

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Saint George Maronite Catholic Church dates back to the turn of the century in a period when there was an influx of emigrants from Lebanon who settled mainly in the Federal Hill area of Providence. They came from all parts of Lebanon such as Baan, Beirut, Besharre, Blouza, Dfoun, Eddee, Ehden, Jebail, Kafarsghaab, Tripoli, Zgharta, and Zouk. Most of them lived around the church which was the center of their religious and social life. For several years they attended Roman Catholic Churches in the area, specifically Saint John, Holy Ghost and Mount Carmel, all three located in the then crowded "Hill" area. The language barrier compelled them to think in terms of having their own church with a priest who could communicate with them and conduct religious services in their accustomed Maronite Rite.

Representatives of the community including Elias Rukas, Michael Hanna, Joseph Hanna, Joseph Badway, Michael Joseph, Assad Michael and Mr. Bu Kalid and with the help of Father Yazbeck, a Maronite priest, petitioned Bishop Harkins of the Diocese of Providence for a Maronite Church of their own and were granted their request. Their wish was realized in May 1911 when the Maronite parish was established by Bishop Harkins. Father Yazbeck contacted his friend, Father Joseph Ganem, a missionary priest who was serving the Maronite community of Birmingham, Alabama and convinced him to agree to come to Providence. Father Ganem was the first parish priest for Saint George Maronite Church. Bishop Harkins sold the Maronite Community a three story dwelling at 85 America Street in Providence, Rhode Island. The church was purchased for \$7,000 which was a tenement house that was remodeled into a combination church and rectory. Consensus of opinion was that the name Saint George came about because of the famous cathedral in Beirut and other churches bearing the name in Zogharta-Ehden and in Baan, Lebanon; also, because it was an easily recognizable English name.

When Father Ganem returned to Alabama in 1922, he was replaced by Father Nemetallah Gideon. When he came to the parish on April 1, 1922 there were approximately 260 adults, most of them quite poor, and 200 children. There was a debt of \$5,000 on the church building and a bank balance of \$24.76. At this particular time, the parishioners were faced with a choice of purchasing a nearby church that was

accompanied by an excellent hall or remodeling and repairing the existing structure. The parishioners chose the option of restructuring the old wooden church at almost double the cost of purchasing the aforementioned church; their reasoning being, mainly, the proximity of the old church to the neighborhood where most of them lived. The renovations to the building started on January 7, 1926 and were completed at a cost of \$30,000 by Sunday, December 4, 1927. During the interim, the parishioners attended Saint John Church. The church changed in appearance although its seating capacity of 120 was not changed. With the veneering of brick and reconstruction of the entire building along Romanesque lines, and with an attractive façade and rearrangement of windows, it took on an entirely different aspect. It took on an appearance of a church! The expenses incurred on repairs were magnified with the onset of the depression of 1929, which lasted well into the 1930's. During these especially difficult years, church bingos, suppers, raffles, and other fundraising events were held to help defray the mounting expenses. Also, Bishop Hickey of the Diocese of Providence gave Father Gideon permission to go to the Roman Catholic Churches in the Federal Hill area and make a collection at one of their Sunday masses for the benefit of Saint George Church because it was impossible to pay off the debt without outside help. The church mortgage was paid in full in 1944 initiated by Nosseff Joseph, Joseph Thomas, Louis Lobris, Mansour Badway, Ablan Haskell and Assad Murray by collecting an assessment of \$75 from each family. This vast venture took almost a year.

During the entire pastorate of Father Gideon, the Sunday school aspect was instituted and instructed by the Sisters of the Holy Ghost of Nazareth House, Sister Mary and Sister Anne. They were assisted by a lay teacher, Miss Mary Mahon, who also served as a housekeeper, secretary and organizer of various revenue generating functions previously mentioned during Father Ganem and Father Gideon's pastorate. Following her death, we were fortunate to obtain the services of Miss Margaret Pittore who served us in the role of housekeeper for several years.

