

**ST GEORGE CHURCH
IN THE MILLENNIUM**

*A Century of Faith and
Heritage*

Andrew Courey

*Dedicated to the memory of
Naseeb Motter, a founding father*

*Gifted by
Frank Motter and Family*

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A Century of Faith and Heritage

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Other sources include reference documents on St George Church prepared by "Les Architectes Beauchamp et Associes, May 1998, containing articles by Philip Dombowski on Briffa's work as well as some history on the Church written by the late Father Howard; St George's 75th Anniversary commemorative booklet and a Church booklet entitled "A Tribute to the Old Church in the New World" commemorating the 31st Antiochian Archdiocese Convention, and articles written by Father Titus Fulcher entitled "St George Montreal

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Forward

The celebrations of a century of Faith and Heritage - St George in the Millennium - had the distinct purpose of remembering the past noble deeds of our forefathers who planted the seedlings of Antiochian Orthodoxy in this country, province and city - to help point to the future. There is an Arab proverb: he who has no past, has no present and certainly no future.

This book authored by Andrew Courey - as well as its companion video for which we gratefully acknowledge the talents of that committee* - have both visually and in print conjured up for this generation all the heroism of the early pioneers whose memories nurture our souls and our hearts with enduring inspirational stories of relentless struggles towards victory in both their personal and Church lives. Andrew Courey's verbal picture shall remain as a testimony to the rich legacy of our ancestors.

The fabric of Canadian/Quebec society has been interwoven with the men, women and children who traversed the ocean seeking a better way of life. In spite of all the odds facing them - horrible winters, language, poverty, illnesses, homesickness and a variety of social problems - they persevered and conquered. This country became their home and they were determined to be honorable citizens in gratitude for the hospitality afforded them by the indigenous population.

* Paulo Carvalho, Ziad Touma, Georgina Howick, Nancy Calille, David Boulatta, Norman Marino, Walid Nahas.

Blessed be their memories! We, too, shall never forget! History is made of men. It is never static. No age is more golden than the present one. It is our prayer that as the twenty-first century looms on the horizon, their grateful children and heirs will continue the march into history.

It is your task to be faithful, the holy ones and witnesses in the daily building of a vibrant Antiochian Orthodox Christian family to respond to the spiritual hunger and thirst of those who follow in your footsteps.

Antony Gabriel
Feast of the Transfiguration
1999

I. Introduction

St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church stands quietly and sturdily amid the din of traffic and bustle of life on Jean Talon street between St. Denis and St. Hubert, a busy section of the city of Montreal still characterized as the "north end", though today not as peripheral as the term once implied. When St. George was erected in 1939, Montreal's Syrians, as they were called then, had already clustered in this relatively new area roughly bounded by Jean Talon on the north, St Zotique to the south, Chateaubriand to the east, and St Denis to the west, establishing a new geographic center for their community. Many had moved from the old town quarter around Notre Dame and Viger streets not far from the port, where the first immigrants landed back in the 1880's and made their first homes.

Today, the relatively small ocher brick Church on Jean Talon is surrounded by buildings of all kinds, small and large, most non-descript, including a metro station, the hub of a constant flow of people from many backgrounds coming and going along what is now one of the city's major arteries. Amid this teeming sector, St. George's modest size and Byzantine architecture is unobtrusive particularly in a city noted for its numerous gothic greystone Roman Catholic churches that dominate their surroundings. But the modesty of the structure belies its significance to the city's Antiochian Orthodox community and the church's place in the history of the city, of the province and of the nation.

Inside its arched oak doors, within its tranquil walls are found treasures whose "discovery" by government officials have vaulted the church into national notice. Charged with preserving Canada's heritage, the officials saw the church, in particular the

interior design and decoration, as such an unusual treasure as to merit government funding for its restoration as a building of historic significance. The rarity of allocation of government funds for such projects is testimony to the "specialness" of this church and the people who built it, for the 100-year-old story of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church is the story of its people, of a community whose spiritual center and spiritual home is still their church on Jean Talon, as it celebrates the 60th anniversary of its construction.

II. St George Church

- Home Is Where The Heart Is -

It is said that "Home is where the heart is". In the case of St George church, the saying might be coined more broadly to properly capture the profound sense of love, reverence, comfort and belonging that the church evokes in the hearts of its parishioners who approach and go through its doors. It is of course a spiritual home to its Antiochian Orthodox community, where hearts are uplifted in the enveloping compassion of God and the exceptional aesthetic beauty of the church's interior no doubt inspired by the Master and executed by a master artist, Emmanuel Briffa. Briffa, originally from Malta, had acquired a reputation for excellence in the United States for his work in theatre decor and had come to Canada when he was hired by the church building committee to do the interior design and decoration. As far as is known, it was his first church commission. This "Maltese Michelangelo" must have been inspired and guided by the same divine presence.

- An Artistic Treasure Spiritually Uplifting -

The church structure has been described by an expert on architecture and decorative arts as "a westernized version of the Byzantine style, reflecting western, Canadian and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Elements of St George which are Byzantine include the drums and small domes on the towers and the central dome, as well as the massing

of the transept (the part of a cross-shaped church at right angles to the long main section, or nave), which recalls Byzantine prototypes with its sense of progressively smaller units on the sides. The semi-circular, arched windows are also characteristic of the style.

Elements growing out of the western tradition of church building include the twin-towered facade set above a flight of stairs leading up to three entrances, with the largest in the center. Others are the pediments (low-pitched gable on the front of some buildings in the Grecian style of architecture) above the central entrance and the decorative features such as the moulded arches of the doors and the contrast in materials - yellow brick and pale limestone basement and trim...

The interior is divided into the narthex (vestibule leading to the nave), the nave and the sanctuary, an arrangement standard for both east and west. The nave opens out at ground level to suggest a transept, has a barrel-vaulted ceiling pierced by an eight-sided dome and an iconostasis, or icon screen, dividing the nave from the sanctuary. The sanctuary, reserved for the priest, is slightly raised, "to be closer to God." The words were written by Rhona Goodspeed, in a paper prepared for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

In fact, the whole church is raised and climbing the long row of stairs up to the wood entrance doors is in itself an act of anticipation of being closer to God. For each and every one who belongs to it, the church is much, much more than architectural and decorative design detail. The church as a whole and the parts that give it its

character, including the ocher-yellow brick facade, the towers, the octagonal dome, the steep stairs, the doors, are familiar to its parishioners as simply their home and their belonging to its community. It is a deeply lasting landmark in their lives.

