

## **Plan of the Armenian Apostolic Church for Generational Change**

### **Preface**

This report outlines the strategic Seven Year Plan for Generational Change of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC). The AAC is a worldwide Church with its headquarters in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia. This document presents the programs that the Church is aiming to realise throughout Armenia, in its eight dioceses and institutions.

It is worth mentioning that the idea of developing this plan was born as a result of ecumenical encounters with representatives from different Christian denominations, emphasising that the ecological projects of the AAC are witnessing ecumenical involvement in the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Christian Education Centre (CEC), the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) and other inter-denominational and inter-religious organisations.

The Armenian Church shares the vision that global environmental challenges can be solved only through the solidarity and joined efforts of faith communities, governments and civil society and development organisations. The issues of justice at stake in North-South relations are of greater import than they have been before, and one of the reasons is connected to environment issues. The environmental challenges, which affect the whole of humanity, are related to human interference with nature and are owing in part to the irresponsibility of some individuals in consumerist societies.

Within this context, then, the AAC singles out the important influence of spirituality and Christian education on environmental programmes, to ensure the sustainable development of the country.

### **Current Environmental Challenges in Armenia**

As a part of its strategic plan to overcome poverty, the Republic of Armenia prioritised the country's recent environmental challenges as follows:

- (i) Efficient use of forest resources,
- (ii) Elimination of extreme air pollution,
- (iii) Mitigation of the negative consequences of global ecological changes,
- (iv) Prevention of soil degradation, limiting human activity that causes desertification,
- (v) Improvement and effective utilisation of meadows,
- (vi) Efficient management and use of water resources, the restoration of Lake Sevan's ecological balance, and relevant measures to ensure the preservation of its natural balance,
- (vii) Municipal waste treatment and management of hazardous industrial waste.

The existing problems and the increasing need for advocacy and responsibility for nature as God's creation is considered by the AAC from the holistic perspective that ecology is closely related to issues such as economics and social development, as well as to human spirituality. The Armenian Church has been actively involved in ecumenical activities through the elaboration of conceptual approaches, vision and partnerships for the introduction of environmental approaches to the Church's agenda, and through the implementation of the

projects. The urgent nature of the problem promotes the direct involvement of the AAC in immediate actions through the programmes implemented by the WCC Armenian Round Table (ART) foundation. The close cooperation was launched with Churches in Armenia and non-governmental organisations, as well as active members of society in the following main directions:

- Information and education
- Arrangement and participation in workshops and seminars, including those organised by WCC, CEC and ECEN
- Dialogue with representatives of civil society, developing agencies and NGOs
- Projects within communities
- Publication of articles and contacts with mass media in relation to church life

The objectives of the activities implemented during the last decade in rural and remote areas were aimed at reducing poverty by supporting income-generating activities and improving the environmental situation by introducing sustainable management practices in agriculture, water use and land degradation.

With this past experience, the AAC acknowledged the importance of expanding these activities. A new working group was established closely linked to the WCC-ART, and with the participation of several NGOs. These organisations have been working in that network for some time already and have been having periodic meetings to identify priorities, create partnerships and initiate ecological and environmental projects.

During the implementation of various of these projects, more and more volunteers have been joining them, including university students, Youth Centre students, members of environmental organisations, and members of various parishes. Below are presented some results of recently initiated projects and views on how to expand environmental programs in the AAC.

### **Promoting the Use of Renewable Energy**

Given the geographical location, Armenia has a significant potential of solar energy, which is currently under-utilised. The area surrounding Lake Sevan, wherein lies the Vazgenian Theological Seminary, is considered one of the best regions for high solar radiation potential, with an average of 1720kWh/ m<sup>2</sup> annually.

The project for the installation of solar powered water-heating systems, integrated into centralised heating and hot water supplies, is implemented in cooperation and on a co-sharing basis with the WCC Armenia Interchurch Charitable Round Table Foundation and the United Nations Development Programme/ Global Environment Foundation's (UNDP/GEF's) "Armenia - Improving the Energy Efficiency of Municipal Heating and Hot Water Supply" project. The total budget of the project is \$35,500 USD. The subcontractor of the project is "SolarEn LLC" - a specialized organisation with extensive experience in assembling and installing hot water supply solar-powered systems in Armenia.

The 60 square meters of the solar panels will satisfy the hot water demand for the 90 students and seminary staff, providing annually 1,500 cubic metres of around 45°C hot water, thus will spare the annual use of 10,000 cubic metres of natural gas. Apart from the environmental

impact, this project also has an ideological angle, as it will demonstrate the leading role of the Church in using alternative energy resources with the view of its expansion in the country.

