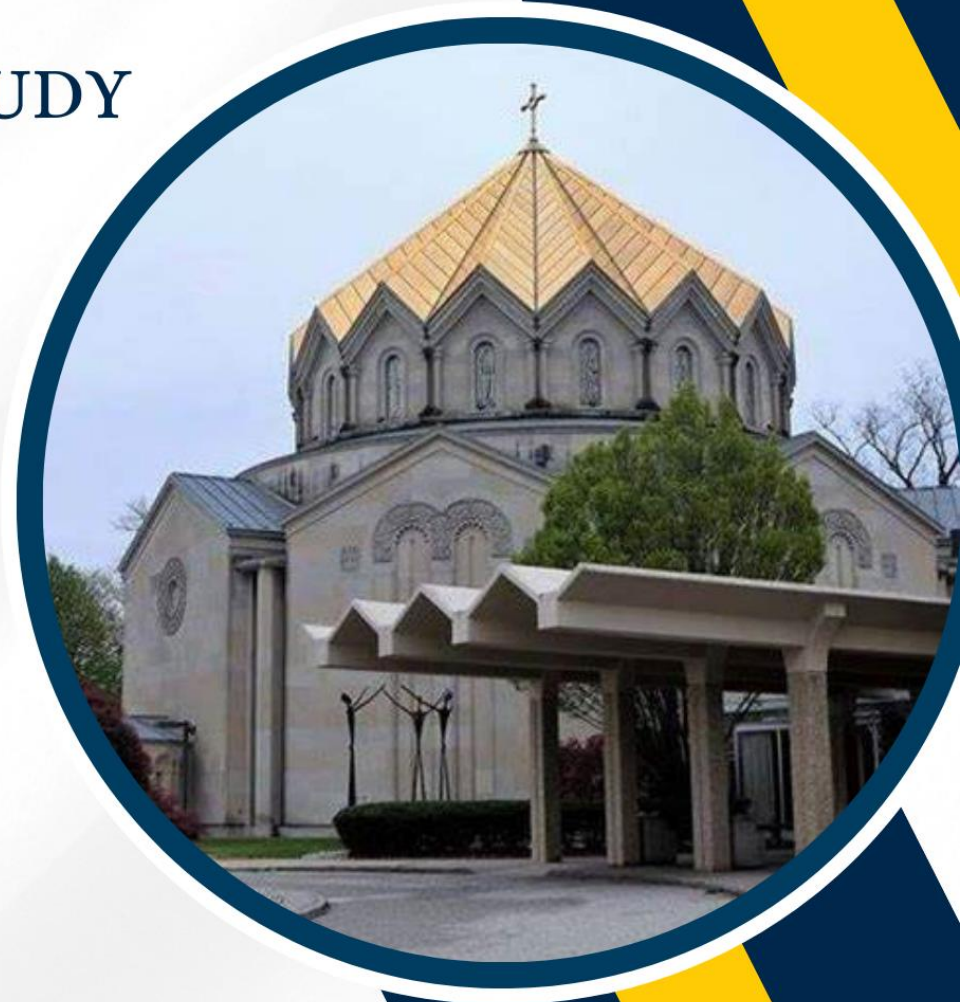




ST. JOHN ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH

COMMUNITY STUDY REPORT



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Armenian Research Center, University of Michigan-Dearborn
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Executive Summary

Established in 1931, St. John Armenian Apostolic Church of Greater Detroit (hereafter the Church), has served the local Armenian-American community for almost a century. Currently based in Southfield, Michigan, the Church has significantly expanded since the 1960s as the local Armenian community has grown with new waves of Armenian immigration from the Middle East, Europe, and the former Soviet republics, including Armenia. The Church community thus now represents a mosaic of Armenian backgrounds, marked by places of origin, cultural specificities, and spoken primary languages, which include English, Armenian, Russian, and Arabic.

This study aimed at gathering insights into parishioners' experiences, assessing satisfaction with the services provided by the Church, and identifying areas for potential improvement within those services.

The study was conducted in two stages by the Armenian Research Center (ARC) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn following a request by and to the benefit of the Church. The initial stage included a survey conducted in September-October 2023 among the Church community, and this was followed in the second stage by focus group interviews conducted in February-March 2024.

Two groups of factors were identified as influencing affiliation and engagement with the Church:

- The **external factors**, over which the Church has no or limited control, include the context of increasing secularization and declining religiosity among young adults across the United States, the geographic distance of community members from the Church, and the duration of affiliation with it. Community members who live closer to the Church are more likely to become actively involved. Similarly, those with longer affiliations are more inclined to contribute as volunteers, donors, stewards, or in other capacities.
- The **internal factors**, over which the Church has significantly more control, relate to its multiple facets. The Church is perceived by the community as a complex institution, encompassing religious/spiritual, ethnic/cultural, social/communal, emotional/personal, and organizational/administrative aspects.

Religious/spiritual: the Church as a place of worship

- *Sunday Service/Badarak* is the most appealing service provided by the Church. The sermons, the Church choir, Sunday School, and the Pastor were listed among other appealing factors of the Church as a place of worship. Shortening the Sunday Service/Badarak was recommended as a possible way to increase attendance.
- "*Christian educational discussions*," "*Bible study*," and "*Monthly catechism*" are among the least attended religious/spiritual services. Making them more relevant to contemporary issues and everyday experiences, in addition to providing remote opportunities via Zoom or other online platforms, may increase participation.

Ethnic/cultural: the Church as an Armenian cultural center

- *Armenian language/culture* is the second most appealing aspect of the Church. The service, conducted in Classical Armenian, helps community members feel connected to Armenian churches worldwide and to a

centuries-old tradition, regardless of their Armenian language skills. There is an expectation for the Church as an important Armenian cultural center to offer more ethnic and cultural programming, such as performances, art classes, and public lectures on Armenian topics.

- While the spiritual/religious and ethnic/cultural aspects of the Church are mutually reinforcing strengths, they may also become a source of tension. Overemphasizing the religious/spiritual aspects may alienate those who are more drawn to the Church's ethnic and cultural aspects. Conversely, placing too much emphasis on the ethnic and cultural aspects may alienate those who feel a stronger spiritual connection to the Church.
- Another source of tension exists between the expectations of Armenian-speaking and English-speaking members of the community. Fluent and native Armenian speakers anticipate a greater use of the Armenian language in the Church. The English-speaking members of the Church fear that increased use of the Armenian language may create an exclusive environment for them. Meeting the expectations of the Armenian-, Russian- and English-speaking members of the community requires careful planning and balancing, to foster inclusivity, ensuring that all members, regardless of their ability to speak Armenian or English, feel included and connected to the Church.

Social/communal: the Church as a community center

- *Community/social events*, such as the annual Church bazaar, and after-church socializing activities, as well as various cultural, youth, and family events, are the third most appealing aspect of the Church. The Church serves as a critical hub for socializing and networking. For long-time members, it is a place to regularly meet friends and extended family. For newer members it is a place to make friends and establish new connections.
- "Unwelcoming atmosphere" is the most repelling aspect of the Church. Contributing factors include the diversity of members' countries of origin, cultural backgrounds, and languages; cliquy networks of some long-established families; unfriendliness and judgmental attitudes; and an increased unbalanced focus on youth programs.
- The traditional structures of the Church's Men's Society and the Women's Guild are among the other less attractive aspects. Their names and missions are perceived to be reinforcing gender stereotypes, making their events less appealing to many community members. Both societies need modern, inclusive, and gender-neutral names that will reflect their activities rather than gender.
- Expanding the Church's role as a community center by organizing more social events, providing social services to community members in need, creating professional networks for early-career and mid-career individuals, and encouraging the formation of interest-based clubs for all age groups will help foster a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

Emotional/personal: the Church as a family place and home

- Families have been instrumental in connecting the younger generations with the Church. For members with long-standing family ties, the Church is part of their family history, a place of personal memories and home, as well as a link connecting to both personal and collective heritage.
- Moving to Southeast Michigan is the second most common reason for joining the Church. Unlike the long-standing members, newcomers need support to feel welcomed and at home in the Church. The perceived cliquishness of established families can at times contribute to an unwelcoming atmosphere. Implementing a

system to identify and actively reach out to newly relocated individuals and families may help them feel welcomed and included and subsequently become more involved.

Organizational/administrative: the Church as a non-profit organization

- The Church operates in many ways as a non-profit organization. Its organizational/administrative aspects include communications and marketing, community outreach, educational programming, fundraising and donations, and volunteer recruitment and coordination, as well as facilities management.
- The Church has an excellent record in communication via emails and the Church bulletin. The website needs a major revamp and regular updates to provide comprehensive information about the services, events, and volunteer engagement opportunities. It should cover the Church's various facets—as a place of worship, an Armenian cultural center, a community center, and a charitable non-profit organization. Additionally, the younger generations prefer receiving regular updates on social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook.
- It was also suggested that another important area to consider should be marketing the Church beyond the Armenian community—through addressing universal issues and engaging with the broader community in Metro Detroit and Southeast Michigan.
- The Church benefits from a dedicated group of volunteers, donors, and stewards who make regular contributions. To expand this group, the Church needs to enhance its outreach efforts through careful planning, strong support from Church leadership, especially in the implementation of plans, and tailored initiatives for people from diverse age groups and backgrounds. Recommendations include creating a database of professionals, and personally reaching out to potential volunteers, considering their knowledge, skills, experiences, and availability.
- The Church facilities are largely underutilized by community members. The younger generations are uncertain about access or costs. Recommendations include providing clear guidelines for facility use and offering spaces for informal gatherings. It is believed that these steps will improve accessibility and help the Church become a more inviting and informal community space.
- Technology in the sanctuary needs an upgrade to improve the sound and visibility during major Church events. Modernizing the sound systems and installing screens for better visibility throughout the sanctuary would address these issues. Additionally, adopting virtual or hybrid formats for the conduct of these services could enhance participation by those unable to attend in person.

The findings of this study do not express the views of the entire Church community. Both the survey and the focus group interviews were conducted exclusively in English, and the ratio of community members unable to complete the survey due to a lack of English proficiency was not measured.

This report highlights community needs and areas for improvement, offering insights for both short-term and long-term planning. While addressing all recommendations may be impractical, forming task forces from within the community and the Church administration, and prioritizing key areas can lead to focused and manageable improvements. These task forces can help tackle the most urgent concerns, while utilizing local resources and expertise, and pinpointing where additional support from the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America or the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin will likely be necessary.

Introduction

This report analyzes the findings from the study conducted by the University of Michigan-Dearborn's Armenian Research Center (ARC) at the request and to the benefit of St. John Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (the Church) in Southfield, Michigan. The study aimed at gathering insights into parishioners' experiences and satisfaction with the services provided by the Church. Additionally, it sought to identify areas for potential improvement within the services provided by the Church. The study was conducted in Southeast Michigan in two stages with adults above 18 years of age. The initial stage included a survey conducted in September-October 2023, followed by focus group interviews conducted in February-March 2024. This study complied with the guidelines set forth by the University of Michigan-Dearborn Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Methodology

The survey and the focus group interviews were conducted exclusively in English. While the majority of Armenians in Michigan are native speakers of English or have fluent knowledge of the language, the exclusive use of English in the study limited the participation of some of the Church community members who have limited knowledge of English.

The survey questionnaire was designed by specialists at the Armenian Research Center in consultation with the Church pastor and members of the Parish Council. The survey was conducted online, on Qualtrics (under UMD License). The survey questionnaire consisted of 50 questions (see Appendix). The survey was active from September 12 to October 10, 2023. A convenience sampling method was utilized, leveraging the

Church email list to connect with potential survey participants. To reduce the survey bias, which is inherent to convenience sampling, an effort was made both by the Church representatives and the ARC to recruit as many participants as possible. Survey reminders were sent on different days and times, usually once every week, and, in addition, community members were invited to take the survey during major Church events. The initial invitation to take the survey was sent to 1,125 community members by email, followed by weekly reminders. The survey QR code was prominently displayed on a poster at the Church entrance, and it was also printed in the Church bulletin. Additionally, printed copies of the QR code in a convenient business-card format were distributed during major Church gatherings throughout the fieldwork period. In addition to the online survey, 25 printed questionnaires were specifically sent to homebound parishioners, who did not have access to email and/or the internet. A total of 312 valid responses were collected, with 308 received online via Qualtrics and four completed on paper. The overall response rate stood at around 27%, representing 312 participants out of the total number of 1,150, who directly received the survey by email or the printed questionnaire by snail mail. The survey asked toward the end for volunteers to participate in focus group interviews in the second phase of the study. About 50 survey participants expressed such interest.

The second phase of the study included four focus group interviews with members of the Church community. Each focus group was conducted with 5-7 participants. Two focus group interviews were conducted in person, and two via Zoom. The focus group interviews aimed at gaining deeper insights into the experiences of the participants with the various services provided by the Church. The focus group interview guide was designed based on the interim findings of the survey.

Limitations. The survey results are not representative and cannot be generalized for the entire Church community. Both the survey and the focus group interviews were conducted exclusively in English. Therefore, the ratio of parishioners unable to complete the survey due to a lack of English proficiency could not be measured. The Church has a large community, comprising native speakers of the English, Armenian, Russian, and Arabic languages. Some members of the community, especially the more recent immigrants or the older immigrant populations, sometimes do not feel confident to complete surveys or to participate in focus group interviews conducted in English. Their perspectives, therefore, were not recorded in the survey or the focus group interviews.

Background of the Problem: Armenian Churches in the Context of the Decline of Religiosity in America

The religious landscape of the United States has undergone significant changes since the 1970s. Studies have shown a decline in religiosity throughout the country, with disaffiliation emerging as a prominent trend (Brauer, 2018; Twenge et al., 2016; Voas and Chaves, 2018). Some studies suggest a decrease in both Christian religiosity and observance among Americans (Pew Research Center, 2019). A longitudinal study examining the religious involvement and beliefs of American adults from 1972 to 2014 revealed a notable decline in religiosity, particularly evident among the younger generations (18-29-year-olds). During the period between 2006 and 2014 a significant decrease was observed among young adults, which included reduced engagement in activities such as praying, reading the Bible, attending religious services, identifying as religious, or being affiliated with a religion (Twenge, et al., 2016). The decline in religious commitment was more pronounced “among men, Whites, and those in the Midwest, Northeast, and West, and was nearly absent among Black Americans and small in the South” (ibid. page 3). The decline in religiosity, however,

did not affect private expressions of individual spirituality. Moreover, a slight increase in identifying as spiritual was reported among Americans above 30 years of age (ibid, page 10).

Studies have offered various explanations for this decline in religiosity among young adults. Notwithstanding the broader societal influences shaping individual worldviews, religious upbringing or its absence significantly shape religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices. Embracing the American individualist cultural ethos, the Millennial generation tends to resist rigid moral prescriptions in spirituality and faith (Wittberg, 2021). Various other social factors, such as higher education, delinquent behaviors (like alcohol consumption, drug use), or life events (such as marriage, cohabitation, parenthood) have also been identified as contributors to religious decline (Uecker, et al., 2007).

Armenian churches across the United States, including Michigan, are not immune to the decline in religiosity and spiritualism in the country. The potential loss of Armenian parishioners in the United States can happen not only due to the religious decline and the increasing secularization in the country, but also because Armenians may join other Christian denominations or may choose to adhere to other, non-Christian religious practices. According to the findings of the Armenian Diaspora Survey in Michigan, there is a segment of the Armenian population (around 15% of the respondents), who are either affiliated with non-Armenian Christian denominations (such as Orthodox or other Protestant churches), or practice other religions (such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Buddhism). Yet, despite these valid concerns, Armenians are more likely to remain affiliated with Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Evangelical (Protestant) or, to a lesser extent, with Armenian Catholic churches in the United States. According to the ADS findings in the United States, the majority of Armenians are affiliated with the Armenian Apostolic Church (78%), followed by Armenian Evangelical (Protestant) churches (12%) with insignificant variations between the gender and age categories

or generational presence in the country (Tchilingirian 2022, 69). Even if some decline of spirituality can also be observed among Armenians (as indicated by the Armenian Diaspora Survey conducted in the United States), many still remain affiliated with Armenian churches for reasons that will be explained in this report.

Demographic Data

Demographic data presented in this section include Armenian origins, gender, age, and geographic concentration of survey participants.