Once inside the church, inside the narthex, the vestibule, there is a sense of transition from the noisy outside world into a hallowed sanctum. The transition is complete entering the main part of the church, the nave, into peace and tranquility. There, casting the eyes about, the beauty of the interior is wondrous, a joy to behold. It is a church of lightness and of light, through its bright stained glass windows, of a harmony of arcing pastel blues and yellows overhead, grey-blue and pink faux-marble, soft yet distinctive colours and dramatic murals high on the arched white ceiling depicting St George slaying the terrible dragon, St Demetrius battling the forces of evil, icons of the apostles atop the iconostasis, a star-studded sky-blue ceiling in the sanctuary, over the altar.

Rhona Goodspeed in describing the interior for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board with her expert's eye,, writes..."The innermost arch above the sanctuary exhibits flat geometric patterns in yellow, turquoise and mauve, which radiate outwards to represent rays of light. ...Of particular note for their quality are the icons of St George and St Demetrius, which exhibit great energy and naturalism... The other saints on the ceiling display the same style (Italian Renaissance) with their noble poses and idealized restraint. All these works were painted in oil on canvas...which were first painted and then glued there by marouflage."

Goodspeed says the interior is an unusual combination of Byzantine, Renaissance and western art-deco styles. It is certainly unusual. The artistic expression was unique for a church of its size, of any size, at the time. It is still exceptional. It is a fine, a wonderful, an inspired tribute to the Master by a master artist.

Adding reverence to all this splendour are biblical inscriptions prominently placed in two arcs on the innermost arch of the nave above the iconostasis:

**THIS IS MY COMMANDMENT: THAT YE LOVE
ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU
...and...
COME UNTO ME ALL YE THAT LABOUR AND
ARE HEAVYLADEN AND I WILL GIVE YOU
REST.**

The words capture the essence of the church itself. St George church is not only a place of beauty. It is a place of rest to its people. It is a place of love. It is a very special home to the hearts.... and to the soulsof the people who belong to it. But more than that, it has been and still is a place of rest, compassion and aid to all who enter its doors.

The "building fathers" of St George who were responsible for building the church and overseeing its interior decoration, with the words on the arch, chose a message that conveyed the spirit of their Faith and an ideal for their people; a Faith they brought with them from the old land to the new within an Antiochian Orthodox religion that was central to their lives.

III.

The Antiochian Orthodox Community In Quebec

- The Origins -

The history of the Antiochian Orthodox community in Canada begins before the 20th century, when the first immigrants from Syria arrived in Montreal in the early 1880's. Syria, including Lebanon as a province, was then under Turkish Ottoman rule. Those who emigrated to North America were generally known as "Syrians" since they carried passports and other papers identifying them as Syrian nationals. In later years, as of the late 50's and early 60's, well after 1950 when Lebanon became an independent state, most of them and others who followed would be known as Lebanese Canadians - those, at least, who came from that part of the Middle East. Even then, the distinction between Syrian and Lebanese Orthodox was often blurred because of marriage unions among them, a common occurrence partly as a result of geographical proximity, their minority status in both Syria and Lebanon, and a shared religious-cultural heritage, though most, by far, were in fact from Lebanon.

Theirs was a deeply-rooted heritage going back two thousand years, to the very beginning of Christianity in the Holy Land, and even before that, ...to the very dawn of human civilization where it was born, ten thousand years ago, in the lands of the Middle East. Thousands of years of history witnessed the rise and fall of many civilizations and empires in and through and around the region -

Babylonian, Persian, Assyrian, Caanonite, Phoenician, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Arab, French, English and lesser-known others. Excavations in Beirut, rebuilding after the recent civil war, unearthed seventeen distinct layers of settlement and Beirut is a relatively young city compared to others in the region, including Tyre, the ancient Phoenician port and city-state. Damascus in Syria, the center of advanced culture for hundreds of years, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world at five thousand years old, is only half as old as the region itself.

From this ancient Levant that had heard the sounds of many languages, had been the prize of so many armies, a region of so much grandeur as well as many conflicts, whose glory was well past and economy largely spent, they came at first in a trickle, to the new lands of North America for a better life, a fresh start. For people rooted in an ancient and rich heritage, arriving in the very young land of Canada, of Quebec, to such a completely different climate, social as well as atmospheric, the challenge of carving out a new life in a land so very different from their own was enormous. Undaunted, they set about the task quickly with determination and a moral strength that came from their wellhead of Eastern Orthodox faith.

The earliest "Syrian" immigrant arrived in Canada in 1882, landing in Montreal. Ibrahim Bounader, a 19-year-old youth from Zahle in Lebanon, is believed to have been of the Melchite Catholic Faith. Three years later, other members of his family joined him and by 1901, Canada counted among its population some two thousand "Arabs". Virtually all of them were Lebanese-Syrian: Orthodox, Melchite, and Maronite Christians and

Muslim. Most, by far, settled in Montreal. The stream continued in the early 1900's with the annual number of Lebanese -Syrian Orthodox arrivals estimated at about 75 to 350 immigrants a year, and in some years before World War Two, about a thousand a year. The great majority were Christians and over a third of those were Orthodox.

In the very early years, there was of course no Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox Church or established community from which to draw for help and sustenance. The first immigrants were more or less on their own. But once established, earning enough money and having decided to stay, they sent for other members of their families from the villages and cities in Lebanon and Syria that they had left behind. The immigrants in Montreal and Trois-Rivieres (which was also a port of entry), among them, those who later moved to other places - Shawinigan Falls, Grandmere, the Lac St Jean region - came mainly from Rashaya el Wadi, Rashaya el Foukhar, Shibha, Zahle, Ain Hirsha, and Kfar Meshki, all of them neighbouring towns and villages in southern Lebanon and Damascus, Syria, only a very short distance away.

They came by way of chain migration, each family sending for more of their members in the "old country" as they were able to financially, in a continuous chain, until most if not all had been brought to their new land. It was a pattern followed by Syrian and Lebanese emigrants throughout North America and for that matter, everywhere else in the world. In this way, by chain migration, the original Lebanese-Syrian communities in Montreal and Trois-Rivieres came from the same neighbouring villages and towns in the old country. Many knew each other, many families were related. The trickle

became a small stream, though never more than a small stream in the early years.

David Weale, in his book "A Stream Out of Lebanon: An Introduction to the Coming of Syrian-Lebanese Emigrants to Prince Edward Island", writes:

"Consider the phenomenon of "chain migration" in terms of a single Lebanese village. At first, just a handful left, but wherever they landed, they were soon filled with longing for others to come join them. Often the merits of their new situation were exaggerated. It was difficult not to fall into that temptation, for it served the double purpose of justifying their decision to leave, while making it more attractive for relatives and friends to join them. In this way, a few more would be drawn away, and in some cases it was not long before such a tide of people was flowing that it seemed as though everyone would leave. After all, departure from one's native land was no longer exile when there were comrades and family members beckoning from the new place of settlement."