## **Next Steps**

**1)** The hot water solar production can be implemented in 5 church-affiliated summer camps and guesthouses in Armenia: the diocese of Kotayk holds a summer camp in Tzakhkadzor, the diocese of Syunik holds a summer camp in Eghegnadzor and the diocese of Gugarq runs a summer camp in Vanadzor. In order to increase the use of solar heating systems in church-run institutions, as well as in rural areas of the country, negotiations are already underway to secure the required financing from potential funding institutions.

**2)** Apart from the summer camps, the church has several guesthouses in the region, particularly in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin and near the Haghpat Monastery. The Haghpat Monastery, along with the other monuments of that region, is one of the most visited sites in Armenia. In the future it is logical that it be included in the environmentally friendly tourism promotion project in Armenia, implemented by the church, which is currently in negotiation.

These ambitious plans are in conception stage and will require a lot of organisational and construction work. That said, it is already possible to take several steps in the right direction. The implementation of solar heating system in the above mentioned sites will allow the reduction of the operating costs of church occupied buildings and the promotion of resource conservation and eco-friendly management. The installation of a solar heating system in the guesthouse of the Mother See in Holy Etchmiadzin may be also seen as very important in the sense that it has visitors all year round, and so the initiative will contribute greatly to the advertisement of renewable energy resources in Armenia.

**3)** In the neighbourhood of Lake Sevan there are 10-14 villages with 20,000 inhabitants, consisting in the main of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan, and supplied by the diocese of Gegharkunik. If solar powered heating systems are introduced in a few public locations here (such as kindergartens, public baths etc.), not only it will cut sizable expenses in this economically poor and disadvantaged region, but will also prevent the tree cutting in the forests, thus boosting the forestation in the country.

**Energy efficiency:** The use of renewable energy sources must be considered in the broader context of energy saving. The introduction of environment and energy audits at seminaries and church administrative buildings is currently being discussed with several specialised organisations and donor-assistance projects. It is planned to conduct an energy audit in nine administrative buildings, four dormitories of the brotherhood and three seminaries. The audit recommendations will provide guidance and measures to reduce the energy consumption at these facilities. With appropriate financing in place, the smart energy planning can be introduced already at the design/conception stage of newly constructed, church-occupied buildings. As a first step, for example, energy efficient lamps can be installed in the administrative building of Etchmiadzin and in the seminary. The energy savings can then be calculated and used to support and justify the feasibility of expanding that practice.

**The idea of using recycled paper in church administration:** This has also discussed because, unfortunately, stationary suppliers in Armenia do not currently sell recycled paper. That said, for the first time attempts are being made to reduce wasteful use of paper by printing on both sides of the paper etc. Furthermore, the use of electronic communication

devices can be extended, which will contribute to resource saving. It is planned to organise the collection of waste paper and return it to the local companies who undertake paper recycling for cardboard production.

### **Adaptation to Climate Change**

Since trees symbolise life, their careful maintenance can be viewed as a very special duty for every Christian, and an act pleasing to God. The tree-planting mission, then, can be one of the main involvements of the Church in overcoming the acute deforestation problem and negative consequences of both land erosion and water retention in Armenia. The planting of trees around monasteries and churches is traditional in Armenia. The former is of utmost importance because more than 10 per cent of the forest was cut down or thinned during the energy crisis of the early 1990s in Armenia. As a result there is an urgent need for the advocacy of responsible stewardship and for strengthening the communal management of forests.

The theoretical studies on green theology were followed by practical work of the future clergy in the framework of the “Tree of Life” project of Armavir Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The tree planting activity was organised in the garden of St. Lazarus Church in the town of Metsamor. The project in Metsamor represents the example of practical lessons in environmental education in a town that does not yet have established community traditions or linkages with the church. The garden, located in an arid region with very small green areas, will hopefully serve as an example for the neighbouring farms and communities.

Thanks to this project the Church of St. Lazarus is now surrounded by five hectares of the newly planted fruit garden. Having ensured uninterrupted water supply by the WCC-ART, the main problem of irrigation was successfully resolved.

The project demonstrated the successful cooperation of the Church, NGOs, the community, and ecumenical organisations, thus setting an example for others. The trees were provided by the Armenia Tree Project NGO, which also designed several dendrological plans for churches, including but not limited to St. Anna in Malishka, Mughni Church, Amenaprkich in Musaler, Asdvadsatsin in Yeghegnadzor, St. Trdat in Vaik and others, as well as 680 trees, shrubs and evergreens at the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin, etc.

### **Next Steps**

**1) Creating green surroundings for the Churches:** In 2009 this program kicked off on the territory of St Gregory the Illuminator Mother Church in Yerevan. It is the largest church in Armenia by size and was consecrated in 2001 during the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of proclamation of Christianity as the state religion in Armenia. The Mother Church is located in the centre of the capital, surrounded by a number of public attractions and universities. The green area around the construction site had to be removed and, as a result, the territory has become ecologically spoilt.