Distribution of Armenian origins

Nearly 8 in 10 of the survey participants (77%) identified as Armenian-American (U.S. born). Other relatively large groups of respondents consisted of Armenians from Hayastan (6%), and Lebanon (3%). There were smaller groups of Istanbul Armenians, Baku Armenians, Iranian Armenians, Iraqi Armenians, and Jerusalem Armenians (Figure 1).

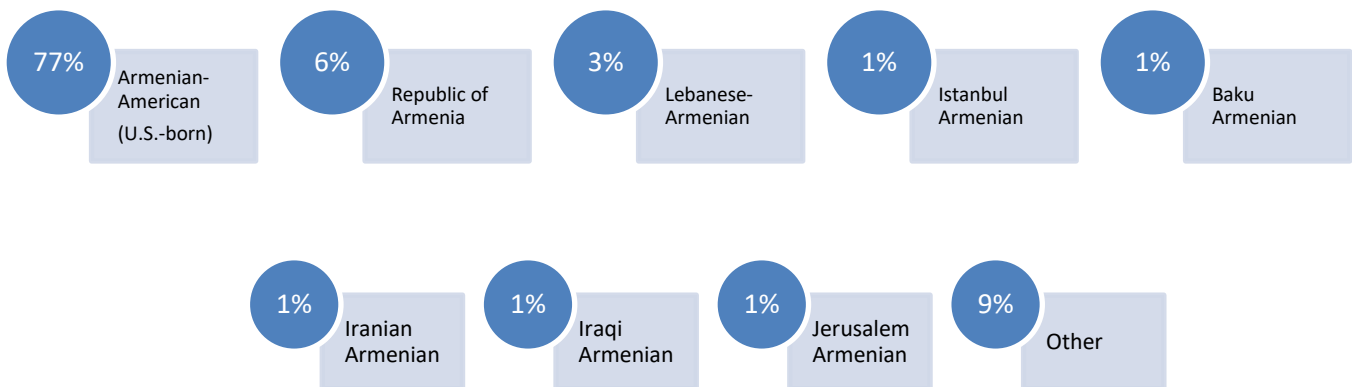


Figure 1. Demographic distribution of survey participants

9% of respondents selected “Other,” and some indicated other choices, not available in the survey. These included “European Armenian” or non-Armenians (“ABC – Armenian by Choice,” “Eastern European and Orthodox,” “Russian,” “French/Irish,” “A Lutheran of Nordic Descent,” “White,” Non-Armenian “odar,” married an Armenian).

Gender distribution

Female respondents were overrepresented in the survey, constituting 60% (Figure 2).

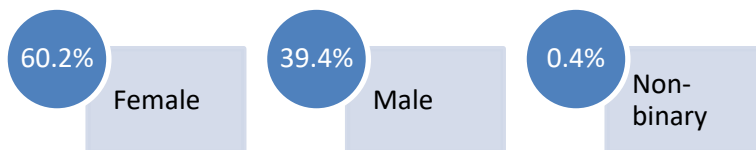


Figure 2. Gender distribution of survey participants.

Age distribution

The highest number of respondents were of the age 66 and above. The lowest number of respondents were in the age group of 18-30 (Figure 3).

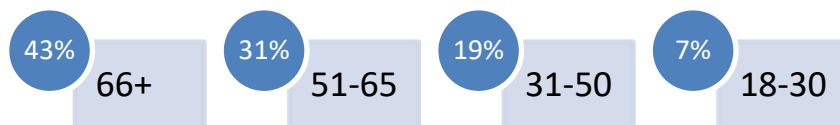


Figure 3. Age distribution of survey participants.

Geographic distribution of respondents in Southeast Michigan

Most of the survey participants indicated residency in Southeast Michigan, primarily clustered near the Church (Figure 4). Many respondents resided in Oakland County (74%), followed by Wayne County (14%), with smaller percentages in Washtenaw (4%) and Macomb (3%) counties. While these numbers might correlate with the density of Armenian population in these counties, other factors might also have contributed to these distributions.

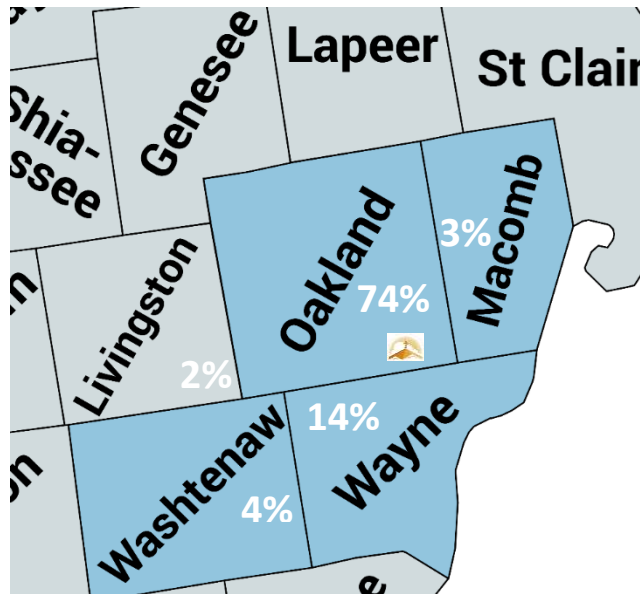


Figure 4. Geographic distribution of survey participants.
(Created with mapchart.net)

External Factors Influencing Affiliation and Engagement with the Church

Two key factors significantly influencing church involvement, over which SJAC has limited or no control, are proximity/distance from the Church, and the duration of affiliation with the Church.

a. Geographic Distance from the Church

Only about 14% of survey participants live within 15 minutes of driving distance from the Church. For most respondents it takes 15-30 minutes (54%) or longer (33%) to get to the Church. For members of the community who do not live near the Church, attending the events on weekdays, especially if they are working professionals, becomes a challenge:

“I work in [city name] until 5:30 and something doesn’t happen till 7 at Church and I’m not going to hang around ... or drive home [and then] drive [to the Church].”

Among less attractive things about the Church, “Distance from my home” is the top challenge, and among reasons that prevent involvement with the Church, “my house is a long drive from the Church” is only the second major reason after “I don’t have time.”

b. Duration of Affiliation with the Church

An overwhelming majority among the survey participants (82%) has had a long involvement with the Church, spanning 15 years or more. Members of this majority represent different age groups, with the largest cohort being in the 66+ category (40%), followed by the 55-65 (26%), and 31-50 (12%) age brackets. Among newer members (less than 5 years), the majority are between 31 and 50 years of age (53%).

The fact that 82% of respondents, representing various age groups, have 15 or more years of affiliation with the Church suggests that:

- a. The duration of affiliation with the Church (not the age of parishioners) appears to impact the probability of parishioners opening and reading communications from the Church. The longer parishioners are affiliated with the Church, the more inclined they are to open and read church emails and communication.
- b. The duration of affiliation with the Church (not the age of parishioners) appears to also impact the probability of parishioners of doing something for the Church (such as taking the survey). The longer parishioners are affiliated with the Church, the more inclined they are to do something for the Church (as evident from the greater number of participants among those affiliated for 15+ years).

Parishioners with longer involvement can potentially become promoters of the Church and its activities.

Internal Factors Influencing Affiliation and Engagement with the Church

Three primary appealing factors about the Church, as indicated in the survey, include “Sunday Service/Badarak” (70%), “Armenian culture/language” (49%), and “Community/social events” (47%), such as the annual bazaar, after-church socializing events, and various cultural, youth and family events, language, spiritual, and cultural enrichment opportunities (see Figure 5).

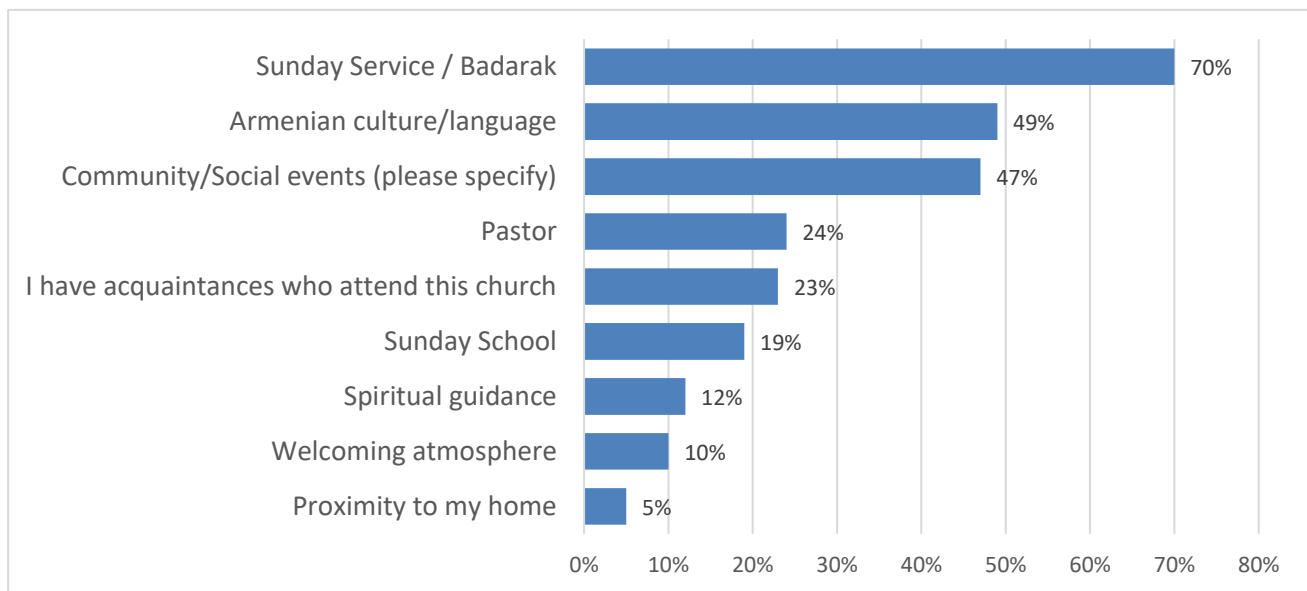


Figure 5. Appealing factors about the Church

These primary appealing factors, combined with the findings from the focus group interviews, suggest that the Church is perceived by the community as a complex institution with several facets, which can be grouped into the following categories:

- ❖ Religious/spiritual: the Church as a place of worship
- ❖ Ethnic/cultural: the Church as an Armenian cultural center

- ❖ Social/communal: the Church as a community center
- ❖ Emotional/personal: the Church as a family place and home
- ❖ Organizational/administrative: the Church as a non-profit organization

These facets overlap in many ways, creating a complexity of factors that affect the connections between the Church and the community. While these different facets are inseparable in the daily operation of the Church, the following parts of the report focus on each of them individually to identify the strengths of the Church in these particular areas and also the issues that need to be considered and addressed, according to the research findings.

a. Religious/spiritual aspects: the Church as a place of worship

Among survey participants, spirituality was relatively high: the majority of respondents believes in God (88%) (10% believe in a spiritual force, 1% reported not being religious, and 1% were not sure). Accordingly, 75% of respondents reported that religion is “extremely important” (39%) or “very important” (36%) in their lives. As a place of worship, intended to meet the spiritual and religious needs of the community, the Church meets the expectations of the community. For some, just being present in the Church is already spiritually fulfilling:

“Anytime I’m lighting a candle, I just think about my family and, you know, the family I knew, the family I didn’t know. And so, for me, just being present and just being in the Church is very spiritual for me.”

“Just like the building itself and being in the sanctuary is really like a spiritual ... and calming for me.”

“I sometimes will come during the week and just sit in the Church and be quiet and I can feel it.”

“I do think the Church does a tremendous job spiritually.”

a1. Strengths (religious/spiritual aspects)

- **Sunday Service/Badarak** is the most appealing service provided by the Church (Figure 5). Most parishioners attend the Sunday Service/Badarak regularly (31%) or every other week or month (31%). About 20% reported attending the Sunday Service rarely (only 2-3 times every 6 months), and 12% reported attending only once or twice a year. The majority of the respondents understands the meaning of the Divine Liturgy (Badarak) very well (28%) or well (50%); they feel they have a strong awareness of the Church's theological teachings (64%), and they are also aware of the Armenian Church's traditions and customs (77%).

Inseparable from the Armenian past, the Badarak is the most spiritually fulfilling aspect of the Church, in part because it also connects to an ancient Armenian tradition:

"It's the same mass that's been in the Armenian Church in many, many years. And I like that idea as well because you feel like you have a connection to your ancestors going back all the way to Armenia. So, you're experiencing the same things that they've done."

- **Sermons.** Most respondents enjoy the sermons (59%). For many surveyed parishioners, the sermons are extremely meaningful (12%), very meaningful (33%) or moderately meaningful (33%). Less than a quarter of the survey participants finds the surveys slightly meaningful (16%) or not meaningful at all (7%).
- **The choir.** Participants in focus group interviews also mentioned the music of the Badarak, especially emphasizing the Church choir as being spiritually fulfilling:

"Listening to Badarak in Armenian... [is] very important to me... and also listening to all the sharakans. I think [mentions the name of the Choir director] really does an outstanding job! It's like going to a concert every time we go to Church. And it's just, it's much more powerful experiencing in that way."

“You could pray at home. We pray at home. I pray at home. I pray in my car. Why do you need to come here? But I'm hearing the music. I'm walking and I'm smelling the incense.”

Community members find spiritual fulfillment not only in the Sunday Service or the sermons, but also in a combination of things, which include the sanctuary, the music, the smells, and the bodily experiences.

- ***Sunday School.*** Among the appealing factors about the Church, every fifth survey participant mentioned “Sunday School” (Figure 5). Not as high in the list of priorities, the Sunday School is nevertheless one of the strengths of the Church because, among the many programs designed for the younger generations, the Sunday School is the most attended. Only 38% of the survey participants had children under the age of 18. From the total number of only those who had children under the age of 18, 54% of their children regularly attend Sunday School, 31% regularly attend the Church’s Summer camp, 22% participate in youth basketball, and 10% in the Armenian Church Youth Organization of America (ACYOA) Juniors. Most respondents who had children attending Sunday School loved the experience.
- ***The Pastor.*** The survey indicated that most participants appreciate the Church Pastor. They find him “friendly and approachable” (72%) and available when they need him (71%). While discussing the individual qualities of past and present pastors was beyond our goals in the focus group interviews, some participants made positive remarks about the Church’s pastors, in relation to various issues, as they recounted personal experiences.

a2. Issues to consider (religious/spiritual aspects)

- ***The Length of Sunday Service/Badarak.*** While most participants of the study found the Sunday Service/Badarak spiritually fulfilling and as the most appealing aspect of the Church, some participants (12%) listed the Sunday Service/ Badarak among the least attractive aspects, mostly for its length. Some participants in focus group interviews liked the idea of shortening the Service:

“I like the idea of shortening it [the Badarak], and it depends on our priests. Some drag it on and go very slow and some are more with it and, you know, move it along. So, I think the time element, I mean, sometimes it's almost two-three hours if you're there from the very beginning to the very end to hogehangist [memorial service]. So, I just think they could shorten it to a more equal level.”

Inability to understand the Classical Armenian text is another issue in relation to the length of the service: “three-hour service and a language I don’t fully understand is a turn off.” While this particular opinion was not broadly shared among the focus group participants, there was a strong consensus among them, that the Service should remain in Classical Armenian and not be conducted in English:

“People have said that they wanted to go to [using] English [during the church service], and that way you would increase the attendance. I disagree with that. I think part of the tradition, the service itself, is the culture. Everything that we've talked about, [is] that ... it's rooted. And yeah, if you convert that it doesn't have the same feel. It doesn't have the same richness because, just like any language, there isn't always an exact translation of a word and just doesn't come across.”

“Personally, to me, if you eliminate a lot of the Armenian language, you're taking the culture out of the church, you know. And frankly, then I can go to an Episcopal church that's around the corner.”

As observed by another participant, some among the younger generations of Armenian-Americans also do not wish to have the liturgy in English:

“I've seen in the later years, ... I'd say within the last ten years, the graduates are saying, ‘No! We want it in Armenian because that's what we're about’. It's that we have, that special Badarak, where other people don't.”