During the lingering illness of Father Gideon, both Bishop Hickey and Bishop Keough supported us in furnishing Roman Catholic priests who carried on the normal priestly functions as well as preaching missions in the Lenten Season. We also had the good fortune of having the services of an elderly

Maronite priest on several occasions, Father Ignatius Sayegh, and the young and popular Father Philip Najem who was related to several parishioners. Father Najem's stay was short lived due to his transfer to Saint Joseph Maronite Church in Waterville, Maine. In 1944 when Father Gideon's health was failing, he did have the good fortune and pleasure of burning the church mortgage himself. Coincidentally, August 15, the day on which Father Gideon was ordained a priest in 1900 happened to be the same day and month of his death in 1947. The parish community endured very difficult times during his administration. Father Gideon will be well remembered for his dedication and perseverance by all who had the good fortune to meet and know him.

While mulling over the advisability of bringing a Maronite priest from Lebanon, the Bishop of the Diocese of Providence decided to assign us a Roman Catholic priest on a temporary basis. For a little more than two years from August 1947 through November 1949 our parish was administered by Father John Tully. There was an excellent relationship between Father Tully and the parishioners helped much by the improving conditions of the economy and the return of normalcy following World War II. A new electric organ was purchased for the church in December 1948. During July 1949 the Altar Rosary Society was canonically established.

In December 1949, Father Peter S. Hobeika arrived from Lebanon upon his assignment to Saint George Church. He was ordained to the priesthood in Lebanon on July 18, 1943. An energetic and alert young priest he came to us well prepared. Since assuming the pastorate at Saint George, Father Hobeika introduced many changes, one of which was the use of English in the recitation of the Lord's Prayer by the congregation en masse. He also formed two Maronite choirs, one for adults and one composed of younger children of the parish. He was instrumental in the organization of the spiritual and civic societies in the community, namely the Holy Rosary Altar Society, Holy Name Society, Lebanese Women's Guild, Knights of Saint George, Lebanese American Community Center, Maronite Youth Organization and Boy Scouts Saint George Council #116. In March 1950, the first Saint Joseph Hafli was held as a fundraising event for the general support of the parish. It was through his initiative and efforts that the original Lebanese Mahrajan held on Labor Day weekend was first brought to Rhode

Island in September 1955 where it ran successfully for many years. In 1968, the Mahrajan was sponsored by six Maronite Churches under the leadership of the General Chairman, Father Hobeika, which was sponsored and blessed officially by His Excellency Bishop Francis M. Zayek.

On April 13, 1977, the first Sunday after Easter, Father Hobeika had a telephone discussion with Bishop Fredrick Belden of the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island. Father inquired about the availability of any church in his Diocese. The Bishop queried him extensively about the needs of Saint George, asking questions like the following: Where do your parishioners reside? How far away are they from their church? Bishop Belden searched for a clear picture of the situation. It was then that he invited Father Hobeika to visit the beautiful edifice at 50 Main Street, Pawtucket, Rhode Island which later became the new Saint George Maronite Catholic Holy Trinity Church. It was our good and timely fortune that the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island merged two of their churches, thereby selling Holy Trinity Church, a declared historical landmark, to us for \$80,000 a sum which belies its true worth.

If were not for the genuine and wholehearted support of His Excellency Bishop Gelineau, the new Saint George Church would not have become a reality. The church was consecrated on November 26, 1977 and the dedication banquet was held at the Cranston Hilton with more than 500 people in attendance that evening at which time the parish hall was renamed "Hobeika Hall."

Early in April 1983, Father Hobeika advised his parishioners that the Diocese of Saint Maron informed him that he was to be elevated to the rank of Monsignor. A celebration in thanksgiving was planned; June 12, 1983 was the date set by the parishioners. These worthy plans were short lived for on May 11, 1983 Reverend Monsignor Peter S. Hobeika was fatally stricken by a massive heart attack a short time after he had testified at a State House hearing in favor of a church bingo bill. The entire parish as well the greater community was greatly saddened by his death. A Pontifical Mass was celebrated on May 16, 1983 with 67 members of the clergy in attendance with parishioners and friends filling the church, his pride and joy, beyond its capacity. His work on earth was completed. His mission was accomplished by giving the parish a depth of character and spirituality.