The first generations, in recounting their stories of why they had left the "old country", to their children and grand-children, told of persecution and even massacres of Christians. Massacres did occur in Syria in 1860, but several historians have questioned whether, in fact, these events were the prime motivation for the emigration to North America that began twenty years later. Several other reasons have been advanced, among them, a desire to practise and live their religion openly and freely and poor economic conditions.

Certainly, the fear of persecution, whether real or perceived, appears to have impelled Orthodox Christians in Syria to a life of withdrawal in order to avoid attracting attention to themselves. It had been so in varying degrees in different places almost throughout the hundreds of years of Ottoman rule. Though many Christian enclaves were granted limited local autonomy, nevertheless, many felt they were second-class citizens in a stifling political atmosphere. The massacres of 1860 confirmed their worst fears. More than twenty years later, the memories were still vivid through the recounting and feelings of insecurity were very real. They saw North America as an opportunity to live their lives and their religion freely and to better their economic status.

- The Church as the Center -

Christians, Muslims and Jews had co-existed in the Middle East for many centuries, peacefully for the most part. Each of these communities were deeply rooted in their Faith which, after all, had their very beginnings there centuries upon centuries ago, well-steeped in Middle Eastern mysticism. Their Faith was at the center of their lives and shaped their cultural distinctiveness.

So it was with the Eastern Orthodox Christians, perhaps even more so, given the importance of mysticism in the history of the Byzantine Orthodox church, and the "minority within a Christian minority" situation of the Orthodox in the Middle East. Be that as it may, the early Lebanese-Syrian immigrants in Canada, in Montreal, carrying their traditions with them, were

deeply rooted in their religion and ardently cherished their church.

A study of the Syrian-Lebanese in the United States by Philip and Joseph Kayal underline the importance they attached to their religion. They write:

"A Syrian's religious identification is so intense that he is the proverbial man without a country. His patriotism and group identification is based on love of family and religion. For all practical purposes, his family and church take the place of the state for him. In both Syria and Lebanon, religion is the practical equivalent of nationality..."

When the early immigrants arrived, their first preoccupation was to find means by which to earn money. Several years and a number of whole family immigrants later, the second step was to form a group leading to the establishment of a church which would be central to their community and give it social and cultural cohesion as well as religious expression.

IV. The Pioneers of the Early Community

- The Background -

The early Lebanese-Syrian immigrants in Montreal, as was the case for their counterparts elsewhere in North America, had practically no money, spoke hardly any English or French, and for the most part, had little formal education. But education is not only acquired from book-learning and they were the beneficiaries of a civilization that had been at the cross-roads of the world for centuries and a people who had been the very earliest mariners to have traveled widely, sailing to and exploring the outer reaches of the ancient world. Knowledge about the world, about trade, about other places and peoples flowed to Phoenician ports and later to great trading centers such as Damascus and then, always by word of mouth, out to surrounding regions and their towns and villages, which were not far away. It was not of course the information age, but over the years, the decades, the centuries, even the millennia, many stories were told, information spread and knowledge gained even in the smallest of villages. It may not have been formal education,...but its recipients in that way, over time, acquired a level of knowledge of the world far more sophisticated than is generally supposed. That sophistication, however unpolished it may have been, as well as a dogged determination to succeed, served to overcome the huge obstacles these early pioneers faced.

- The Kishé -

Not having much usable training for the kind of work available, they turned to buying and selling small goods - peddling. For some, it was a natural occupation; not so natural for others. While trading and bargaining was a time-honoured and well-practised way of gaining benefice or goods in the old country, it was not everyone's occupation in earning a living. Some had made their living in other ways, such as coppersmithing, or blacksmithing, for example. Still, it is said that it is in the nature of the Lebanese-Syrian to trade and "make business". In any case, the "kishé" - peddling - though arduous and demanding of energy, had its merits. For one, small goods could be had for very little investment or even on consignment and for another, they preferred to work for themselves, with freedom of action to make of their business whatever they could. And so, many filled suitcases with whatever they could get - small items of clothing such as underwear, belts, hats, buttons, thread, needles, combs, brushes, washcloths, towels and went off trudging from door to door, first, in the city, and later, in the countryside, from farm to farm, even through deep snow in the freezing cold of winter. Those who came first did it entirely on their own. Those who came later had the advantage of a helping hand from their predecessors.

The early arrivals supported each other, especially among family and relatives and established entrepreneurial networks. All the studies, the literature and the stories on the era take particular note of their long hours of hard work. This ardour for work had as its goal, initially, to amass as much wealth as quickly as possible and, for some, return to the "old country". But with the

passage of time they decided to stay, sent for their families and continued to work hard. With the help of their wives, who were often instrumental to their success, they set a new objective: improve the standard of living for themselves and for their children.

The story is told about how one man, arriving at his brother's home in Montreal, said to him, "How can I go out and peddle these things. I can't speak English. I can't speak French. How am I going to sell if I can't speak to these people in their language." Immediately came the reply..."Look, you don't need to say much. All you have to do is knock on the door, open your suitcase, and say...Besoin quelque chose?...!"

Language may have been a barrier, but it was quickly overcome by gesture first, and then by learning key words and phrases - the words and phrases of commerce - in much the same way that their Phoenician forebears centuries past had "made business" with peoples of other languages across the seas. And business they did certainly make! Not surprisingly, they were good at it, including those who had worked at other occupations in the old country. They bought and sold more and bigger items, in ever bigger suitcases, going farther and farther afield, out to the edge of the city and beyond to the countryside. When the suitcases became too heavy and too many to handle, strapped over both shoulders and the back, and the distances too great to walk, they rented or purchased a horse and carriage to take more goods over greater distances, to farms in the countryside. They took the store to rural areas where there were no stores. The goods were not the only inventories. Of far greater

importance were their personal inventories of energy, enterprise and determination.

David Weale in his book on the Lebanese-Syrians in Prince Edward Island writes:

"Clearly the greatest reason for the extraordinary success of the Lebanese in establishing themselves here and elsewhere was their commercial genius; a genius, it might be added, which was nine parts hard work. Because of their know-how and application, they were able to gain an economic foothold... at a time when opportunities were very scarce.....The passing of the years and the success of the Lebanese have revealed just how great was that inventory of enterprise, energy and determination. During the era of pack peddlers, there were long periods of the year, particularly in the spring, when roads were impassable and travel was practically suspended. It was during these times that the peddler was a welcome sight. When it was difficult to get to the store, it was convenient to have the store come to them on the back of a peddler. Further, if the peddler did not have a particular item, it could be ordered and delivered the next trip."