And another participant confirmed:

“They think there’s also something powerful, knowing that when you go to church and hear it in Armenian, you’re hearing it the same way that everyone else [among Armenians] around the entire planet, probably for the most part, is hearing it – the connection around the world.”

As possible solutions to the length of the service, some focus group participants suggested shortening the sermons and explaining how the liturgy was structured on each Sunday:

“If there was like ‘These are the roughish times of the different parts [of the Service]’, so that people don’t feel ashamed that they’ve, like, entered at the wrong time or that they got there late and people are going to look at them And then, you know, sometimes you might not know that that day’s service is having an extra part past hogehangist. And if you’re not ... well-versed in the calendar of the church, that might surprise you. And now you’re thinking, ‘wow, I didn’t know I was going to sit here till like twelve thirty or one.’ So maybe just like a little more signposting of what’s going on Sundays.”

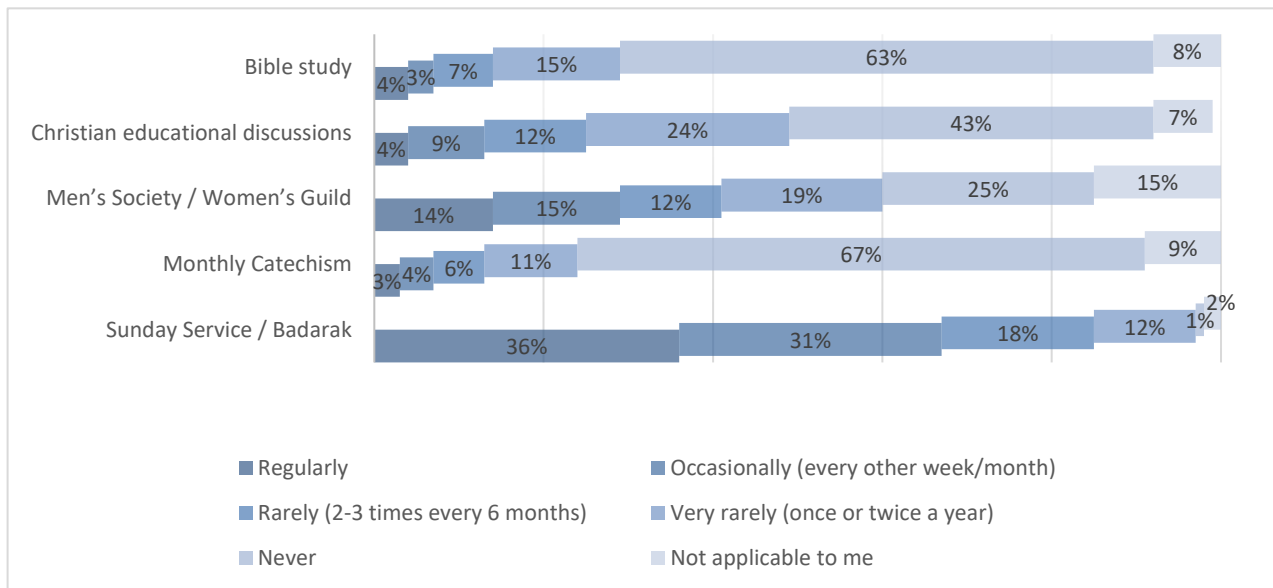


Figure 6. Participation in religious/spiritual services

- **“Christian educational discussions,” “Bible study,” and “Monthly catechism”** are among the least attended religious/spiritual services provided by the Church (Figure 6). Despite the relatively higher rates of spirituality among survey participants, only 4% attend “Christian education discussions”

regularly, while 43% have never attended them. 63% of the respondents never participate in “Bible study,” and 67% never participate in “Monthly catechism.” Most respondents did not have enough experience in attending “Monthly catechism” (76% selected “I have no experience”), “Bible study” (65% selected “I have no experience”), and “Christian educational discussions” (half of them reported “I have no experience”) to be able to rate them accordingly. The lack of interest in these programs should not just be interpreted as a sign of declining religiosity in the community. Other inconveniences also influence participation in these programs:

“I feel like all of the Bible study and Catechism, they tend to be on weekday evenings too, which is just really hard.... Like I can just imagine if you're, if you have a 9 to 5, or you know you have kids that like you have to, you know, you can't leave them with a sitter on a weekday. People don't really want to do that. It's hard enough to find a sitter, like on a regular weekend. I think it's hard. And then people are just already exhausted, so they don't want to go to church and pastor, you know, really have like maybe deep conversation or get into deep spiritual thought.”

Some younger participants of focus groups see an opportunity in organizing these events in the Church sanctuary instead of conference rooms:

“I would really like to see enrichment programing that does take place in the sanctuary. You know, not necessarily calling it Bible study, but I've seen it built as like praying with Scripture or like meditating with Scripture.”

Others thought Bible Studies could be made more relevant to the daily experiences of people, instead of “popcorn reading of the Bible” when someone reads, “and then the priest says a few words”:

“I think if there was something like a ground up initiative of, you know, gauge people's experience with the Bible, I think just, you know, for a lot of people who are unfamiliar, diving into any one book can feel like, well, okay, this is a nice story, but I can watch this on Netflix right now with the Chosen. And if there was something that kind of maybe gave insight into this.... I'm sure the priest has read the whole Bible. I don't know if any of us have, but is that something you should do? Should you read it cover to cover? Should you go and order like something that kind of connects us to the act of Bible study?”

And yet another suggestion was made to think of some innovative ways in which modern technologies could be incorporated in the study of the Bible:

“Instead of the status quo, approach the Bible in a sense where, find out how people like to consume it. Some people like the written word, some people like audio, purely audio, some people like audio visual. So, if given the technologies that we have today, if it was provided in a different format, I think a lot more attendance would be seen.”

- **Rigid service and lack of relevance.** Church practices are perceived as “not flexible,” “out of touch with life and needs of parishioners today.” “Rigid service, instead of pulling people in to understand God and how He helps/can help them,” was mentioned as another issue of concern. This explains why many of the survey participants are unsure or are not aware of the Church’s perspective on contemporary issues (Figure 7). This also explains why Spiritual Guidance was not as high in the list of most appealing aspects of the Church (Figure 5).

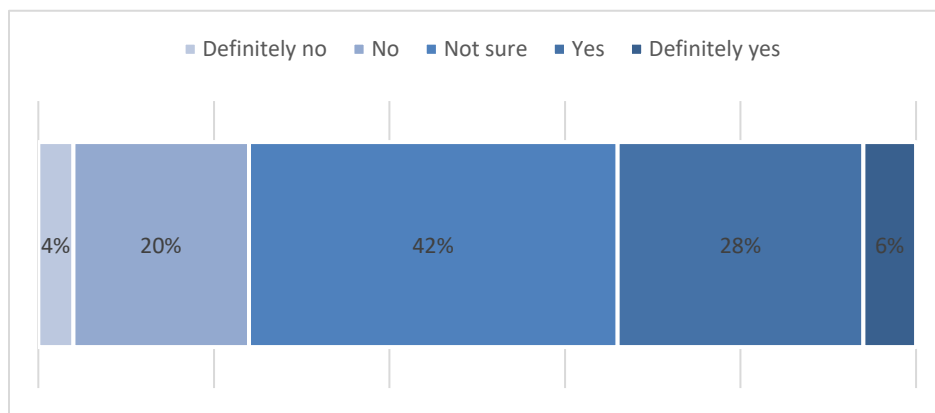


Figure 7. Awareness of the Church's stance on contemporary topics.

b. Ethnic/cultural aspects: the Church as an Armenian cultural center

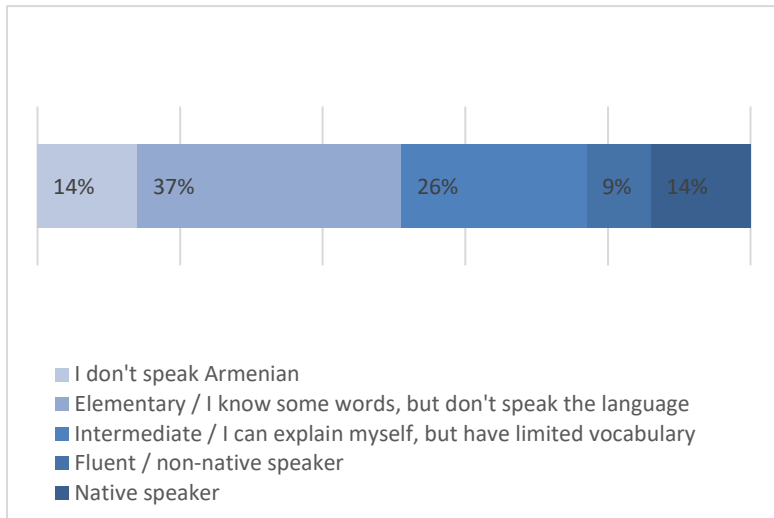


Figure 8. Fluency in Armenian. Self-assessments.

The majority of the survey or focus group participants were U.S.-born Armenian-Americans, followed by smaller representation of Armenians originating from various countries (see Figure 1). While the survey was conducted in English exclusively, about every four out of ten survey participants (23%) were fluent or native speakers of Armenian in their self-assessment (Figure 8).

Unsurprisingly, the second most appealing aspect of the Church was its ties to “Armenian culture/language.” Close to half of the survey participants listed “Armenian culture/language” among the most appealing aspects of the Church (Figure 5). Quite predictably, “Armenian language/culture” as an appealing factor was ranked much higher among the native and fluent speakers of Armenian (Figure 9). While only 14% of survey participants were native speakers of

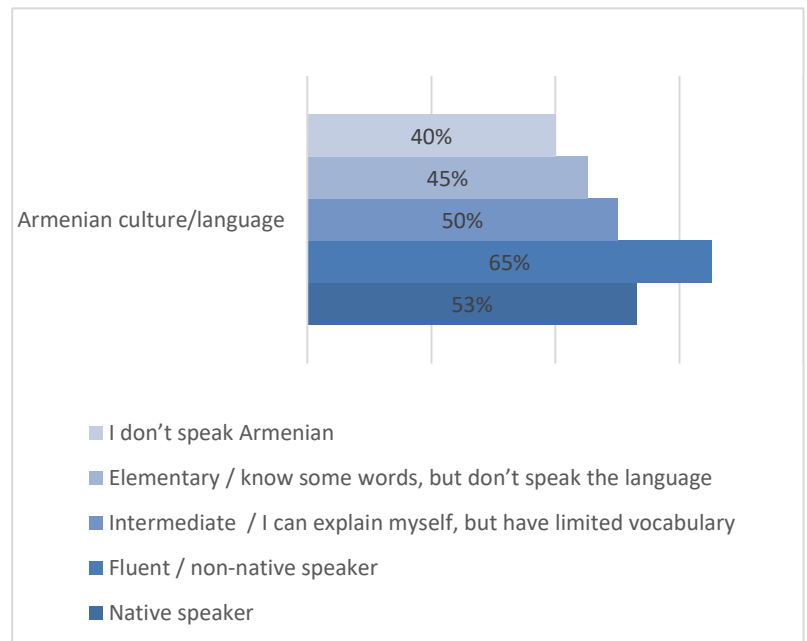


Figure 9. Armenian language proficiency and “Armenian culture/language” as an appealing aspect of the Church.

Armenian, 53% among them selected “Armenian culture/language” among other appealing aspects. Similarly, while only 9% of participants were fluent, non-native speakers of Armenian, 65% among them selected Armenian culture/language among other appealing aspects of the Church. Hence, one could contend that had the survey been conducted also in Armenian, this figure could have been higher in the Armenian-language responses. This finding points to a strong conclusion that for many members of the community, especially for those who are fluent or native speakers of Armenian, the Church functions as an important ethnic/cultural Armenian community center.

b1. Strengths (ethnic/cultural aspects)

- ***Armenianness of the Church.*** This is a strength compared to many other churches in the vicinity. In the context of declining religiosity, across the country, especially among younger generations, the fact that for many community members the “Armenian language/culture” is an appealing factor allows us to infer that Armenians will remain affiliated with the Church, regardless of how spiritual they are or become in life.

“[I like] the Armenianness of [the Church]. I mean, you know, you're here, [and] everybody's Armenian, with a few exceptions. As soon as you walk out of here, you're pretty much alone because there isn't nearly that density of Armenians here, as in, for example, [the] L.A. area, Glendale, or if you go to Armenia....”

“It's a different feeling in our Church. It's a deeper feeling maybe because I'm within these people that are Armenian! I don't know. But I do feel closer to God in our Church.”

- ***Unique Armenian worship and tradition, going back centuries.*** As mentioned above, the Badarak is intricately intertwined with the Armenian culture and the past. While some among the participants expressed a need to have the liturgy conducted in English and shortened, many opposed this idea.

Keeping the service as it is and in its original (Classical) Armenian language is important, many suggested in the focus group discussions, because not only does it connect with an Armenian tradition going back centuries, but also with Armenians all around the world. Being able to follow the same Badarak with the same structure everywhere around the world creates a feeling of belonging to an Armenian universe through Armenian churches around the world.

“I like [that] no matter where I go in this country or overseas, the Badarak is always the same. Yeah. I know exactly where I am in the service if I know it well enough. And I think I do sing along. I feel like I belong, even if I don't know anybody. When I just show up, I feel like I belong.”

- ***The Church as an Armenian community center.*** The Church shares the campus and part of the adjacent building with the Alex and Marie Manoogian Museum, the Edward and Helen Mardigian Library, and the AGBU Alex and Marie Manoogian School. These interconnected spaces send a strong message to the community that the Church and the broader campus serve as an Armenian cultural and community center, which becomes attractive for younger generations of Armenians, especially when they compare it with Armenian churches elsewhere:

“I did get to see other parishes in the [Eastern] Diocese [of the Armenian Church in the US] and really feel how lucky we are for the campus that we have. But for me personally, I think it's more of that community center feel with the school being on the same piece of land and the museum and the library.”

Often, the spiritual and the ethnic/cultural aspects of the Church are mutually reinforcing. When thinking of spiritually fulfilling aspects of the Church, a younger participant in a focus group interview found spirituality in the Manoogian Museum as well:

“I get spiritual fulfillment from the Badarak primarily.... The museum is very fulfilling in that sense [as well]. The connection to my history is more of a spiritual connection. I know that's kind of a different topic, but I primarily derive my spirituality from the Badarak.”

b2. Issues to consider (ethnic/cultural aspects)

- ***Tension between the religious/spiritual and ethnic/cultural.*** While noting the reinforcing links between the religious/spiritual and ethnic/cultural aspects, these can be a source of tension as well, especially for the non-Armenian members of the Church community. Some participants in the survey identified themselves as “ABC – Armenian by Choice,” and others as “non-Armenian.” These individuals mostly represent non-Armenian spouses who became affiliated with the Church after marrying Armenians. Some have chosen to become Armenian (ABC); others have not, even after marrying an Armenian and becoming member of the Church community. The relatively smaller figures of non-Armenians in the survey should not be interpreted as representative of the Church community. As one of the focus group interview participants noted:

“We have a lot of, I'd say the majority, if not more, of our marriage[s] is Armenian to non-Armenian. And I don't see anything going on to really welcome the non-Armenian partner into the Church. Yeah, and that's sad because if we can't garner them, we don't have them.”

For non-Armenians affiliated with the Church, spirituality and ethnic/cultural aspects of the Church are not necessarily intertwined and mutually reinforcing. While individuals who identify themselves as ABC may become more interested in the ethnic/cultural aspects of Armenianness, individuals identifying themselves as non-Armenians may be more interested in the spiritual rather than ethnic aspects of the Church.

“Spirituality is what brings people to Church... ethnicity is what brings people to [Church] bazaar or to what to do.”

Considering that Armenians marrying non-Armenians could potentially bring more non-Armenians to the Church in the future, the Church administration needs to delicately balance between the inseparable spiritual/religious and ethnic/cultural aspects, to create and reinforce an inclusive

environment for non-Armenians as well. Too much emphasis on the religious/spiritual aspects may alienate those who find the ethnic/cultural aspects of the Church more appealing, and conversely, too much emphasis on the ethnic/cultural may alienate those who are more connected spiritually to the Church.

- **More ethnic/cultural programming.** Despite the tensions between the spiritual/religious and ethnic/cultural, most of the (Armenian) participants of the survey think that having more cultural events (performances, art classes and so on), public lectures on Armenian topics, youth events, would help them “a lot” to get further involved (Figure 10).