His Excellency Archbishop Francis M. Zayek then sent to Saint George Father William Hakeem, a recently ordained priest. He served the community for only three months. On August 23, 1983, Archbishop Zayek assigned Father Paul F. Mouawad. With a great deal of enthusiasm and boundless energy, he picked up the reigns of pastor. In a relatively short time, he showed his enthusiasm in performing all his duties. He overwhelmed us with his progressive ideas and goals, and he wasted no time in pursuing his objectives. During his first three months, Hobeika Hall was remodeled, and some renovations were done inside to preserve our lovely edifice. Our Sunday school was reformed and a special team of dedicated teachers, with the diligent support of Father Paul, developed an excellent program using the new catechism books, "Faith of the Mountain." Weekly bulletins, ushers, lectors, altar boys, sacristans, secretary and maintenance staff were introduced actively into Saint George Church. Within months of being assigned to Saint George Church, the church and hall were paid in full and on December 11-12, 1983 festivities were held to celebrate the final mortgage payment.

During Father Paul's tenure, our census increased from about 55 to 210 active families. He adapted the liturgy to the youth of the church and purchased new prayer books to make it easier to follow the liturgy. In January 1984, he initiated the 200 Club which has become a good source of income for the church but more importantly it brought about togetherness at monthly meetings and social functions. He re-introduced the violin and organ to the choir. Father Paul worked tirelessly with all committees involved with church activities and especially with the youth of the parish. NAM, National Apostolate of Maronites, membership increased from 24 to 105. Also, Father Paul was an active member of the community who served on the Pawtucket Building Authority and the Pawtucket/Central Falls Church Council on Drug Abuse.

The floor above Hobeika Hall served as the rectory and as Father Paul became more and more involved in many church related activities it was evident that the parish needed larger facilities to accommodate visiting priests and bishops. In May 1986 a house was purchased, approximately 2 miles away from the church, on Wolcott Street, Pawtucket, Rhode Island which served adequately as an interim rectory for

approximately 9 years. During the weekend of June 7-8, 1986, the “Diamond Jubilee – 75th Anniversary of Saint George Church” was celebrated with a grand banquet at the Venus de Milo Restaurant in Swansea, Massachusetts. In May 1995, the parish purchased a spacious and well-constructed brick building at 50 Summit Street, Pawtucket, Rhode Island one block up from the church. On July 3 through July 7, 1996 Saint George hosted the 33rd Annual NAM Convention which became the pivotal celebration of the church’s 85th anniversary. During 1999 Saint George Church celebrated the 50th Anniversary of its annual Saint Joseph Hafli.

On October 25, 2005, our church and hall at 50 Main Street, Pawtucket, Rhode Island was suddenly stricken with devastation as a fire raced quickly through the buildings. The facility was ruined beyond repair with a crane taken to it on the very next day demolishing what remains were left. The community was in awe and felt homeless because of this enormous loss in their lives. Within a few weeks of the tragedy the parish had rented Saint Raymond Church at 1240 North Main Street, Providence, Rhode Island to use as our temporary house of worship. The parish rebounded swiftly and within months created an Exploratory Committee to research the many possibilities as to the future home of Saint George Church. In July 2006, Father Paul F. Mouawad was transferred to Newtown Square, Pennsylvania to serve the Maronite parish of Saint Sharbel Church. At the same time, Father Edward T. Nedder was assigned to serve Saint George Church. In May 2007 a house residing on 8 plus acres of land at 171 Twin River Road, Lincoln, Rhode Island was purchased to be the site of the future church, hall and rectory of Saint George.