It was much the same for Lebanese-Syrians everywhere in Canada, including Quebec. For some, financial success led to importing goods from abroad including fine hand-made linens and laces from Europe. Now become "traveling salesmen" (an improvement over "peddler"!) and wholesalers, they developed a network of wealthier clients, private individuals as well as retailers, from Halifax to Vancouver. Others set up import-wholesale establishments. Still others had earned enough money to open dry goods, textile and clothing stores

in Montreal, Trois-Rivières, and other smaller cities and towns where they had gone to do business - Shawinigan Falls, Grand'Mere, Ste Hyacinthe, Sherbrooke, Quebec City - even the smallest of villages such as Louiseville, on the road between Montreal and Trois-Rivieres, and the farthest reaches of the province - the Lac St Jean region. They worked long hours at the store, with the help of their wives and sons and daughters, behind the counters. Some developed manufacturing enterprises in textiles and clothing and developed popular, nationally recognized brand names. All of them, then and later, built highly successful concerns from humble beginnings. Still others started businesses in foodstuff imports that were sold widely under brand names that became household names in homes and restaurants throughout Montreal and Quebec.

There were also success stories of another kind. In a spirit of mutual aid and assistance, the first arrivals in the 1880's and 90's were helpful to those who came immediately after. They knew each other in the old country and those who came later found lodging and sustenance with friends or relatives in the new land, long enough to get started on their own. In turn, they lent a helping hand to those who came after them. Mutual aid and close cooperation was common in those early years. It was comforting and encouraging to a growing but still small community that had not yet sufficient numbers to put in place their own institutions.

V. Building a New Life

- Integrating in the New land -

In Montreal, it wasn't long before the early peddlers acquired a working knowledge of English, the main language of commerce. Their children, attending school, had become fluent in the language. Many learned some French as a third language, on the streets as well as in business and to some extent, in school. In the cities and towns outside the metropolis, French became their second language as they did business with French-Canadians. The early peddlers were appreciative of the friendly reception they usually received from French-Canadians who, they said, were not so prone to look down on them as were the English.

Baha Abu-Laban in his book on "The Arab Presence in Canada", writes:

"The early Arab immigrant peddlers found Quebec particularly attractive because, according to our older respondents, French-Canadians were seen as being kindlier, friendlier and less likely to display feelings of superiority than English-Canadians. One respondent, relating his experiences as a young Montreal peddler at the beginning of this century, spoke for many others like him when he reminisced: "I harbour nothing but gratitude and good feeling towards the French-Canadians. As a young peddler I recall many instances when I could not return home at the end of the day, either because of long distance from home or heavy snowfall. At that time, roads were not cleared of snow. I used to knock at the door of the closest

house and, by gesture, ask for accommodation for the night. At the time, I knew neither French nor English. In every case, accommodation was gladly provided".

Abu-Laban concludes that this positive feeling towards French-Canadians, together with Montreal's important position as a port city and commercial center, may explain why the Arab community in Quebec grew steadily in size and importance.

The feeling was often reciprocal. Though some French as well as English Canadians found the Syrian-Lebanese and their customs somewhat strange, sometimes giving offensive expression to their thoughts, among most there was little overt discrimination. The immigrants knew how to "get along". Accommodation to many different empires and peoples was part of their long history.

Many business relationships evolved into affectionate friendships. Many of the Syrian-Lebanese storekeepers in the small towns would earn the gratitude and friendship of their customers by putting off payment until they had the money. Some developed close relationships with prominent French-Canadian families who found the Syrian-Lebanese to be warm people as well as hard-working.

The story is told of how one woman, Mariam Courey, a widow, came to Trois-Rivieres from Lebanon, alone, with two sons. A pioneer among women, a strong woman, as many were among those early Syrian-Lebanese, she stayed with her two nephews at first, buying and selling goods in the dead of winter. Eventually, she took on maids' work with one of Quebec's prominent families - the

Duplessis family. Her hard work, intelligence and beauty so impressed the Duplessis that she was made "nanny" to the children. One of them was Maurice, who became the Prime Minister of Quebec - one of the province's great historical figures. Later, having left the Duplessis family's employ and bought a residential-commercial building to support herself, she would travel to Quebec City, to the Parliament buildings and the office of Prime Minister Duplessis, where she would occasionally seek help. Duplessis, it is said, loved her almost as a mother. The door to the Prime Minister's Office was always opened to her no matter how busy he might have been. Duplessis would kiss Mariam on the cheek and then ask what he could do for her. The offers, followed by concrete action, were helpful on more than one occasion!

Wherever they settled in Quebec, outside Montreal as well as in the metropolis, the Syrian-Lebanese prospered and soon were quietly and almost invisibly, integrating into their French-Canadian surroundings. In Trois-Rivieres, the Syrian-Lebanese community was by far the largest ethnic group. Some families had migrated to the small nearby towns of Shawinigan Falls and Grand-Mere, where they had found business to be good and set up shops and stores. Though far away for the transport of the time, they maintained contact with the main Canadian Syrian-Lebanese community of Montreal often through the church ministry - weddings, Christenings, and funerals. Trilingual, they were as much at ease in English Montreal as they were in French in their home towns. For some, the contacts became fewer as they began attending Catholic church. There was no Orthodox church that had always been so intrinsically important in their lives and so essential in holding Syrian-Lebanese

Orthodox communities together. Those who kept contact with St George in Montreal and remained parishioners though they could not attend their church often, took special pleasure in receiving priests.

- Staying Close to the Roots -

Receiving priests was a common occurrence in Montreal and special occasion was always made of their visits. In towns and cities farther away, their visits were even greater occasion.... in direct proportion to the distance from the metropolis!

Jean Hanna Courey, in her early 90's, writing her memoirs, recalls the church in its early years (around 1914) and its importance to those outside Montreal. She was then living in Grand-Mere.