Although the area surrounding the church is not managed by church itself, it was viewed as a poor policy and an anti-environmental urban planning example. Alternatively, the church parish members and visitors could rest under the shadows of the trees on the green mound whilst being shielded from dust and traffic pollution. Furthermore, this could be a place where the university students could enjoyably spend their free time and have spiritual food and ecological self-education. Last but not least, the neighbourhood will also benefit from this

project, as public park areas are very limited in the capital as well as around the country in general.

The Mother Church has around 4.9 hectares of land plot, two hectares of which ought to be green. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2009, a tree planting session was carried out. This notwithstanding, so much still needs to be done to implement the comprehensive green-design of the plot. The negotiations for securing finance have been initiated, looking to begin the project in the spring of 2010.

The most costly parts of the project are the preparation of the land plot (as the area is covered with construction waste and stones) and, owing to the dry climate in that region, that irrigation system must be installed. The preparatory works will be followed by tree and bush planting by volunteer students from surrounding Universities. The students from the Theology faculty will then take care of the area for the first three years so that the newly planted trees may become deeply rooted and sufficiently strong to survive. The success of this project will enable the group to ensure its expansion, and to include other Churches around the country.

**2) Restoration of sacred green spaces:** During the days of the Catholics of All Armenians Nerses the 5<sup>th</sup>, there used to be a historic forest and a small lake close to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Since the city was in the centre of a very dry region with particularly hot summers, it was the only green area in the neighbourhood. Waters from the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin, which once had more than 80 wells in its vicinity, irrigated the forest. Furthermore, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the forest became a graveyard for the thousands of orphan refugees from Western Armenia who were rescued from genocide, and continued to exist until the early 1990s. Unfortunately, however, most of the trees were cut down during the afore-mentioned energy crisis. The territory was no longer under the management of the church and no replanting activities were put in place by the regional administration.

Recently, the Church has acquired the administration of this plot, covering close to 8.5 hectares. A small part of the forest was used to construct a playground for children. There is also a plan to replant the forest in the spring of 2010 and erect a monument dedicated to the child victims of the Armenian Genocide. The green area will serve as a restful, relaxation spot for the Echmiadzin citizens and Holy Church visitors. A steering committee was established to prepare the project and the budget. The current plan is to have approvals in place for the completed project by the end of the year, so as to allow planting works to commence in the spring of 2010. This will be part of a bigger plan to plant 1.5 million trees in different regions in Armenia in the memory of the 1.5 million victims of the Armenian Genocide.

## Education

**1) Green Theology:** The goal of the project is the introduction of new approaches in the educational processes of the Vaskenyan Theological Seminary. Brand new disciplines were introduced into the educational system of the young clergy of one of the oldest orthodox Churches: they received both theoretical and practical knowledge on ecology and the protection of nature. The objectives of the project are: to promote the education of Green Theology, to understand the importance of protecting the natural environment and to realise the significance of environmentally responsible management through studies and practical work within communities.

The activities of 2007 included three components: training in Green Theology, training of teachers and training in farming practices. The training in Green Theology was introduced in Vazkenyan Seminary. From October 15<sup>th</sup> until December a course on ecology and nature-protection (22 hours) was delivered to 33 students of Vazkenyan Seminary who were in their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years of studies. The course was conducted by the professors of Yerevan State University, and was visited by Fr. Minas Martirosyan (Vice Dean of the Seminary), Dr. Dmitri Oikoumene from Oxford University, and two priests from the Russian Orthodox Church.

Guest speakers were invited to cover special topics. In the Gevorgyan Seminary, lectures were delivered on the following topics: “Global Climate Change and its Consequences in the Republic of Armenia” by Mrs. Diana Harutyunyan and “Ecology and Theology” by Rev. Hans Schravezande, Netherlands. The young clergy who had expressed interest participated as well. In June Prof. Dr. Konrad Raiser delivered lectures in the Gevorgyan Theological Seminary and the Theological Faculty of Yerevan State University, covering the following topics: “How can the Church Participate in Ecological Movement?”, “Biblical Themes in Ecological Care”, “The Issue of Eco Justice: Integration of Ecology and Justice” and “Confidence Building in Ecumenical Relations.”

**2) Publications on Eco-Theology:** A small publishing unit was established to publish booklets, information leaflets and papers on various topics related to eco-theology and to then distribute them among the population of the Sevan region during the students’ visits to parishes and schools.

In 2007 a book called “Nature Protection and Theology” was published. It consists of three parts: Ecology, Nature Protection and Christian Church on Relations of Man and Nature. One thousand copies were published and distributed to the libraries of theological seminaries, to the chairs of ecology in universities and to the clergy. It is the first Armenian publication ever related to the protection of nature from a theological point of view, and furthermore is the first attempt of its kind from the orthodox world, as acknowledged and stated by many specialists.