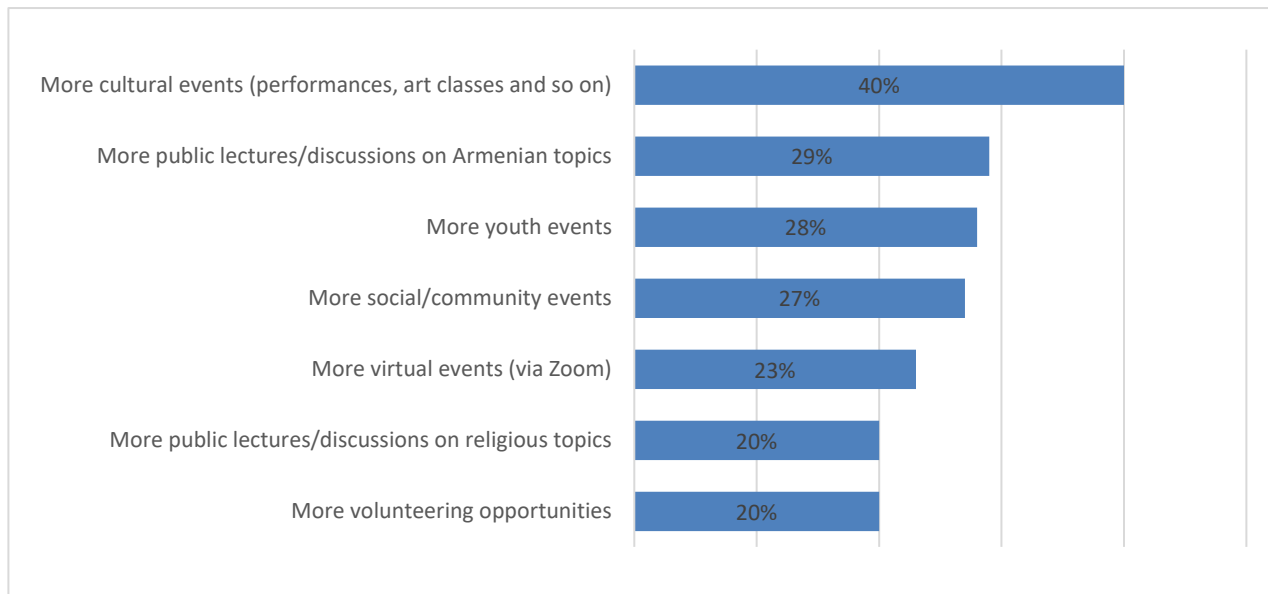


Figure 10. Areas that would encourage involvement with the Church.

There is an expressed desire among most respondents to expand the Church’s role as an ethnic/cultural institution, despite the concerns for non-Armenians mentioned above. While the sequence of preferences remains consistent across all age groups, respondents in the 18-50 age

bracket place more emphasis on the importance of expanding Armenian cultural and public events for increased involvement. 61% in this age bracket selected “More cultural events,” 54% “more public lectures/discussions on Armenian topics,” 51% “More youth events” compared to only 22%, who selected “More public lectures/discussions on religious topics.”

Focus group interview participants expressed interest in having more events on Armenian painters, music, music performers, dances, and Armenian travelogue talks. They would also be interested in attending Armenian concerts, musical performances, folk music performances by local Armenians or from Armenia. They would also like to watch Armenian films with subtitles, if such were organized at an Armenian community center.

Utilizing the potential and resources of the **Manoogian Museum** and the **Mardigian Library** can also contribute to meeting the expressed need in having more ethnic/cultural events in the community. While every 4 out of 5 respondents have visited the Manoogian Museum, only 24% have used the resources of the Mardigian Library: 70% of survey participants have never used the library’s resources, and 6% did not even know about the library.

“I think another underutilized point of culture that we have is the Museum.... It's so likely to walk past it and not even know that there's the other big room. So, I wish there were more Museum [events], like an afterglow with the Museum open. Like if you're having another event at Church, just let the Museum be open for people to stroll through even on Sundays, like one Sunday a month would be great.”

- ***Tension between Armenian-speaking and English-speaking members of the community:*** The ethnic/cultural aspect of the Church creates a tension between the expectations of Armenian-,

(Russian-) and English-speaking members of the community. Fluent and native Armenian speakers anticipate a greater use of the Armenian language in the Church.

“It is important to me that there's as much Armenian spoken as possible, because that is, for me, that's more spiritually fulfilling.”

Some are concerned about the future of Western Armenian, which also translates into a desire to have more emphasis on Western Armenian in Church services or events.

“I am always very frightened that Western Armenian is going to be lost. And I know there is class, that there are classes at the Church. But I think like a huge part is just making that as accessible as possible, even in the service, maybe explaining certain words and what they mean. ... [T]here's so many things that I don't know, that I want to know, and I would love if the Church, had like these history classes, classes about, like, Armenian superstitions, you know, for example, like where [are] those from and all of that. But definitely for me, a big one is definitely language. My biggest fear is, is losing that, and so I would love if there were more resources.”

Since the focus group interviews were conducted exclusively in English, the study only partially recorded the tensions between Armenian- and English-speakers. Interviews with native Armenian-speaking or Russian-speaking Armenians could potentially reveal some further areas of concern in this regard. Yet even in the discussions happening in English, the divergences between English speaking Armenians and the more recent Armenian immigrants from Armenia, the former Soviet republics, or the Middle East, who had grown up in a different linguistic environment, could still be observed and recorded:

“We're getting further away from native-born speakers that are their third and fourth generation in this country. I spoke Armenian as a child but lost that ability because I didn't use it enough. My parents were born in this country.

And I think now we're getting to a point where we're bringing in a lot of native speakers [who] are immigrants from the Middle East and Armenia. And there's some, I would say, dichotomy, difference, culturally or socially. And that may be, I won't say a dividing line in the community, but something that we're going to have to address and find a way to make people feel more welcome, because I don't speak Armenian [or Russian] and they don't speak English well....”

Some participants of the focus group interviews recalled instances of encountering Armenians who insisted on the increased use of the Armenian language. “This is an Armenian Church; you should only be speaking Armenian!” they recalled being reprimanded. Increasing the use of the Armenian language in the Church, however, could also become a source of tension. English-speaking Armenian-Americans feel very comfortable and included in the Church because much of the communication and sermons are conducted in English. Some fear that increasing the Armenian-language content may create an uncomfortable and exclusive environment for them:

“Because now we're incorporating a lot of English, there could be a point where we're going to be told, “you can't do that anymore.” And that's a concern to me that this has happened in other Armenian communities out east, where they were in English mode, and then they were converted back to all Armenian, and they went from having a community that was growing at an astronomical rate to [a] depressing [one] and gone.”

Meeting the expectations of the Armenian-speaking, (Russian-speaking) and English-speaking members of the community requires careful planning and balancing, which would foster inclusivity, ensuring that all members, regardless of their ability to speak Armenian or English, feel connected to the Church.

c. Social/communal aspects: the Church as a community center

The third most appealing factor about the Church constitute the “Community/social events” (47%), such as the annual bazaar, after-church service socializing activities, various cultural, youth and family events, as recorded in the survey (see Figure 5). Most survey participants (86%) enjoy the social events (social

gatherings, programs offered) at the Church. Moreover, many younger individuals feel connected to the Church mostly through participating in social gatherings and attending events:

“Continuing to have different events, and social events... I think the Church has been good, really good about those in the past couple of years... Like for me, I go to Church, well, when I do go, to events, it's like social. That's why I go. And you look at the attendance of, like, a picnic, and there's just tons of people. And I mean, all those people don't actually go to [the] service.”

The Church is perceived as an important community center, “our hub.” It’s a place for socializing and community support, which is also acknowledged by senior members of the community:

“People like social, I think. I don't know so much if people always want to have a Bible study or, you know. They like secular things, but with our people, yeah, but with their friends, friendships they've cultivated growing up or meeting [at the Church]”

[another focus group participant continues:]

“You're hitting on a good point. You can't always draw people and say ‘Oh, it's Church!’; you have to bring them in socially.”

The Social/communal aspects of the Church are as important as the spiritual/religious or ethnic/cultural aspects:

“It starts with the social in this day and age. And if we don't start providing that, we're not going anywhere.”

c1. Strengths (social/communal aspects)

- ***A community place for longer-involved members.*** The overwhelming majority of survey participants (82%), as mentioned above, have been involved with the Church for 15 years or more. Predictably, the majority of these longer-involved members feel welcome and a part of the Church

community (Figure 11). This is a major strength that the Church has been able to establish for longer-involved community members.

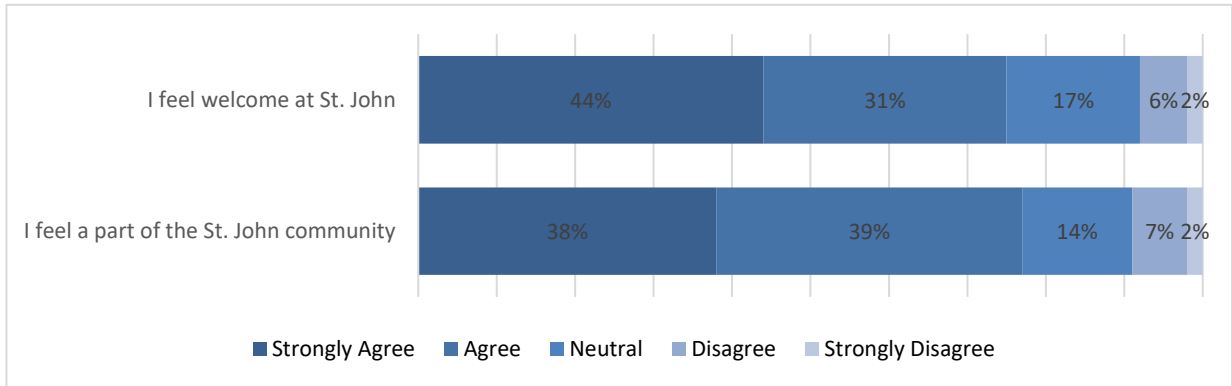


Figure 11. Feeling welcome and part of the Church community.

- For new members the community, a place to make friends and establish new connections.*** Another notable strength in this area is that regular social gatherings and events at the Church create a welcoming and inclusive space for newer members of the community, providing an opportunity for them to make new connections and build meaningful relationships. Among other appealing factors, 23% of the survey participants selected the option “I have acquaintances who attend this Church.” The social/communal aspects of the Church are appealing especially to newer members of the community—recent arrivals in the area who are seeking opportunities to make personal and professional connections with other Armenians.

“[I also like the] community aspect of [the Church]. ... I was born in Armenia, so in Armenia I feel like the churches don't have those community aspects because they don't need to [as] everyone's Armenian there. But moving to U.S. ... I moved to [a place name], and then, the first place where I met Armenians was the Armenian church there. And that continued. And then I moved to [another place], I was very close to the Armenian church, had my group of friends, and then moving here to Michigan, kind of same thing happened. So, it serves basically those two purposes for me [spiritual and social].”

While most participants of the survey are connected to the Church through families, some newer members became connected with the Church through the active outreach of clergy. They feel welcome and happy to be in a place where they have made many important connections:

“I like [the Church] because I was approached by the clergy when I first moved here, and they've been nothing but welcoming, and it's allowed me to have a great community of friends and meet so many influential people in the community.”

As a community place, the Church has provided some newcomers with connections and networks that have helped them find resources and gain access to various services in the community.

“For me, as a foreigner, we moved ... years ago, the Armenian church, [names the Church] was the first place. [Mentions the name of the pastor of the time], and everyone who worked there, including the secretary, they welcomed us with open hearts, even [helped] finding a job for us. I mean, for me, [the] Armenian Church was one of the most important parts of starting the life in United States.

If I have anything to ask, anyone to go to, it's my spot to go to... [for] any questions. Start needing a doctor for somebody that they have no insurance... Start needing a lawyer... Have no money to go to... They [the Church people] were my first place to ask.”

c2. Issues to consider (social/communal aspects)

Compared to other areas, both the survey findings and the focus groups interviews indicate that there is an expressed need to target especially the social and communal aspects of the Church's activities. The following issues need further attention by the Church leadership:

- ***Unwelcoming atmosphere.*** Despite the higher ratio of participants who feel welcome and included, “Unwelcoming atmosphere” was brought up as a major challenge both in the survey and during the focus group interviews. A third of the survey participants (29%) indicated “Unwelcoming atmosphere” among the least attractive factors about the Church, which was only the second most referred after “Distance from my home.” While many participants of the survey feel welcome and respected at the Church, lesser numbers of participants are confident that people “are respectful to

one another” or “feel welcome” at the Church (Figure 12). If 44% of the respondents strongly feel welcome at the Church, only 26% of those surveyed strongly agree that “People feel welcome” at the Church. If 84% of respondents think people are nice to them at the Church, the level of confidence decreases to 74% when asked if people are respectful to one another at the Church. These are indicators of an unwelcoming atmosphere for some community members.

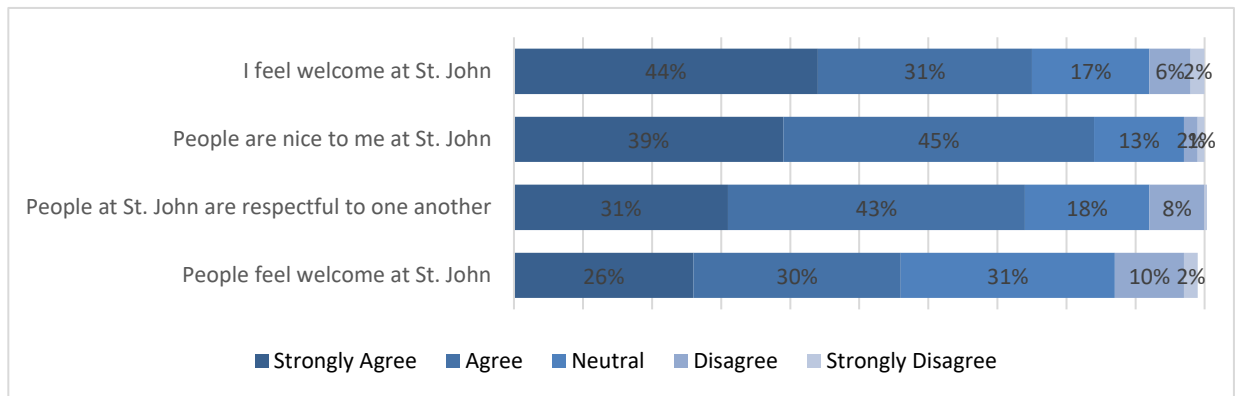


Figure 12. Perceptions of the Church Atmosphere.

No significant variation was observed in the perceptions of an “unwelcoming atmosphere” depending on gender or age, or whether the respondents were U.S.-born Armenian-Americans, naturalized citizens, or more recent arrivals. Considering that the survey was conducted exclusively in English, and because most of the respondents were U.S.-born Armenian-Americans (see Figure 1) involved with the Church for 15 or more years, further studies are needed to identify the specific demographic groups who feel most “unwelcome” in the Church. However, the survey findings and focus groups interviews suggest that an “unwelcoming atmosphere” is perceived to be caused by the following issues:

- *Diversity of places of origin, cultural backgrounds, and spoken languages.* The Church is a major community center where Armenians originating from various parts of the world and

with different backgrounds come together and mingle. The diversity of Armenian backgrounds often creates subgroups based on places of origin, cultural backgrounds and/or spoken primary languages.

“There are waves of immigrants that are coming into this parish over the course of 50 years... from Beirut, from, you know, the ones from Istanbul.... [And] then you started getting all of the refugees from the hottest areas of conflict that the Armenians found themselves in, made their way to Detroit. And so now if you go in there, you know, it's Bakutsis, Baghdadtsis, Beiruttsis.... And I don't know if you're getting very many who are coming and talking to you.... They can honestly tell you straight out that they don't often feel welcome here.”

Many newcomers speak English. But some newer members of the Church community are native Armenian-, Russian- or Arabic-speakers. This fact was noted by U.S.-born Armenian-American participants of the focus group interviews as a possible reason for their feeling unwelcome.