"Reverend Aftimios Ofeich (who in 1906 had assumed the pastorship of the first Syrian-Lebanese church building in Montreal, on Vitre street) came to our home in Grand-Mere to marry my sister, Mary, to Sam Aboud and at the same time, baptized my brother, Ted. I remember his high hat. Reverend Aftimios was tall and had a dark complexion. He arrived by train accompanied by quite a number of people. A wedding was to be enjoyed by all. No invitation was needed. The families were few in the towns of Grand-Mere, Shawinigan Falls and Three Rivers. Most would come for such an event. Montreal numbered more families but the journey was too far. To the delight of my father, we had visits from every priest who served St George Church and later on from St Nicholas church. We saw more of Reverend Aftimios who later became bishop, Father Abu-Hatab and Metropolitan Antony

Bashir, who would visit us. Both he and Father Abu-Hatab were a joy to entertain. Metropolitan Bashir always called before coming, asking to prepare such and such a dish. (He would say) Tell mother not to bother too much for me, but I have three men coming with me. On entering our home, my father would pick His Eminence's hand to kiss it but before he had a chance to lift it, Metropolitan Antony would kiss my father's cheek."

The priests were the purveyors of their Orthodox religion and its culture, and their visits, even if only occasional, served to keep its presence alive. They, too, were deeply devoted to their religion, as Jean Hanna Courey makes vividly clear in writing about her father:

"No one could shake my father's trust in God. He prayed with intense sincerity, full of reverence to God. He became transfigured by his belief. He prayed upon arising beside his bed, went downstairs and said morning prayers with mother before breakfast (and) late afternoon. He called them evening prayers and before going to bed and on Sunday morning, all of us with arms across one's chest. There would be at least six or more relatives and friends. It lasted one hour".

The inevitable process of integration had begun soon after the first immigrants had set foot in their new land. The individual mutual aid and cooperation in the early years had been sufficient to keep the Lebanese-Syrians together loosely. Growing numbers soon made it possible, at least in Montreal, to begin thinking about community organizations within which they could act together to preserve their culture and give expression to their religious devotion.

- Preserving The Culture Through The Church -

In 1896, after barely more than a decade in Canada, some members of the community formed a Syrian Orthodox Benevolent Society. It was created not only as an aid society to help arriving immigrants, the needy and the poor. It had another purpose - that of putting in place a church. The group sought and received the blessings of the Rt. Reverend Raphael Hawaweeny, sent to North America by the Patriarchate of Moscow, the only constituted Orthodox Church having jurisdiction over all of North America at the time.

The members of the society went to work immediately and three years later, in 1899, the first liturgy was performed in a private home (name unknown) by Father Ephraim Dibs. Now, their Church was a reality. It did not yet possess a building as a permanent place of worship. Church services were held in various private homes and rented halls, but by 1905, the society, with the leadership of Father George Mahfouz and the support of their community, had raised the funds necessary to purchase an old factory warehouse located at 270 Vitre street, near Viger. The warehouse was renovated and the church named: "St Nicholas Syrian Orthodox Church of Montreal" which later would be renamed St George Antiochian Orthodox Church. It was an important step in the community's determination to "keep the Faith", preserve its religious and cultural heritage, and form a larger family.

- The Church And The Community Family -

To the ordinary parishioner, the church is a place of worship - of Sunday services, of Christmas, Easter and other special religious celebration. It is a place where baptisms symbolize the entry of the newborn into the grace of God, marriages are consecrated and funerals performed. It is a place of prayer in community.

The church is all these things for the St George Antiochian Orthodox community..... and more....much more. It is a spiritual home. It is a physical home. It is the place where members see each other as part of an extended family, who pray together, interact together, laugh together, cry together, get together and take part in various social events and functions together, in varying degrees of participation. Most simply go to church for reverent prayer. The church as the House of God is perfect and that is all that matters.

Behind the scenes, however, certainly in administrative and organizational matters, things are not always in a state of perfection. The evolution and growth of churches as in any human endeavor is often accompanied by growing pains. The Antiochian Orthodox Church is no exception. Despite its long life, or perhaps because of it, the church has had more than its share of growing pains and trials and tribulations.

VI.

The Antiochian Church - From Old to New

- Old Struggle for Survival -

Shortly after its inception in Antioch, Syria, by the apostles Peter and Paul, the Antiochian Church - the very first Christian church - lost its primacy to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, a Greek city at the time and capital of the Byzantine Empire. With the passage of time and many political upheavals, the Antiochian Patriarchate itself came to be dominated by the Hellenes -the Greeks - who placed their own as Patriarchs of the Church of Antioch. Hundreds of years later, in the 1500's, at the time of Turkish Ottoman rule in the Mideast, the patriarchs of the ancient See of Antioch were still Greeks, originally from Constantinople (now Istanbul) and later selected from the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Syria had fallen under Ottoman rule and the Patriarchate of Antioch was transferred from Antioch to Damascus, in 1531. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Middle East was again in a state of political flux and then turmoil -turmoil that, again, directly affected the Antiochian Church.

Through all those hundreds of years, the Antiochian Orthodox Church had steadily lost place in its centrality to the lives of its people throughout the Middle East. Political authorities and other religious denominations time and again purposely set out to weaken the Church in order to spread their own sway and authority. Most if not all the patriarchates, over time, suffered loss of stature,

authority and influence. But the patriarchate of Antioch had suffered the most ...the victim of political intrigues and outside economic interests. As Metropolitan Antony Bashir wrote in the Archdiocese publication, "The Word" (Jan 1957) "The Middle East has been a battleground of ideas and armies since the dawn of time... The troubled history of the Church founded by the Apostles indicates the constant miracle implied by its survival".

In the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, Arab nationalism began to blossom throughout Syria. The Arabs, long under the arbitrary rule of others, began calling for the liberation of their patriarchate from alien domination. The cause of restoring the Patriarchate of Antioch to the Arabs was furthered by the presence in the Mideast of the Russian Consulate and the Russian Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society established in 1882. The Church of Russia saw herself as the protector of the Orthodox Arabs since 1774, when Moscow signed the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardji with Istanbul. The close relationship between the Russian and the Syrian Orthodox that had been evolving in the Mideast continued in North America.

- The New Old Church in North America -

Orthodoxy in North America began with the Russian mission to Kodiak, Alaska in 1794 and when Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867, the See was eventually transferred to New York, in 1905. The ties in the Mideast made it virtually inevitable that the Syrian Orthodox Church in the New World would come under the canonical protection of the Russian Church.

Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox immigrants had already founded communities in Montreal and somewhat earlier in New York. The larger New York community petitioned the Holy See of Russia, asking that a Lebanese-Syrian bishop, Archmandrite Raphael Hawaweeny, who was a professor of Arabic at the Academy of Kazan in Russia, be sent to serve the spiritual needs of the their community in the United States. Two other Lebanese-Syrian priests sent to the U.S. earlier had been unsuccessful, in the absence of full support at home and abroad. Hawaweeny managed to establish and lead a Syrian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in North America in 1892, under the existing Russian Orthodox Archdiocese.