The publication has aroused tremendous interest among specialists of ecology and nature-protection, clergy, NGOs and the general public. Moreover, TV companies that are broadcast all around Armenia grouped it among ‘important new publications’. The project manager Fr. Minas participated in a one-week long training course organised by the ART on strategic planning and applied his knowledge in drafting the strategy plan for further development of the “Green Theology” project.

**3) Practical application of knowledge on Green Theology:** The farm adjacent to the Vazgenyan Seminary was reconstructed and is fully operational for practical training for students. The farm can sustain its own operations and is able to use additional income to continue and further expand the farm and to support the seminary in relation to its practical training activity. As a result of the project’s implementation, the students of two theological seminaries have substantially improved their knowledge on nature-protection, ecology and eco-theology, and are well equipped for awareness-raising activities regarding nature-protection issues during their work in parishes. Furthermore, the publication of the handbook on eco-theological issues contributed greatly to the distribution of the eco-theological values and basic information in this sphere.

## **Next Steps**

A series of seminars for the parish priests to increase their knowledge levels regarding environmental issues could be organised. These could include the presentation of general environmental issues, as well as specific problems of the sector, followed by possible solutions and alternatives.

The seminars will give the participants an opportunity to become more aware of the importance of environmental protection and preservation. They will also draw attention to current environmental problems and their possible solutions. In this way the priests may advocate proper resource management in their own parishes. The participants will be introduced to environmental problems specific to their region and equipped with recommendations and adequate skills of environmental protection through practical assignments.

## **Media and Advocacy**

The AAC runs “Shoghakat”- a TV Company which, among others programs, periodically transmits information on environmental projects implemented by the AAC and RTA.

### **Next steps**

**TV Programme:** A project called “Green Theology” will be launched in 2010 and is planned to broadcast thirty-minute programs twice a month. Each broadcast will address an actual environmental issue presented by specialist guests who will be invited to the TV studio. The program is supposed to be built on the positions of the specialist/ consultant, representatives of the government and clergymen. At the beginning of the discussion a short topic will be presented, which will then be followed by the discussion itself.

Besides the discussions, short films ranging from 20 to 30 minutes in length will be shot, which will later be translated into several languages. The TV Company has already had some experience in making this kind of project. The programme is scheduled for inauguration at the beginning of 2010.

**Eco-twinning:** As the Armenian Church has only recently initiated ecology-oriented activities, there are no projects on eco-twinning just yet. However, there are a few possibilities to create links between theological centres in Eastern Europe with already established traditions on ecological trainings and start by organising summer camps and lectures, as well as exchanging students.

The Sevan Theological Seminary will be able to host such a conference and a summer camp, which can be devoted to the exchange of experiences on eco-management in church institutions, and how to build partnership with organisations concerned about civil society.

## **Celebration of Creation Day**

**Sustainable land management, theology of land:** The writings of the Armenian Church-Fathers are full of examples of and references to the preservation of fertile land. Some of the Armenian Church celebrations and ritual liturgies can serve a good example. During the

celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, grapes are blessed. Several times a year there is a special blessing of the world. There are strong recommendations in the mediaeval writings of the Church Fathers on how to respect nature. The book “Nature Protection and Theology” was the first example of such publications. However, with the establishment of a special department, there will also be an opportunity to create a theological research group to create publications of theological books and booklets on Green Theology.

**Creation days:** It is a new ecumenical introduction in the life of the churches. There is a plan to organise an event with the Christian Education Centre of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. There are a few alternatives that are planned to be organised each year:

- A composition on ecology by the pupils of the public schools,
- Performances by the kindergarten children,
- A drawing or photo contest with the participation of Youth Centre children.

### **Lifestyle**

Armenia is an agricultural country. In rural areas, the responsible approach towards the surrounding environment still exists despite some degradation as a result of the switch from private to public property ownership, imposed by the Soviet regime in the past. As a part of its ethics the Church takes some measures to promote ecologically lean life. For instance, the church holidays and celebration of creation day can be opportunities for advocating the responsible community management of the surrounding nature – forests, meadows etc.

Several churches and monasteries are located amidst abundant land that is rich with natural reserves so, considering the growing tourist attraction in these areas, the church can promote environmentally friendly development as well as responsible behaviour in these holy areas.

**The high rate of poverty coupled with weak to no environmental governance result in an overall attitude of indifference, thus depriving the society of responsible behaviour and adequate care towards the natural environment in Armenia. The role of the church should therefore be to introduce the concepts of self-awareness and responsibility to the communities all over the country, in order to achieve the common goal of a better life and healthy environment for each and every community member.**