“Maybe another area of difficulty is the language. ... something that we're going to have to address and find a way to make people feel more welcome, because I don't speak Armenian, [or Russian], and they don't speak English well.”

“We need to do better at making people feel welcome, whether they're born in this country, not born in this country, whether they're from another state, moving into this community, from another community. It's sometimes more challenging because we're so large and we don't know everyone.”

Not growing up within the Church community was noted as another possible reason for feeling unwelcome in the Church:

“I don't think [the Church] is unwelcoming. It can be cliquey, but I don't think as a whole [it] is unwelcoming. I do think it can be intimidating a bit for newcomers. It's different for us because we've grown up here.”

The diversity of places of origin, cultural backgrounds, and spoken languages creates an atmosphere in which people feel more comfortable creating and remaining engaged within their own groups rather than trying to mix and mingle with others in the Church.

- *Cliquey networks of some long-established families.* Families are important bridges connecting younger generations with the Church. Families of many community members have been actively involved with the Church through several generations. Members of these long-established families around the Church naturally feel personal/emotional attachment to the Church (see the following section). While the intergenerational involvement of families has been a major strength for the Church, the long-established influential roles of some families and individuals in the Church are also perceived as contributing to an “unwelcoming atmosphere,” as indicated in the following comments:

“I worry that it's unwelcoming for people maybe like [names another participant] who came here 20 years ago or recently that did not grow up here, from overseas or from different communities, that didn't grow up in this environment.... I just worry that they are excluded from the Church community in the way it's run because they haven't been here forever, and it might be hard for them to break in.... That's what I think potentially is unwelcoming because of the cliquey nature of the people, who have been [the Church's] people forever.”

Or, as expressed by another participant:

“Many members are so stuck in the past and [the] prestige of their families within the Church's social hierarchy (be that past or present in the Women's Guild, choir, board, or [the] Apostolic Society for example), that they are unable to see sometimes the real damage they are causing. Sometimes that damage is psychological. Sometimes it is even physical.”

Families serving on various Church committees or organizations through several generations are also often perceived as negatively affecting the Church atmosphere:

“Parishioners who get on committees and fail to work well with others. They don't know how to be accepting of others who are not in their immediate circles or have opposing opinions.”

Or, in the words of another focus group interview participant:

“I think one problem is, is the status quo, like the same people who have been doing some of the same roles for a long time or [the same role] stayed in the same family. So, it's hard when like someone's grandmother used to do something

and then, now, like their daughter, or it's like going down generations.... I think it's hard to get new people involved because like, they haven't lived here, you know, since they were born. I think it's hard for them to get like initiated into some of the Church operations for sure.”

To some participants, however, there is “truth” in that certain families have had long involvement with the Church, serving on various Church committees, but they also believe there are “a lot of misconceptions” about an “unwelcoming atmosphere”:

“If there was a new person that’s young that came to the town, sometimes without anyone even being exclusive or being snobby, they perceive it as being snobby, because ... me and whomever I'm friends with are talking to each other and we're all very close, and the other person feels intimidated, sort of. It's not that we wanted to exclude them, but they just looked at it and they got nervous. There are people who are snobby. I am not saying there aren't. Of course there's snobby people everywhere, but I think a lot of it is like a, maybe, a misperception.”

The participants of the focus group interviews have noted the progress made in the previous years, when relatively recent members of the Church parish are becoming involved in various committees. Yet this is an area that still needs attention to make the Church more welcoming for all members of the community.

- *Unfriendliness by people, judgmental attitudes, and lack of pro-active engagement with newcomers* were also mentioned as reasons contributing to an “unwelcoming atmosphere.” Personal traits, such as people “need to be friendly,” “smile,” and “be nice to one another” were highlighted as important. A younger participant of a focus group interview recalled the following incident when he walked to the Church to volunteer in a program:

“Someone asked me to volunteer at Church.... So, I show up to volunteer. I walk into the kitchen and someone looks at me and says: ‘What are you doing here?’ Like stops me at the kitchen, like you're, are you allowed to be here? ... I mean, clearly, I'm here for a reason.... I'm here to work for you. So, do you want me to wait outside and make a phone

call? You know, like I'm giving my time to you! Instead of asking, help me find, like, where I'm supposed to be here. It's like, whoa, whoa, don't come in here."

Judgmental attitudes were mentioned in reference to some "opinionated" parishioners who judge others based on appearance or for not attending Church services regularly. Personal traits of individuals would be harder to control, but some focus group interview participants thought the clergy, the deacons, and the parish council should take a more active role in educating the community on good manners, as they discussed examples of other churches.

- *Too much focus on youth programs.* Concerns about connecting younger generations with the Church created an atmosphere in which senior members of the Church community have a feeling that they are no longer a target audience and a priority in the Church's programming.

"Quite honestly, we are not part of the Church's target audience. The target audience is the youth. The youth, the youth, the youth, the youth! If you look at the programing, it's the youth, the youth, the youth, the youth! Fine! Have your youth! Have a nice day!"

While programs aimed at involving the younger generations are crucial, equally important is the creation of an inclusive atmosphere in which senior members would also feel welcome and important.

"There used to be a seniors' program person. Then it got changed just to youth. Well, the older generation, the older people are just as important not only for their experience, but I'm sorry, and this sounds cold, they're the ones that would most likely leave financial means to the Church to be able to sustain themselves going forward."

- Traditional structures (Men’s Society, Women’s Guild).** Events organized by the Men’s Society or the Women’s Guild usually do not attract many community members. Only about a third of the survey participants reported attending these events regularly (14%) or occasionally (15%). A quarter of the survey participants (25%) never attend these events (Figure 13). Age is an important factor in community members’ experiences with the Men’s Society or the

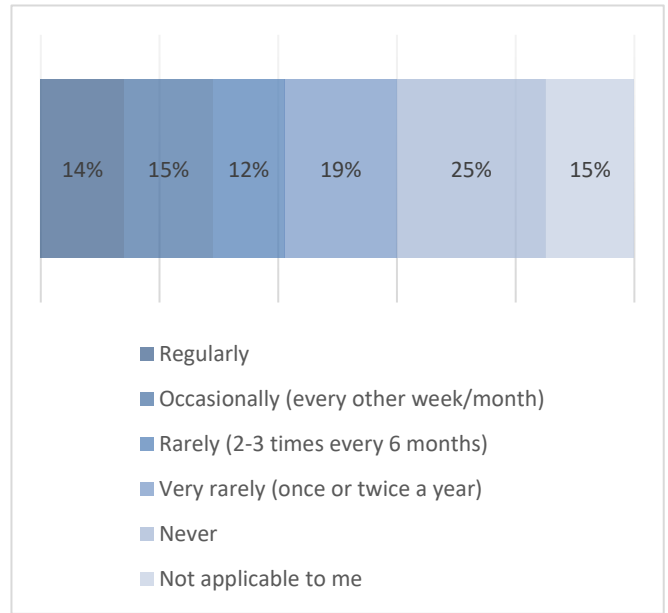


Figure 13. Participation in the events organized by the Men's Society or the Women's Guild.

Women’s Guild. If 79% in the 66+ age category has some experience with either the Men’s Society or the Women’s Guild, and only 21% do not have any experience, having no experience with these organizations is higher among younger generations (Figure 14). These organizations attract mostly parishioners who are above the age of 50.

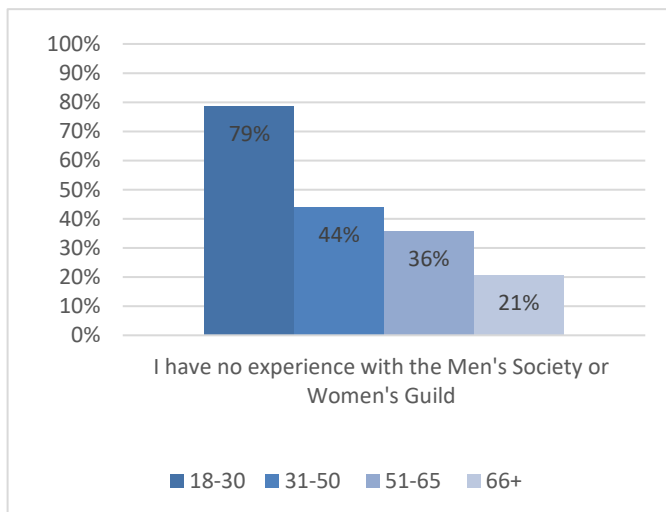


Figure 14. Experience with the Men's Society or the Women's Guild.

The traditional structures of these societies organized around “Men” and “Women” binary categories often generate preconceived notions about their activities, stereotypical perceptions of gender roles, creating an unpleasant place for some members of the community, both from among the younger and older generations.

“I don't feel those social connections here [at the Church]. [The] idea of ‘social’ is ‘women in the kitchen’ I mean, that's, you know, the attitude that me or that I and a lot of my contemporaries had, you know, especially if you're a professional working woman, single.... You know, I'm not here to shovel pilaf. Thank you.” [An older participant]

A younger participant of a focus group interview, who had some experience of attending or participating in the events organized by these societies, believed they need to change and “adapt” to attract younger generations:

“I think the Men's Society, I think in recent years has also kind of resurrected itself and grown again. And they're doing a whole lot. And the Women's Guild ... they're, I think, they're really trying to get the younger group involved and integrated and knowing each other and wanting to be involved.... So, I think both groups just have to adapt, continue to adapt, to try to integrate the younger set and then adapt to where they're at today. [Younger generations] cannot be involved in the same way as [the older generations].”

Events organized by the Men’s Society or Women’s Guild, even if they appeal to broader community members across the age and gender lines may still have low attendance or participation for reasons unrelated to the themes of events. Many female members, for example, may have to question whether they could, should, or are expected to attend events organized by the “Men’s” society, even if they are interested. A female participant of one focus group interview, for example, shared:

“I saw something fun, like the Men's Society did Karate one night, and I was like, wow, that's really cool! But should I go to Men's Society?”

Another younger female participant of one focus group interview also implied the need for change while acknowledging the interesting events organized by these societies:

“Men's Society lectures are wonderful. That lecture series that they do is so simple. They just have dinner; someone lectures and then they have their more business meeting. And you know, I'm familiar with that. So, I think, me personally, I don't mind going [to Men's Society's lectures] and being like one of the only women or one of the only younger people. But if you're talking about, you know, Ladies' Guild baking, I have a preconceived notion typically of what that's going to be like.”

Another area in relation to the traditional structure of the Armenian Church was brought up by a few female participants in the focus group interviews, who emphasized the exclusive tradition, which does not allow women and girls on the altar.

“The girls don't like that. The girls can't go on the altar. Girls don't like that, you know. Orthodox girls don't do that. I've never been on the altar, not even when nobody's looking. I've never been on the altar.”

Some other participants shared stories of churches, including Armenian, in which women and girls are allowed on the altar by local pastors. There was a consensus that in the long run this tradition needs to be changed, even if there was the realization that such changes do not happen easily.

“There are some things that we can't change, that have to be changed from the top. That's something you take to your diocesan delegates, [and] they take it to the Diocese and then they find it out.... Even the Diocesan Assembly can't make that decision.... They can make the noise and somebody else needs to hear that.”

The patriarchal structure of the Armenian Church might be deterring younger females and individuals with non-binary gender identities, born and raised within less traditional American circles. Further studies are needed to explore the gender-related issues in greater detail. Within the framework of the current study, we could only record this issue indirectly, as stories related to the latter were recounted by participants in the focus group interviews.

- **Social Services.** Longer-involved members of the Church community recall that the Church used to provide social services to community members in need.

“One area that we had years ago was social services. ... They did help people with immigration and health care issues, and transportation, and a lot of those things. It would be nice to see it again. It would be a volunteer most likely, because [the Church] can't afford to put somebody full time on [the] payroll.”

“Lack of outreach to homebound parishioners” and special programs for seniors were also mentioned as areas for improvement. While thinking about the opportunities for enhancing services provided by the Church, participants of the focus group interviews often discussed their experiences in other churches, in hospitals, or other organizations to stress the importance of outreach and services to the community members who are in need.

“When I observe what they're doing, there's organized ways of, as soon as, you know, somebody's sick. There's all sorts of things that happen, and that makes people loyal and appreciative and want to be part of that community. And I think we could do more of that kind of stuff. And I know it's not the spiritual part and the church part, but that's what makes people want to be part of the community.”

- **More social/community events.** Every third survey participant thought having more social/community events would help them become more involved in the Church. 27% of the survey participants indicated that having more such events will help them become more involved “a lot,” and 47% indicated these would help them “a little.” The younger participants in focus group interviews expressed interest for having more of “kef” gatherings and dance parties:

“I'm just for having big kefs. I would love [it] like that. Hear music and dance, and like have a big community event more often.”

“The dances fell off like November dance, things like that were dead for so many years. It's coming back now, so maybe it is time to implement more kef things. The problem to, again, is finding what kind of music everybody likes.”

“Dance is a huge thing. We had a lot of success thanks to [mentions a name] with dance [at an organization]”

Hye Doon, the monthly gatherings of young adults in their twenties through forties, is perceived as an important step forward in the direction of having more social events. Movie watching gatherings and organizing various activities for different community groups were mentioned as

other areas of expansion in social and cultural events that could attract more community members. Creating a “fun committee” responsible for raising “fun (not funds)” was also suggested in one of the focus group discussions.

- ***Clubs and professional networks to empower younger generations.*** Younger generations often do not know how to become more involved in Church activities or do not find interesting ways to get involved. Some think that the Church, because it is also perceived as a community center, should encourage the younger members of the community to use its underutilized spaces for launching all sorts of clubs and professional networks. Another group expects that the Church should also organize or facilitate professional workshops (health-related, financial or other) for members of the community, thus contributing to the creation of networks among individuals with shared interests or needs.

“The young people are into networking and perhaps you could think about forming networks of professional people, a place for them to meet, whether they're lawyers or engineers or dentists, physicians, and have a meeting night where they could come together, and those groups could be useful to the community.... And then that's a niche that they would blend into the community a little bit where they could provide the services to the Church.”

“I think there's definitely this desire that, you know, younger generations have to come and be involved. But it's hard because there's just not enough going on. So, I think just being able to be at the Church, start clubs and network with people, I think that would be really big.... And then you feel more comfortable going to Church because you're like, I'll see that person in Church.”

For long-standing members of the community, whose families have been affiliated with the Church for generations, the Church is a deeply personal and familial space (see the next section). Newer members of the community, who lack these generational family affiliations, see the Church's potential as an inclusive community center. To achieve this, they envision better management of facilities and spaces, better programming, and more effective outreach which will foster youth

initiatives and involvement. The younger generations believe that creating and encouraging interest-based clubs could bring people together and bridge diverse backgrounds and experiences.

“My dream is like a village sort of situation.... I think there's a really big need right now and it's going to be an even bigger need with Gen Z, that is, studies are showing they're the loneliest generation as social media has really been taking over. People are very isolated on their phones and not seeing each other in person. And I think that, like everyone's saying, having events at the Church, I think even having like ways to start clubs at the Church, like a card club, a board game club, and I feel like if the Church was like, ‘Yeah, we're going to host that’, you just like, pick a time, come to the Church, and if you want to have your, like, weird poker card game thing with your friends, then we'll advertise it in the bulletin and find some buddies. If you want to learn to knit with some people, then like, let's find them and network you in. And, like, if you want to learn a skill, then just tell them ‘we'll put it up like in the bulletin.’ Like, ‘Do you want to learn how to fix a car? Well, let's find someone in the Church that knows how to fix a car,’ you know, and like, kind of link people to the community and make it very much like a little village where, you know, this is my family. And it's not just my Church family. It's also like my network family that's there for me. If somebody at the Church needs something, you know, making it very clear that we're all there for each other, but just really, really enabling people to explore their interest in person. I think that would help a lot.”

d. Emotional/personal aspects: the Church as home

Families have been instrumental in connecting the younger generations to the Church. 74% of the survey participants became involved because of their families (Figure 15). The retention of families who have been connected with the Church for generations, and making efforts to attract their American-born descendants through their families should remain a priority.