Born in Beirut, educated in Syria, at Halki and in Russia, Hawaweeny was a charismatic and capable, authoritative leader who became an outstanding hierarch of the Antiochian Church. Among his important contributions was the translation of a number of liturgical texts from Arabic to English for the North American Church. When he died in 1915, he had succeeded in laying a solid foundation for the Syrian Orthodox Church in North America, having planted and nurtured the Antiochian presence, still under the Russian Church. He had also, in 1898, appointed Father Ephrem Dibs as the first priest of the Montreal community, at its behest.

- Dissent and Division -

Shortly before the death of Hawaweeny, Metropolitan Germanos Shehadi arrived at the Syrian Mission on a fundraising tour. His message,

however, deepened a controversy that had already begun. He supported and encouraged moves to sever ties with the Russian Orthodox authority in North America in favour of joining the Church of Antioch, an idea that had already taken root within the more nationalistic circles of the Syrian-Lebanese community, including that in Montreal. The division seems to have been worse in Montreal because of quarrels between families of different villages in Lebanon and factional disputes between those with a village mind set and those with a wider perspective.

The Montreal community also had difficulties in finding consensus on a priest. Father Dibs had left the parish in 1900 on being elected Bishop of Syria. In 1902, Archmandrite Meletios Karoum, who had replaced Father Dibs, was persuaded to accept an assignment in New York, to make room at St George, it seems, for Father George Mahfouz. The Patriarchate in Damascus had sent him mindful that the majority of the Montreal flock at the time was from Rashaya, and had (likely) made their preferences clearly known!

Services were held in Father Mahfouz' home. No permanent place of worship had yet been established. He returned to Damascus after two years and came back to Montreal in the following year, in 1905, when a permanent place of worship was found at last - an abandoned factory on Vitre street in Old Montreal. It was originally called St Nicholas Orthodox Church - later to be renamed St George.

The small community was determined to have its Church and the drive was on for funds to renovate the old factory. Father Mahfouz himself

traveled to towns in Northern Ontario, by train, seeking donations. It took some time before collecting sufficient funds for the renovations necessary to transform the building into some semblance of a Church. Meanwhile, Father Mahfouz returned again to Damascus, in 1908.

The Montreal parish had by that time become acquainted with another priest, Archmandrite Aftimios Ofeish. He had arrived in New York, the headquarters of the Syrian Orthodox Mission, earlier and was sent to Montreal to mediate ongoing disputes. His success in doing so and restoring harmony increased his stature and popularity. As a result, he was asked to stay on in Montreal as pastor. The peace, though, proved to be only temporary. Disagreements soon flared again over which See to follow - Russia or Antioch. That additional and larger issue had not been settled, nor would it be for some years to come.

The differences had led to sharp division within the Syrian Orthodox Benevolent Aid Society, splitting it into two groups, and a second Syrian Orthodox Benevolent Aid Society was formed. Each established its own church, with the same name, St Nicholas - the one in the factory building on Vitre street later to be renamed St George and the other, later, in a hall on Notre Dame East, in 1908. The Vitre street church with the majority of the community remained within the Russian fold, while the Notre Dame street church gave its allegiance to Antioch. Neither church, however, had a charter of incorporation, which was necessary to be officially recognized as a permanent church and to buy and own property. However, both could not legally incorporate under the same name. The issue exacerbated existing differences and was finally

brought to court. The practised judge, who it was said, "had the wisdom of Solomon", found a compromise solution. Both groups could name their respective churches after St Nicholas, with a slight change, and the charters were granted in 1910. One church was named St Nicholas Syrian Greek Orthodox Church of Montreal - Charter 99 - (now St George Antiochian Orthodox Church) and the other, the Syrian Greek Orthodox Church of St Nicholas of Canada - Charter 100 - (Now St Nicholas Syrian Greek Orthodox Church). The compromise, however wise it was, only settled the name debate temporarily, and did nothing to soften the sharp lines drawn between the two churches in what became known as the "Russy-Antacky debate".

The dispute over the names resumed until finally, in 1939, Archbishop Antony Bashir persuaded the present-day St George church to adopt the name of the patron Saint of Syria.

- Difficult Decisions -

The "Russy-Antacky" debate that was so divisive for the Montreal community had also been fractious for all Syrian-Lebanese communities throughout North America.

In essence, the lines were drawn between those who felt a certain gratitude to the Russian Church for having supported their efforts to establish local churches in the new world while allowing a great deal of local autonomy and those who felt their loyalties should be placed instead with what they considered to be their own national church, the Antiochian Church and better able to

understand and relate to the Syrian-Lebanese community in North America.

The Russies argued that their de facto autonomy within the Russian fold allowed greater freedom of action to run their own affairs. Only under the Russian Church would they have that precious freedom. Some on that side of the debate wanted to go even further - a completely independent North American Church. Among the proponents and leaders of that view was Bishop Ofeish of Montreal's Vitre street parish. Montreal's ranking then as a senior parish established in North America was second only to that of New York.

The Antackies believed the Antiochian See would be more sensitive to their needs and circumstances - after all - they were their own people. The Russies however, feared a more direct control, especially since Antioch, supported by growing nationalistic sentiments in the old world, was striving to regain its long-lost stature and authority in order to revive and give new strength to Orthodoxy in the Mideast.

These were powerful arguments, on both sides, in a debate that had much gravity and expressed views of momentous consequence for the future. Little wonder that passions were high, sometimes flaming.

The circumstances for both the Russian and the Antiochian Churches during the period made the debate even more salient than it might have been ordinarily. The Russian Church was weakening with the decline and eventual fall of the Czars, the political turmoil that followed, and the takeover by the Bolsheviks, who then attempted and largely

succeeded in dismantling its power and influence. The Church, preoccupied with its very survival, allowed increasing autonomy for the Syrian Orthodox in North America, while trying to maintain the flow of financial contributions from local churches. The Church of Antioch, meanwhile, was gaining strength for reasons mentioned before and greater authority. Its efforts were bearing fruit and it was felt, necessary to the survival and preservation of Mideast Orthodoxy together with its culture. Its future in North America depended in part on its administrative as well as religious authority.

The times, in both the old and the new worlds, were going through upheaval; the Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox of North America were right in the middle of it and Montreal was close to its very center.

Right-Reverend Aftimios Ofeish, now the pastor of the Vitre street church, had espoused the Russy view but was soon convinced that nothing short of outright independence was necessary for the continued growth of the North American Church. In his later years as Archbishop, he became bitterly disappointed and withdrew from church affairs when the Diocese took a different direction. Nevertheless, he is remembered for his humanitarian work and his generosity.

Many priests - Elias Fragy, Agabius Glam, Abraham Zein, Solomon Boulos, George Kattouf, - came and went at St George throughout all the years of agonizing debate. Archmandrite Emmanuel Abou-Hatab who became Bishop of Montreal in 1927 when the city was still a major hub in the Diocese, stood out as a leader just as Bishop Ofeish had

stood out before. He was just as heavily involved in the Russy-Antacky controversy.

By that time, the Russian Church was severely weakened with its own problems and its presence in North America was fading. Under the circumstances, it was inevitable that the Russies within the Syrian-Lebanese community would come around to the Antacky view. Abou-Hatab was working in that direction, laying the groundwork for the transfer of the Syrian Orthodox Mission in North America to the Patriarchate of Antioch. But five more pastors would take up the stewardship at St George - Joseph Ghiz, Solomon Merhige, Adbullah Kouri, Constantine Abou-Adal, Solomon Fernini - before the debate was more or less resolved.

In 1934, the momentous change was made. Locally, St George of Montreal fell into step. Under the guidance of its next pastor, Father Makarios Moore, St George chose to be placed under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Antioch and to pledge allegiance to Patriarch Alexander III. The vote of the parishioners was unanimous at a special, general meeting of the Vitre street church, held on September 14th. Relations with Moscow were officially severed. So solemn was the occasion that at the conclusion of the meeting, the Board of Trustees resigned "en masse" and requested that an election for a new board be held by secret ballot. Its first act was to send a message to the Patriarch of Antioch, to inform him of their obedience and loyalty.

When it seemed that the Great Debate had been resolved and tensions defused in the Montreal community, events decided otherwise. The Church

lost all its North American leaders who had been at the center of the debate, precisely at that time, within two years, in 1933 and 1934, including Archbishop Abou-Assaly. He had been the first Antiochian hierarch in North America to be elected according to canonical procedures.

Elections were held for a new leader of the North American Church. The leading clerics to succeed Abou-Assaly were Antony Bashir and Samuel David. On November 19, 1935, Archmandrite Antony Bashir was elected and soon after, consecrated as Metropolitan of New York and All North America. St George Church of Montreal had been one of his supporters. The St Nicholas Church in Montreal was among those which had voted for David. While the Russy-Antacky debate appeared to have been settled, the division continued, both in Montreal and within all of the Archdiocese. In a move to appease the David camp, the Archdiocese was virtually split, with David consecrated as Metropolitan of Toledo and Its Dependencies.

If the previous thirty years was a time of division, the next thirty began as a time of confusion. But Antony Bashir would become the leading figure on the march toward a final and clear resolution as the Church in North America, under his powerful leadership, began another stage in its history.

VII.

The End of an Era - The Beginning of a New

- A New Building - A New Archbishop -

Since 1905 when the Vitre street church had opened its doors in a factory warehouse, the parish continued to grow with new arrivals and second generations of expanding families until it became obvious that a more spacious place of worship would have to be found. Parish members, now becoming more affluent, had begun the move to better quarters, to the Jean Talon district. Intermittent discussions were held with the Notre Dame street parish in attempts at reconciliation and merger before deciding on a new building.

For a time in the 1930's, it seemed as though a consensus might be found. There was no ill will between the two parishes nor differences in their Faith and its practise.... simply differences in views and perceptions on local administrative matters including how best to use funds earmarked for aid. That had been one of the major contentious issues leading to the split shortly after the Syrian Orthodox Benevolent Society was formed. The other major issue - the Russy-Antacky dispute - had subsided to some extent by the early 1930's. However, passions flared again during the leadership elections of 1935, and it soon became clear that the merger talks would not succeed.

For many members of either parish, these differences were no barriers to good relations. Indeed, many frequented both churches, or even

switched from one to the other simply on the basis of neighbouring proximity. Many St. George parishioners today remember going to the Notre Dame street church because it was closer to home and playing with the children of its pastor, Father Zabatany, at his house. They also remember that the Vitre street church had become rather cramped!

It was indeed a small building, by all accounts. But to many, it was cozy and quaint, with beautiful icons at the front and straight-back wood benches.. Some say it was so small that it seemed more the size of a house rather than that of the warehouse it had once been. The parish had certainly outgrown the little church.

The Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox community as a whole in Montreal was not large enough to warrant the erection of two new churches. But since the merger talks had broken down, the Vitre street Church Commission (equivalent to the Board of Trustees) in 1936 decided to forge ahead. On November 17, members of the Commission held a meeting at a place called "Peter's Hall" on St Denis street to discuss and study the possibilities of building a new church in the northern part of Montreal. There, the decision was made to go ahead and to press the idea at a general assembly meeting of parishioners. One week later, the general assembly meeting was held at the same place and a building committee formed.

The original members of that committee were Camille Courey, Najeeb Lawand, Tom Rossy, Moussa Souaid, Fahad Tabah, Nasseeb Motter, Azar Makarous, George Zakaib and Zeiden Hanna. Only two days later, the committee met for the first time. The process had been set in motion. For the next

three years, the building committee and Father Moore, the pastor, would work with single-minded determination towards the realization of a dream for a new and beautiful church.

- Bringing Reality to the Dream -

The first step was of course to raise the necessary funds. That in itself would be difficult. The Great Depression had set in. These were hard times. The church treasury contained only one-thousand four-hundred dollars. The weekly Sunday collections did not exceed a total of twenty dollars! An average weekly wage was seven or eight dollars...for a fifty to sixty hour week! Two more years passed before discussions and planning began to bear fruit. Then, the process picked up apace, and moved swiftly.

The sale of the old church building was arranged and quickly completed within a matter of weeks in January 1938. A "Special General Meeting" was held at the Vitre street church where the congregation accepted an offer of six thousand dollars for the building with one thousand dollars cash down and the remaining five thousand dollars to be paid in 25 consecutive installments of two hundred dollars each. The next month, the Commission members decided that funds for the new church would be gathered from all parishioners within two months. That was the deadline for the beginning of construction for the new church.

In the interim, the composition of the Building Committee chosen to manage the project had changed. Camille Courey was named President of the committee and Moussa Souaid, the Secretary.