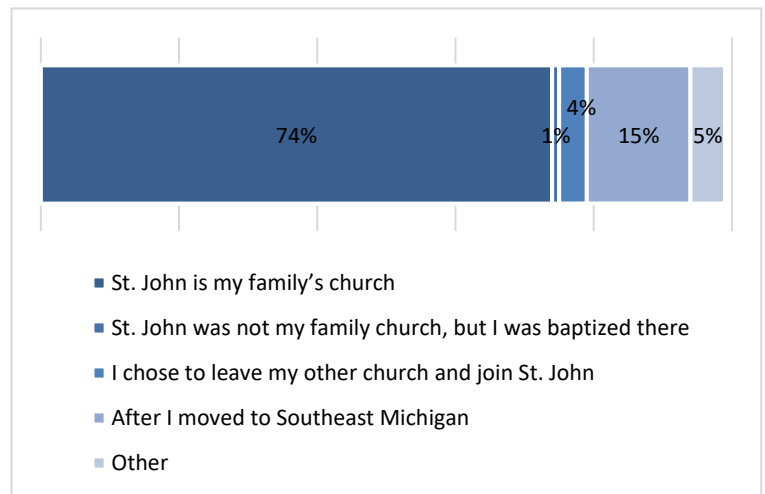


Figure 15. When did you become involved with St. John Armenian Church?

As an emotional and personal space, the Church is perceived as part of family history and home. Many community members like the Church because it is also a space where one connects to relatives, to extended family members, “from grandparents to aunts, and uncles that were central figures or very involved with the Church.” As a family space, the Church is often thought of as a home, a personal, emotional, and familial place, in addition to all its other roles. The three quotes below represent similar perspectives by different participants in the focus group interviews, all of whom express personal and emotional experiences:

“My grandfather was very involved in the Church. Just imagine ... and he was on the Apostolic Society from the old building to this building, and he was one of the gnahayrs [godfathers] – one of the pillars in the Church. So, when I physically look at the Church, I see my grandfather.... He kind of looked, you know, round, and when I just pass by, I think of my grandfather every time that I see the facility, that I see the building.”

“It is a second home. When I'm here, I feel at home and comfort people, you know, and I'm happy that my boys and their wives and now my grandchildren are part of the Church. That makes me feel good. And when they're in Church, I'm thrilled. It's home.”

“It's my home. What do I like most? It is that I feel comfortable there. I feel at home there. I feel, I actually do feel accepted there, unlike what you said some people feel.”

d1. Strengths (emotional/personal aspects)

The perception of the Church as home to many parishioners is a major strength that needs to be maintained and expanded upon. Intergenerational family affiliation with the Church seems to correlate with the perceptions of the Church as home and familial place. In other words, the longer families remain involved in the Church through several generations, the more are the chances that younger generations born in these families and baptized in the Church will remain affiliated with their “family church.”

“It's the place where my family's always been, so I know when I go, you know, I'm going to see family, I'm going to see people who know me and have known me forever. And so, there's a real sense of generational warmth, I guess, for me and my family when we go.”

Perceptions of the Church as home, as a familial space, where several generations of one's own family were baptized and remained engaged in, transcend the religious, spiritual, cultural, social, communal, and ethnic aspects, encompassing all.

“The commonality is not only just religion, but culture, the ethnicity. It's a combination. And you just can't pick up and go to say, [mentions a non-Armenian church] and you're going to find the same thing, right? Our bond is different, and our common denominator is unique. And to me, that is part of the attractiveness of not only having, you know, my grandparents being a part of this community when they've come from the old country and established themselves here. They established themselves with other Armenians and formed a community, and it's gone on for several generations.”

As a place that encompasses much more than spiritual or religious aspects, the Church also serves as personal space for many longer established Armenian-Americans, in which they grew up, which is filled with memories, and which connects to both personal and collective heritage.

“I would add the word heritage, and I think that kind of encompasses family and culture and faith. And having grown up in this community, I identify with all that here, and the symbolism of when I come ... like where I have memories.... I think that would be another good word. Heritage and memories.”

d2. Issues to consider (emotional/personal aspects)

The focus group interviews revealed a disjunction between the perceptions of the Church as “home,” as a personal and familial space, and the experiences of the relatively newer members who sometimes do not feel welcome at the Church. Besides attracting the younger generations of the longer involved families, the Church also has many members who joined the Church more recently – after moving into the area. The survey findings show that moving to Southeast Michigan was the second most popular reason among survey participants of how they became involved with the Church. The fact that 74% of the survey participants selected “family church” and only 15% became affiliated with the Church after they had moved into the area (see Figure 15) should not be interpreted as representing the actual ratio in the community. The survey

findings are not generalizable for the entire Church community because of the limitations we outlined in the introduction. Regardless, if moving to Michigan is the second reason among the survey participants of how they joined the Church, the observed disjunction between the experiences of the longer established families and the relatively newer members of the Church is an issue to consider.

Members of the community who grew up in the Church, where their families, parents, and grandparents had been involved for decades, can react differently to the “unwelcoming” situations compared to those who recently settled in the area or those whose families were not affiliated with the Church for decades.

“When I grew up, I know the Church is my home. I know I can walk into any Armenian church in the country or the world, and I can walk in the back of the kitchen and whenever someone gives me, like, the look of like ‘why are you here?’ I roll my eyes and roll it off my shoulders because I know this is my home. I grew up in the Church. But I can see new people being like ‘what do I do? Am I allowed to go here?’ Like [mentions a name] is a new person in the Church. And she’ll ask me all the time, ‘Am I allowed to do that?’ I’m like, ‘This is your home. You can do whatever you want. Can’t vandalize the place, but you can go wherever you want. Open that door and go look inside the door.’ So. But yeah, I agree. If you want new people, not everyone has that attitude.”

The cliquy networks within and between longer involved families, as mentioned in the previous section, can also be seen as a challenge for feeling “welcome” in the Church, when some families seem to own the place for generations. While the longer involved families have been the backbone of the Church, and the Church should continue being that familial space for their children and grandchildren, the Church administration will also need to have a system of identifying and pro-actively reaching out to Armenian individuals and families newly relocated in Southeast Michigan and help them feel welcome and “at home” in the Church.

“[The Church] has an opportunity to work on, when new people show up with the Church. I feel like [the] parish council should be the one who welcomes them, asks their name, where are they from, and then connects those people to.... If it’s a younger person, connects to the younger group of people, if it’s, you know, middle

aged or someone just connecting with them. Because coming to Church without knowing everyone is already stressful.”

e. Organizational/administrative aspects: the Church as a non-profit organization

The Church operates in many ways like a non-profit organization. In addition to organizing and coordinating diverse services and events, it relies on donations and volunteer involvement to continue providing a range of services to the community. The organizational/administrative aspects include community outreach and social services, communications and marketing (emails, Church bulletin, website), fundraising and donations, volunteer recruitment and coordination, educational programming, and facilities management, parts of which were discussed above.

e1. Strengths (organizational/administrative aspects)

- **Marketing and Communications.** Overall, the Church’s use of emails and the Church bulletin seem to have been effective for communicating with the community. Most survey participants (82%) regularly read email correspondence from the Church, and most of them also regularly

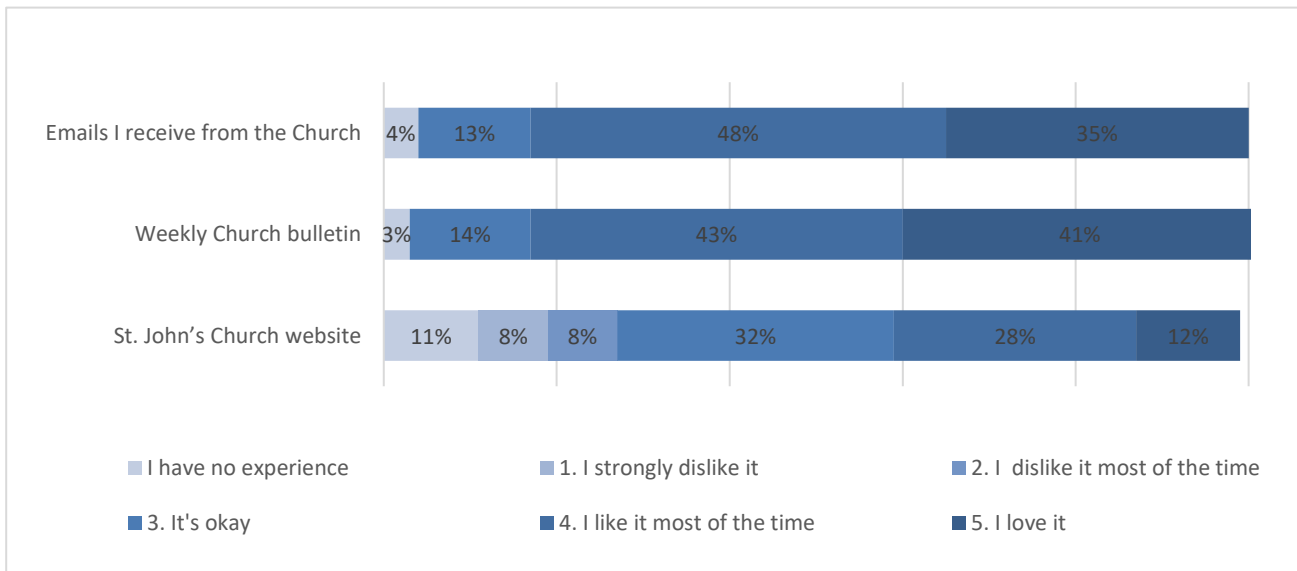


Figure 16. Experience with the Church emails, weekly bulletin and website.

(73%) read the printed or electronic versions of the Church bulletin. 71% of the respondents prefer receiving church communication via email, and 12% want to receive correspondence via regular mail. Most respondents like (or love) the “weekly church bulletin” (84%) and church emails (83%) (Figure 16). A small number of the survey participants had no experience with reading the emails or the weekly Church bulletin. However, the absence of “I strongly dislike it” or “I dislike it most of the time” in both cases (both are 0%) is another notable indication of the strength of communications by email and/or through the Church bulletin. It is worth repeating that these findings should be interpreted carefully, considering the imbalance of the survey participants according to age, gender, language speaking abilities, or Armenian origin (see the Methodology section above).

- Donations and Stewardship.*** The established community of donors and stewards who regularly support the Church is another major strength of the Church as an organization. Most of the survey participants indicated either monthly (39%) or somewhat regular (38%) donations to the Church. 14% make donations once every year, and 6% - every few years. Only about 3% of the survey participants have never made any donations to the

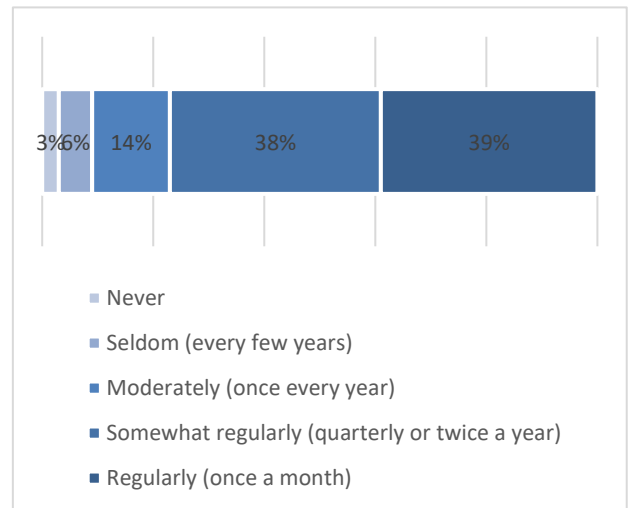


Figure 17. Frequency of donations to the Church.

Church (Figure 17). Combined with the fact that most of the survey respondents had been involved with the Church for more than 15 years, these findings indicate the presence of a strong supportive community around the Church. Among the reasons for not making any donations,

most of the survey participants falling into this category mentioned financial hardship (70%). Others indicated preference for volunteering over donating (10%), or not having trust in donation management (10%).

Among the various reasons why people make donations to the Church, many respondents indicated donating as stewards of the Church (68%), and “love and devotion to the Church” (65%). Among other reasons, the survey participants also indicated “the desire to help the Church accomplish special projects” (50%), such as renovations, refurbishment, capital fundraising, and “in leu of flowers” (48%) (Figure 18).

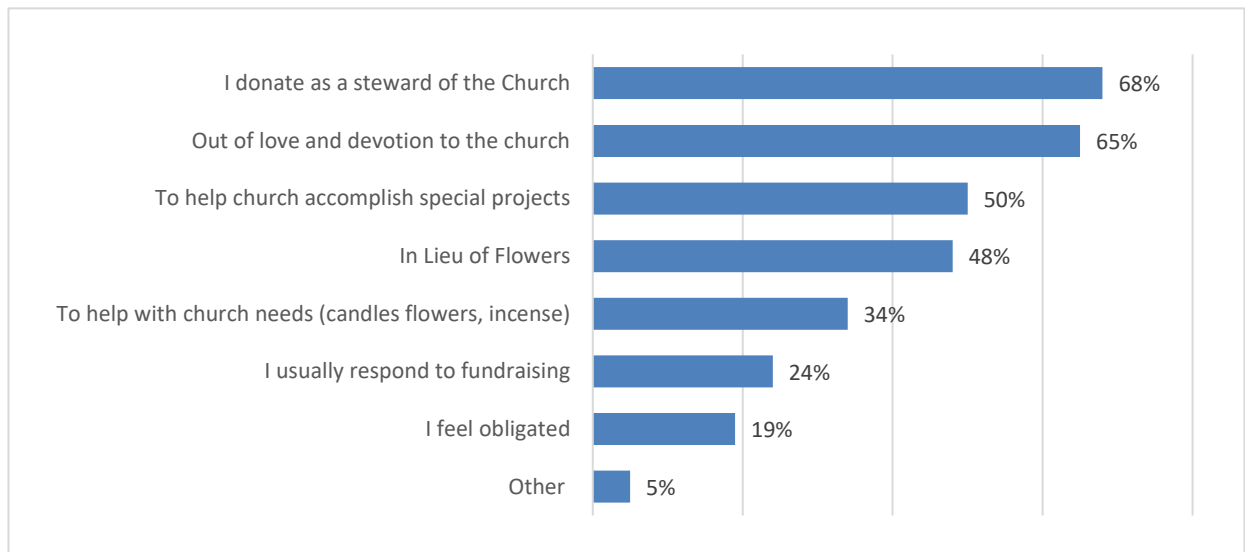


Figure 18. Reasons for donating to the Church.

When asked about whether they considered becoming a steward of the Church, from among those who were not already Church stewards (32% were not Church stewards), 21% were not sure, 20% were not aware of the stewardship program, 19% considered joining, 15% would probably join, while the remaining 25% were not interested in becoming a Church steward.

- Volunteer engagement.** Over half of the survey participants (51%) reported contributing to the Church’s cultural and social activities as volunteers. Events organized by the Men’s Society, the Women’s Guild, and the ACYOA also attract many volunteers (43%), while the activities sponsored by other community organizations are the third preferred area for volunteering (26%). Other volunteering opportunities have also attracted the survey participants: 15% volunteered for World Medical Relief, 13% for Motor City Mitten Mission, and 13% for the activities of the Sunday School (Figure 19). Among other volunteer engagements, respondents noted baking for the annual bazaar, working on repair/renovation jobs, singing in the choir, volunteering for art shows, or serving on the altar. Because the survey allowed for selecting multiple options, these findings do not necessarily indicate a large group of volunteers around the Church. Identifying the actual numbers of community members who have volunteered in the past six months was beyond the survey goals. Regardless, the participation of 2/3 of the survey respondents in various projects as volunteers is a strength, showing a relatively consistent group of supporters around the Church.

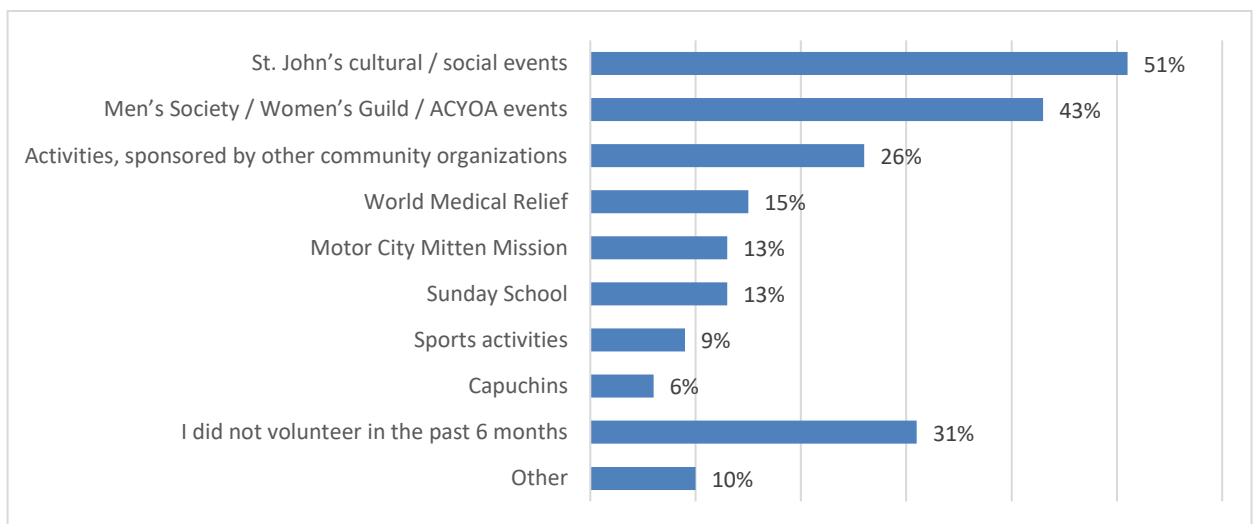


Figure 19. Volunteering in the past 6 months.

- **Facilities.** The banquet hall and several other rooms available in the building are strengths that contribute to the functioning of the Church as an organization. However, only a very small number of the survey participants, about 1 in 10, had experience in renting the Church facilities for events. Funeral/memorial meals were the most common reasons for renting the facilities (38%), followed by wedding receptions (22%) and baptism celebrations (19%). Other reasons included family celebrations such as birthdays, baby showers, bridal showers, and anniversaries. Those who have used the Church facilities were happy about the appearance of the Grand Ballroom (92%), its cleanliness (92%), and overall catering experience (96%), including food presentation (92%), quality of the food (88%), and courtesy of the wait staff (84%). Responses were divided on the price point of an event. Half of the respondents (52%) thought the price point of the events was adequate, 40% thought it was average, like elsewhere, and 8% thought it was more expensive.

e2. Issues to consider (organizational/administrative aspects)

- **Marketing and Communication.** The findings from the focus group interviews show an expressed need for improvement in the areas of marketing and communications. Effective marketing and communications require professionals who would be confident in using modern technologies. To improve in this area, the Church cannot rely solely on volunteers. Some participants even suggested hiring a director of communications and publications.

“With communications we have now, with the technology, it's so important to get this done well. I think our parish is big enough. They're going to have to think about that investment in somebody for who this is their career or [a] part time position.”

“We expect everything to be [done by] volunteer[s], but for certain things you do need a professional, and we have to be willing to pay them.”

The Church website is one of the major areas in marketing and communication that needs attention. Over half of the survey participants check the Church website for events or other information on a regular basis (20%) or occasionally (34%). Most of them, however, prefer emails or the Church bulletin. While no respondents disliked the Church bulletin or the emails from the Church, some expressed a dislike for the website (Figure 16). About half of the survey participants noted that the website would benefit from a makeover. In addition to the website, the younger generations prefer receiving communication also via text messages (8%) and social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook (7%). An improved website and social media presence could also serve as places where newer members of the community could connect with other Armenians in the area, find professionals and services.

“I think the website is a big problem because if you don't know how to sign up for the emails and you won't find out about the events and the website is not good.... I'd like to have someone maybe redesign it and have a tab for people who have just moved or are just new to the community to see like whether they're like new to the country and they need to find like, maybe, they prefer Armenian, like doctors and dentists or lawyers, like have that information on there because there are a lot of professionals.”

To better communicate with members of the Church, suggestions were made to create databases of phone numbers and email addresses, and to reach out to them from time to time. This view was debated among the younger participants in focus group interviews as some of them expressed reluctance in joining email lists or having their names and phone numbers recorded. As a better strategy of marketing the Church to newcomers, a suggestion was made to hand out a flyer of the Church with a QR code on it, which would take the viewer to the Church's website, where people could find all the relevant information about the various services, events, and volunteer engagement opportunities.

“I'd like to draw a distinction between having a flyer on a wall with a QR code as everything, and being approachable that way, but then also having someone like [the] Parish Council say, 'here's our flyer, scan this QR code, because

this has all the events'. And then, you go back. You know, I think there's a balance, because some people might be like, like, 'no, thank you!' Some people might put the flyer on the floor, but some people may not even pick up the program book to see that there's a QR code or might if there's something on the wall, they might just walk right past it, not realize what that is. So having a little bit of engagement, but also like, 'Hey, welcome.' You know, just a two-minute conversation and then a flyer, then walk away."

Marketing the Church outside the Armenian community was also mentioned as an important area for consideration. From the perspective of religion and Christianity, some participants of the focus group interviews thought it would be important that the Church becomes more vocal about issues that are of universal concern.

"We're very focused here. You're very, very focused. And I, I have to be honest and tell you that when [the Gaza war] happened in Israel, the war in the Ukraine, all the wars that are happening, here on a Sunday, we don't pray for the wars everywhere. We pray only for one. And it hurts."

Others thought more work could be done to market the Church within the broader community in Metro Detroit and Southeast Michigan, and not just among community members who are already connected with the Church.

"If we were to market the Church to the community in other aspects, as opposed to everything being conducted on Church property, where we can do an image push for the Church.... Let me give you an example. The Church has a Mittens program where they make food for homeless people. It's great you're making the food on Church property. You're advertising it to your Church parishioners on Facebook that, look, we did this, we did this, every week we're doing this.... But how do you expect those who weren't aware of it to be educated about it if you're only educating those who are already following your Facebook page? If we were to do a push, for example, go to a homeless shelter and distribute that food or even make the food there and say that today's meal is courtesy of the [Church], it would allow the broader community to be aware of our activities and our efforts."

- **Community outreach, volunteer recruitment, and coordination.** While the Church has a strong community of supporters, donors, and volunteers, about a third of the survey participants never volunteered for any program in the past six months (Figure 19). The lack of outreach to the broader community was recorded in the survey, expressed in the following statements: “Lack of

empowerment for [the] younger generation to be parish leaders (beyond ACYOA),” “Lack of outreach effort to keep or bring young married couples in[to] the Church.” Participants of the focus group interviews also pointed to the lack of outreach as an issue that needs attention.

“One of the things that in my opinion that we're not quite successful on is outreach. Those of you that have lived here, think back to when you were in [the] Church school. How many of those classmates come to Church or are involved and their children?”

Offering religious, spiritual, and cultural education to the younger generations in the Church Sunday School is a major strength. Yet the Church could benefit further by more effectively engaging the Little Saints, the graduates of the Sunday School, and by utilizing their potential through personal outreach.

“They come during the Holy Week, come Christmas, and everything, that energy is here and it's not being harnessed. And the rest of us are sitting here going, we're losing it all. No, you're not losing at all. You're just not embracing, embracing what's there. Yeah, it has to happen.”

Outreach initiatives should not just include sending emails or circulating flyers announcing volunteer opportunities. Many among community members believe that personal contact via text messages or phone calls could be a better way of encouraging participation and inclusion. Encouraging volunteer involvement is sometimes as simple as just personally asking someone to volunteer or to help.

“Somebody has to ask.... There are multiple occasions where only by accident I found out that some gizmo was broken. ‘Oh, we're going to have to spend some \$10,000 or \$5,000 on that.’ Only by accident finding out. And then it's like, okay, well, that costs 20 dollars to fix, because somebody had the knowledge as to how to do that. Yeah. Or we're going to go buy this, whatever. All you have to do is ask, and somebody who knows can help figure out what's wrong or help with the choice of the new one.”

The personal aspect of communication makes it easier to find and recruit volunteers, as another participant in the same focus group interview confirmed: “The personal contact. People tend to not refuse.” Others in another focus group interview, also noted that “the personal touch is the best way to do it.”

“Don't just send out a flyer. There could be people that actively recruit for them, because it's pretty easy to ignore an email or a flyer. It's a lot more difficult to say 'no' to somebody that is trying to recruit you. [other participants agreed] And that's the same like coaches. Coaches don't send emails and letters to the players that they want to come [and] play on their team. They go visit them.”

Expanding the pool of volunteers was another area that the participants of focus group interviews highlighted.

“Why always dip in the same pool? Why not go out to people who have been away?”

“We need to train the next group of people. I can't, you know. They asked me to do this and this and this because I'm good. We need to get like a group, not just one person always doing it, that one person leading it. And I think we lack in that.”

A suggestion was made to collect volunteer applications and create a database of professionals who could be contacted for help with various projects or activities. By creating a database of professionals in specific fields the Church can also contribute to the development of professional networks (see “Social/communal aspects” above). Additionally, it will also benefit from having a readily available list of potential volunteers in various areas.

“You could have like, like a little brochure stand to have the person fill out a little application form about volunteering for the Church, you know. At least start there or have a place where that could be available to them that you know, and then someone would then reach out to them.”

An effective outreach should involve careful planning and advance communication with potential volunteers to ensure that enough time is provided for people to make decisions and adjustments to their schedules:

“Coming from the youth side of that ... I think more organization is needed. When recruiting volunteers, like asking people more in advance to help out, especially if it's like a picnic or something, that they need volunteers for two or three days leading up to it. That's something that I don't always love, because like a few days before something happens, I'll get asked to come [and] help. And sometimes I can't because of whatever reason. But I think for me, who's like somewhat connected, like a bit more connected than most people, I would say ... if I don't love getting asked to do something four days before an event, then I don't think people who haven't come to church since their high school graduation are going to want to do that.”

Outreach initiatives will also need to be tailored towards the interests, preferences, and availability of individuals of various age groups, families, and backgrounds, to include both the long-standing members and those who have recently joined the Church community, both the younger and older generations, both those who work full-time and those who are retired. The quote below, shared by a younger individual, expresses how sometimes it can be hard to volunteer even if someone wants to:

“I feel like there's not as much regard for like our generation, like a lot of the people doing volunteering, a lot of them are retired and a lot of our generation, we're still in the workforce and we're still having to do a commute. And so ... if they want us to be there, don't be upset if we're not there, and it's like 9AM on a Tuesday.”

Some participants in the focus group interviews believed that involving professionals and developing strategic plans would be crucial for effective outreach. However, they were also skeptical about whether even the best plans and strategies would be effectively implemented.

“So that's what happens to strategic plans. There's usually an implementation, you know, five years. Everything's supposed to happen over a period of time. And if you don't have a buy in from the person at the top or the leadership and the council, it's not going to happen.”

Some participants of the focus group interviews believe active recruitment and community outreach should be part of the responsibilities of the Parish Council. Others thought deacons and

the pastors of the Church should also be involved in outreach. The Church leadership should become more willing and active in not only planning outreach activities, but also in following up and making sure that the plans are getting implemented.

“Like any good business, corporation, organization, things work best when it's top down. So, when the leader sets the example, helps set the policy, helps push things along, it's far, far smoother than if the people at the lower levels are trying to do that, because then it becomes like somebody pushing on a rope in order to move things along. So, if it's not from the top down, it's far, far more difficult.”

- **Utilization of Church facilities.** Only a small number of community members who participated in the survey or focus group interviews had experience in using the Church’s facilities for events or social gatherings. To many, Church facilities seem to be underutilized.

“I think what they're upset about the facilities is [that they're] so underutilized. It's not easy and intuitive for people of our generation to just feel like we can stop by after work for coffee rather than going out and spending money at Starbucks, like we have so many rooms that are comfortable, especially with the [recent] renovation [of the Church compound].”

Younger participants of the focus group interviews expressed uncertainty about how to get access to the facilities, if they are expected to pay for having any events, or if they can freely access these facilities, which they think can be resolved by making various facilities more accessible.

“I think better access, easier access to facilities, kind of like if I want to use a room, I don't have to get it approved and, if I have to, you know, I don't know how much it costs. So, I'm just going to, you know, so I think better access to facilities might help sort out that. Yeah. I would like to use the kitchen. Maybe I need to be supervised. But, you know, I can have a Choreg group on my own and I like that.”

Lack of experience in using the Church facilities could also be part of the problem. Some see a greater role for the Church’s leadership and individuals in charge of making the Church facilities more accessible. This could be achieved by having more informal, casual social events.

“[W]hen we have those really, like ticketed lunches or like something is going on in the big hall, I think a lot of people almost think, ‘can I even go in? I didn't call to register; I don't want to stage a lecture....’ But if we made it more of like a relaxed kind of event, if there is something going on, if there is just a landing space, a casual, like a high kind of concept of casual, low key, not like someone's going to come in, like, yell at you to buy raffle tickets.”

Other suggestions on how to make the facilities more accessible included having open library hours and providing rooms for informal gatherings.

- ***Equipment and modern technology.*** Discussions about the Church facilities often highlighted issues with equipment and the need for better utilization of technology. Some focus group interview participants expressed a concern that the equipment does not work well during major Church events. When the sanctuary is full, people standing in the back cannot hear the sermons clearly due to the poor quality of the microphones and speakers. Others suggested installing big screens so that parishioners can follow the Sunday Service more easily. Screens could also be used to make livestream connections with the Primate from New York or the Catholicos from Armenia.

Technological improvements could also help organize more events remotely, via Zoom or other applications. Having more virtual or hybrid events would enhance participation of community members, who for various reasons cannot attend them in person, even if they are interested.

“I'd probably be more inclined to jump on a Zoom lecture or an activity than I would to go in person because it's hard for me to get out of my office.... And I don't think we do that at all really.... I don't think we've really offered anything since COVID. And I do think we should utilize that.”

Adding more virtual, livestream or Zoom events would also help to connect with and involve parishioners who live far from the Church, in Lansing or Ann Arbor, for example.

“I know my grandma can't come to Church every Sunday, but she knows how to log on to Facebook. She would totally watch [the mass] every Sunday if it was available. And I'm sure it would also be an opportunity for someone who's too lazy to come to engage, but at least they're engaging.”

Distance from the Church is one of the external factors that cannot be controlled, but parishioners who live far from the Church can become more involved and connected if there are more opportunities for remote involvement and participation. About 80% of the survey participants who need to drive more than 45 minutes to get to the Church believe that adding more Zoom events would help them a lot (29%) or somewhat (52.4%) to become more involved (Figure 20).

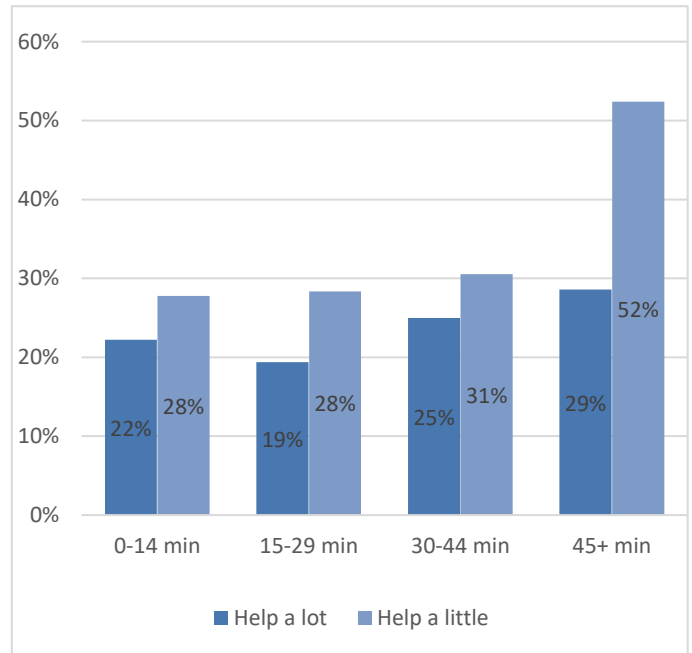


Figure 20. Impact of adding more virtual events (via Zoom) on participation based on distance from the Church.

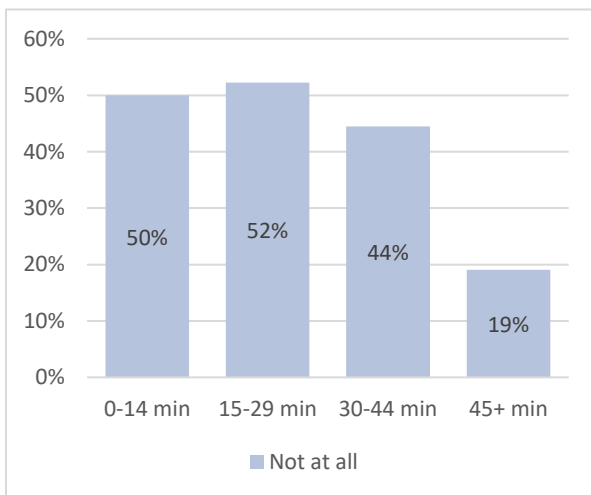


Figure 21. Impact of adding more virtual events (via Zoom) on participation based on distance from the Church.

This can also be observed in Figure 21. About half of the survey participants who live very close to the Church (less than 30 minutes away by car) believe that adding more Zoom events will not have any impact on their engagement. By contrast, those who live further away from the Church are less inclined to think that it will have no impact. Only 19% of those in the latter category believe that Zoom events will not affect their involvement.

CONCLUSION

This report was based on data collected in two phases—a survey with the Church community conducted in September-October 2023 and focus group interviews conducted in February-March 2024. Surveys and focus group interviews are research methods used for gathering information, opinions, and insights from a target population. They are tools which help to identify various tendencies among population groups and areas that need attention for improvement. Data collected through these methods may also contain some practical recommendations or provide valuable insights on how to address problematic areas. Yet tackling all the areas identified as problematic or following all the suggestions and recommendations made by participants of surveys or focus group interviews can be impractical and ineffective. The findings and recommendations presented in this report, therefore, should serve as grounds for designing short-term plans and long-term strategies in directions that the Church administration will define as priorities.

Located in Southfield, Michigan, St. John Armenian Apostolic Church has served the local Armenian community as a place of worship, as an Armenian cultural center, a community center, and as a home for members of some long-standing Armenian-American families, while also functioning in many ways as a non-profit organization. The Church community comprises long-established Armenian-American families, Armenians originating from other countries, including Armenia and those in the Middle East, as well as some non-Armenians, usually spouses of Armenians. The Church community represents a diverse mosaic of generations, gender and age categories, and social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. The diversity of the Church community creates an abundance of expectations about its services and events, as well as about the future directions that the Church needs to expand in. The multifaceted areas of the Church's activities, as a place of worship, as an ethnic-cultural institution, as a community center and an organization, are intricately intertwined. Placing much emphasis on improving one of these areas while ignoring others may

also prove ineffective. To effectively approach the areas of concern presented in this report, the next step can involve creating task forces—from among members of the Church community and the Church administration—which will be assigned areas and responsibilities to design plans and strategies, and which will also have the necessary administrative leverages to implement the proposed plans and strategies. Expanding in certain areas may require an involvement of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America or the Catholicosate of All Armenians of Etchmiadzin. Many of the areas of concern, however, are possible to address at the local level, with local expertise and resources, and with the support of the Church administration.

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Appendix

Questionnaire



Welcome to the St. John Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church community survey conducted by the University of Michigan-Dearborn Armenian Research Center. We invite you to participate in this survey because your voice matters! The St. John Armenian Church Pastor and members of the Parish Council are eager to learn about the ways in which they can better serve your needs and the needs of the Church community. For this purpose, they have engaged the expertise of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, Armenian Research Center.

Any adult who lives in Southeast Michigan can take the survey. Members of the same household are encouraged to respond to the survey individually. Please share the survey QR Code above with members of your household, who are 18 and over, and ask them to complete the survey individually.

The survey will not ask for any personal information. Please do not share such information. Based on individual responses to the survey questionnaire, the Armenian Research Center will prepare and present a generalized report to the St. John Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church Pastor and Parish Council. The responses will be anonymized and generalized in a way that cannot be traced back to the respondent. You may refuse to answer any questions, but please continue with the survey until the end.

Do you wish to continue?

1. Yes
2. No [Thank you for your interest! Please return the survey to the Armenian Research Center]

Do you live in Southeast Michigan?

1. Yes
2. No [Thank you for your interest! Please return the survey to the Armenian Research Center]

In this first section we ask several questions about your affiliation with St. John Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church.

A 01. For how long have you been involved with St. John Armenian Church?

1. Less than 5 years **[skip to A04]**
2. 5-10 years **[skip to A04]**
3. 10-15 years **[skip to A04]**
4. 15 years and more **[skip to A04]**
5. I am not involved with St. John Armenian Church

A 02. What is the major reason for not being involved with St. John Armenian Church?

1. I am affiliated with another Armenian church
2. I am affiliated with another non-Armenian church
3. I am a follower of a non-Christian faith
4. I am not religious
5. I live too far from St. John
6. Other (please specify _____)

A 03. Are you considering joining St. John Church?

1. Yes **[skip to A05]**
2. Probably yes **[skip to A05]**
3. Probably no **[skip to A36]**
4. No **[skip to A36]**

A 04. When did you become involved with St. John Armenian Church?

1. St. John is my family's church
2. St. John was not my family church, but I was baptized there
3. I chose to leave my other church and join St. John
4. After I moved to Southeast Michigan
5. Other (please specify _____)

A 05. What appeals to you about St. John Armenian Church? (You may select up to 3 answers)

1. Sunday Service / Badarak
2. Community/Social events (please specify _____)
3. Sunday School
4. Proximity to my home
5. I have acquaintances who attend this church
6. Armenian culture/language
7. Spiritual guidance
8. Pastor
9. Welcoming atmosphere
10. Other (please specify _____)

A 06. What is less attractive about St. John Armenian Church? (You may select up to 3 answers)

1. Sunday Service / Badarak
2. Community/Social events (please specify _____)
3. Sunday School
4. Distance from my home
5. I have no acquaintances at this church
6. Armenian culture/language
7. Spiritual guidance
8. Pastor
9. Unwelcoming atmosphere
10. Other (please specify _____)

A 07. Do you believe in God?

1. Yes, I believe in God
2. I believe in a spiritual force
3. No, I am not religious
4. Not sure

A 08. How important is religion in your life?

1. Extremely important
2. Very important
3. Moderately important
4. Slightly important
5. Not at all important

This next section will ask several questions about your overall satisfaction with the services provided by St. John Armenian Church and your engagement with the church.

A 09. Below are 10 statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by indicating that response for each statement.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel a part of the St. John community					
I feel welcome at St. John					
People at St. John are respectful to one another					
People are nice to me at St. John					
People feel welcome at St. John					
St. John's pastor is friendly and approachable					
St. John's pastor is available when I need him					
I enjoy the sermons					
I enjoy the Sunday Service / Badarak					
I enjoy the social events (gatherings, programs offered)					

A 10. How often do you typically attend or participate in the following services or events?

	Regularly	Occasionally (every other week/month)	Rarely (2-3 times every 6 months)	Very rarely (once or twice a year)	Never	Not applicable to me
Sunday Service / Badarak						
Men's Society / Women's Guild						
Christian educational discussions						
Bible study						
Monthly Catechism						
Other (please specify)						

A 11. How often do you read the email correspondence sent from the Church?

1. Regularly
2. Occasionally
3. Rarely
4. Never

A 12. How often do you read the print or electronic Sunday Church bulletin?

1. Regularly
2. Occasionally
3. Rarely
4. Never

A 13. How often do you check the Church's website for events or other information?

1. Regularly
2. Occasionally
3. Rarely
4. Never

A 14. What is the best the way you would like to receive communications from the Church? (Please select all that apply)

1. Email
2. Regular mail
3. Phone
4. Text
5. Social Media (please specify _____)

A 15. Have you ever visited the Manoogian Museum?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know about the Manoogian Museum

A 16. Have you ever used the resources of the Mardigian Library?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know about the Mardigian Library

A 17. Please use the following scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “Strongly dislike it” and 5 is “I love it” to rate the following services:

	I strongly dislike it 1.	I dislike it most of the time 2.	It's okay 3.	I like it most of the time 4.	I love it 5.	I have no experience
Sunday Service / Badarak						
Men’s Society / Women’s Guild						
Christian educational discussions						
Bible study						
Sunday School						
Monthly Catechism						
St. John’s Church website						
Weekly Church bulletin						
Emails I receive from the Church						

A 18. Which of the following statements best describes your involvement with St. John?

1. I am actively involved in the Church [skip to A21]
2. I am somewhat involved and I would like to be more involved
3. I am somewhat involved, but I cannot be more involved
4. I am not involved, but I would be interested in getting more involved
5. I am not involved and have no interest in getting more involved

A 19. What prevents you from getting more involved? (You may select more than one answer)

1. I don’t have time
2. I am not religious
3. I am not connected with many people at the Church
4. The atmosphere is not welcoming
5. People at the church are not respectful
6. My house is a long drive from the church
7. There are no events at the Church that interest me
8. There are not many volunteering opportunities
9. No one asked me to get more involved
10. Other _____

A 20. How much would the following steps help you become more involved? For each statement please check the appropriate box:

	Help a lot	Help a little	Not at all
More social/community events			
More volunteering opportunities			
More public lectures/discussions on Armenian topics			
More public lectures/discussions on religious topics			
More youth events			
More cultural events (performances, art classes and so on)			
More virtual events (via Zoom)			
Other (please specify _____)			

A 21. Which of the following church programs or events do you attend or participate in regularly? (Please select all that apply)

1. Sunday Service / Badarak
2. Major religious holidays (Easter, Armenian Christmas, etc.)
3. Monthly Catechism
4. Bible Study
5. Basketball
6. Events organized by Women’s Guild, Men’s Society or ACYOA
7. None
8. Other (please specify) _____

A 22. If you have children under 18, which of the following do they regularly attend or are involved in? (Please select all that apply)

1. Sunday school
2. Youth basketball
3. ACYOA Juniors
4. Summer camp
5. Other (please specify) _____
6. None
7. I don’t have children under 18

In this next section we will ask some questions about the meaningfulness of church sermons, our customs and traditions.

A 23. How well would you say you understand the meaning of the Divine Liturgy (Badarak?)

1. Very well
2. Fairly well
3. Not very well
4. Not at all

A 24. Would you say that you have a strong awareness of the Armenian Church's theological teachings?

1. Definitely yes
2. Yes
3. Not sure
4. No
5. Definitely no

A 25. Would you say that you have a strong awareness of the Armenian Church's traditions and customs (such as lighting candles, home blessings, blessing wedding dresses, and so on)?

1. Definitely yes
2. Yes
3. Not sure
4. No
5. Definitely no

A 26. Would you say you are aware of the Church's stance of contemporary topics?

1. Definitely yes
2. Yes
3. Not sure
4. No
5. Definitely no

A 27. How meaningful are the sermons for you?

1. Extremely meaningful
2. Very meaningful
3. Moderately meaningful
4. Slightly meaningful
5. Not meaningful at all

The following section will ask several questions about your volunteering experience and donations.

A 28. In which of the following programs or events have you volunteered in the past 6 months? (Please select all that apply)

1. World Medical Relief
2. Capuchins
3. Motor City Mitten Mission
4. Men's Society / Women's Guild / ACYOA events
5. Activities, sponsored by other community organizations
6. St. John's cultural / social events
7. Sunday School
8. Sports activities
9. Other (please specify _____)
10. I did not volunteer in any of these programs in the past 6 months

A 29. How often do you make donations to the Church?

1. Regularly (once a month) **[skip to A31]**
2. Somewhat regularly (quarterly or twice a year) **[skip to A31]**
3. Moderately (once every year) **[skip to A31]**
4. Seldom (every few years) **[skip to A31]**
5. Never

A 30. Which of the following best describes the reason(s) why you do not make donations to the church? (You may select more than one answer)

1. I do not make enough to donate to the Church
2. I prefer volunteering than donating money
3. I do not trust how my donation(s) will be spent
4. I do not feel obligated to donate
5. I never donate to charities
6. I do not believe in Church's mission
7. I donate to other charities
8. Other (Please specify) _____

[skip to A32]

A 31. Which of the following best describes the reason(s) why you donate to the church? (You may select more than one answer)

1. I feel obligated
2. Out of love and devotion to the church
3. I usually respond to fundraising
4. In Lieu of Flowers
5. To help the church accomplish special projects (like renovations, refurbishment, capital fundraising, etc.)
6. To help with church needs (candles flowers, incense)
7. I donate as a steward of the Church **[skip to A33]**
8. Other (Please specify) _____

A32. Are you considering becoming a steward of St. John Armenian Church?

1. Definitely Yes
2. Probably yes
3. Probably no
4. Definitely No
5. I am not aware of the stewardship program
6. Not sure

In this section we will ask a few questions about your experience of renting or using the facilities at St. John.

A 33. Have you rented the St. John facilities for any events in the past year?

1. Yes
2. No **[skip to A36]**

A 34. What was the occasion? (Please select all that apply).

1. Wedding reception
2. Baptism celebration
3. Funeral / memorial meal / hokejash
4. Birthday party
5. Other (please specify _____)

A 35. How would you rate the quality of the following?

	Poor 1.	Below average 2.	Average 3.	Above average 4.	Excellent 5.
Appearance of the Grand Ball Room / Cultural Hall					
Cleanliness of the Grand Ball Room / Cultural Hall					
Food Presentation					
Quality of the food					
Courtesy of the wait staff / servers					
Overall catering experience					
Price point of an event					
Other (please specify _____)					

Finally, we would like to learn about your background (please note that your responses in this section will be anonymized and used in a generalized form for reporting purposes).

A 36. What is your marital status?

1. Single
2. Married
3. Separated
4. Divorced
5. Widowed

A 37. What is your employment status?

1. Full-time employed
2. Part-time employed
3. Self-employed
4. Owner of a business / enterprise
5. In full-time education
6. Home-based parent, partner or caregiver
7. Retired
8. Unemployed and actively looking for a job

A 38. What is your highest level of education?

1. Incomplete / less than secondary school
2. Secondary or high school degree
3. Vocational or craft training/ Associate's Degree
4. Incomplete college or university education
5. Bachelor's degree or equivalent
6. Master's degree
7. PhD or professional credential (medical, law, etc.)

A 39. Gender

1. Female
2. Male
3. Non-binary

A 40. Age

1. 18-30
2. 31-50
3. 51-65
4. 66+

A 41. Which of the following best describes your Armenian background? (You may select up to 2 answers)

1. Armenian-American (U.S. born)
2. Istanbul-Armenian (originating from Istanbul or Turkey)
3. Lebanese-Armenian
4. Syrian-Armenian
5. Egyptian-Armenian
6. Iranian-Armenian
7. Iraqi-Armenian
8. Russian-Armenian
9. Baku Armenian (Armenian from Azerbaijan)
10. Armenian from Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh
11. Armenian from Hayastan
12. Other (please specify _____)

A 42. In which county do you currently live?

1. Oakland
2. Wayne
3. Macomb
4. Livingston
5. Washtenaw
6. Lapeer
7. Genesee
8. Other (Please specify _____)

A 43. On average, how long does/would it take you to drive one way to St. John's?

1. 0-14 min
2. 15-29 min
3. 30-44 min
4. 45+ min

A 44. How would you rate your knowledge of Armenian?

1. Native speaker
2. Fluent / non-native speaker
3. Intermediate / I can explain myself, but have limited vocabulary
4. Elementary / know some words, but don't speak the language
5. I don't speak Armenian

A 45. How would you rate your knowledge of English?

1. Native speaker
2. Fluent / non-native speaker
3. Intermediate / I can explain myself, but have limited vocabulary
4. Elementary / know some words, but don't speak the language
5. I don't speak English

A 46. Are you interested in participating in a focus group to provide more details which will inform the St. John Church leadership on how to improve their service to the community?

1. Yes
2. No

If you answered “yes” to the last question, please send a separate email to Dr. Vahe Sahakyan (sahakv@umich.edu) at the Armenian Research Center expressing your interest in participating in a focus group. This information will remain confidential.

By participating in a focus group, you can provide additional insight and feedback. Be assured, your identity and information will remain confidential. The University of Michigan-Dearborn Armenian Research Center professionals will be conducting the focus groups.

A 47. Please use the space below to share any thoughts or comments that were not covered in the questions.

Thank you for your time!