The other members were Salim Rossy (cashier), Nicholas Zigayer (cashier), Tom Rossy, Najeeb Lawand, Joseph Shamie and Khairallah Habib. In early spring, the committee gave the go-ahead to Najeeb Lawand to act as representative and arrange for the purchase of the land and the contracts for construction and decoration of the church. Within a week, Camille Courey was given authority to sign the agreement to purchase a lot at 555-575 Jean Talon for the sum of eight-thousand-four hundred dollars and to sign a contract with a builder for forty-two-thousand-nine-hundred-and-fifty dollars.

A parcel of land had been bought previously on Chambord street. There were a few heated discussions on the practicality of the location before the decision was taken to sell the lot in favour of the Jean Talon location. There were also sharp exchanges on the wisdom of buying land that had come up for sale behind the Jean Talon street location, for a parking lot. The building committee, strapped for cash, opted to let it go. George Courey, not a member of the committee at that time but close to it as a member of the Board of Trustees (so renamed from The Commission), foreseeing the need for the space, acted on his own and purchased the lot. It would prove to be a wise move. Later, after much argument, the committee accepted the land and compensated him for it.

At a Committee meeting in July, 1939, final arrangements were made for construction to begin. The general contractor was to be J.J. O'Shea & Co. of Montreal with plans and specifications prepared by Raoul Gariepy and Payette and Crevier, architects. The final price for construction of the church building was set at forty-six thousand dollars.

The church treasury was far short of the total amount, even with the sale of the Vitre street building and the sale of the land on Chambord. But nothing would defer the dream; no stone would be left unturned. Many of those on the building committee had mounted successful enterprises and were financially secure. They had worked hard and long hours to achieve that position. In negotiations for a bank mortgage, eight men on the committee, Camille Courey, Najeeb Lawand, Moussa Souaid, Nicholas Zigayer, Tom Rossy, Salim Rossy, Joseph Shamie and Kairallah Habib personally guaranteed the loan with their signatures - the concluding act of faith in a long and trying process over three years that also guaranteed that the church would indeed be built.

Raoul Gariepy, however, had died in the interim but his architectural plans were retained. It fell upon a St George parishioner, Toufic (Theo) Bouziane, to succeed Gariepy and oversee the construction according to those plans. He had been working for the firm as a draftsman. Bouziane studied drafting at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal and though not a full-fledged architect, he was as capable as any architect and certainly more keenly interested.

Father Moore, meanwhile, had left the parish in November, 1938 to serve at the Archdiocese Cathedral of St Nicholas in New York City. Father Basil Sidawee had replaced him.

- Archbishop Bashir Backs a Bold Move -

Gariepy had designed and built several theatres in Montreal, including the Rialto on Parc avenue, one among the Confederation Amusements theatre chain. Najeeb Lawand was a major Confederation shareholder and was familiar with Gariepy's work. The interior of the Rialto was the work of the Maltese artist, Emmanuel Briffa. In control of the building project, Lawand chose them for the church. The choice of Briffa for a church was avant-garde, a bold move for the times. It proved to be a brilliant choice, though at the time, there were raised eyebrows within the Building Committee, and some lively arguments!

As the interior work progressed under Briffa's hand, reservation occasionally became opposition on some elements. That opposition, limited as it was, quickly dissipated when Lawand and Bouziane received the support of Archbishop Antony Bashir himself. Bashir had taken a keen interest in the construction of the church, especially its interior decoration. It was different, unusual, even unconventional in its mix of Renaissance and art-deco style combined with Byzantine. But Bashir was a strong man of independent thinking and unafraid of the unusual, of the unconventional or of the criticism that it might provoke. Briffa's art, though more closely associated with theatres and their purpose of entertainment, seemed to intrigue the far-sighted Archbishop. Evidently, the style and quality of Briffa's art caught Bashir's sharp eye for aesthetics.

Lawand and Bouziane traveled to the Archdiocese headquarters in New York apparently to seek Bashir's support for their side in

disagreements on the interior. They received unequivocal approval and came back to Montreal with renewed confidence that Briffa's artistic freedom would be left unfettered.

- The Art of Emmanuel Briffa -

Who was this man who designed and decorated theatres to have been chosen to do the interior of the new St George Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox Church? Why a theatre designer? How did it come about?

Few of the parishioners at St George knew much, until recently, about the church interior. It was sufficient to know that it was beautiful, that it was different, that it was special. Only after the decision was made to renovate the church in the early 1990's did it become generally known that the church interior was the work of Emmanuel Briffa and that Briffa had been a theatre designer and decorator of note both in Canada and the United States.

Confirmation of his professional status and background came in 1997, in a letter by art historian Philip Dombowsky of Concordia University in Montreal to St George's pastor, Father Antony Gabriel. In it, Dombowsky says the interior design of the church "is important given that it is the only surviving religious work by Briffa, a designer better known for his numerous cinema interiors in Montreal and other cities in Canada." Dombowski goes on to say "the paintings on the iconostas and the upper walls in particular offer a rare glimpse of his skill as a muralist".

Briffa's work at St George apparently was brought to Dombowski's attention by Joffre Gendron in 1990. Gendron was an assistant to Briffa for twenty years and took part in the work at St George. Once the exceptional nature of the work was confirmed, the decision was made to preserve and restore the original interior with financial aid from both the Quebec provincial and the Canadian government.

Professor Dombowski is an authority on Briffa's work and his background. In an article in *The Journal of the Theatre Historical Society* (Vol 28 no. 3) he says that Briffa, born in Malta in 1875, studied art at the Academy of Santa Lucia in Naples where he was a medallist and the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. He came from an artistic family. His father was a furniture-maker in Malta and Emmanuel's two brothers were artists. He left Malta in 1912 for the United States where he worked as designer and decorator for many buildings and soon specialized in theatre decor for which he became well-known in cities across the U.S.

By the time he arrived in Montreal in the 1920's, Briffa's success in what was called "atmospheric" decors led to commissions for theatres across Canada. One of them was the Rialto on Park Avenue in Montreal. It was the most luxurious neighbourhood movie house built in the city up to that time, in 1924. The Rialto "featured a heavily ornamented exterior...modeled after the Paris Opera and an interior finished in the style of Louis XIV." Dombowsky says Briffa also decorated the Empress in Montreal, in a "magnificent" Egyptian style.

Among Briffa's other noteworthy works are the West Wing of the White House in the United States capital and the Library of the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa.

Briffa's credits were impressive and his reputation considerable when Najeeb Lawand approached him sometime after the Building Committee was formed. As a major shareholder in the Confederation theatre chain, he probably knew Briffa and in any case, was familiar with his work. Lawand felt Briffa was the man for the work of the church and the "Maltese Michelangelo" got the commission.

VIII.

Building a New Church

- Construction and Anticipation -

The sod was turned and the construction machinery went to work in the summer of 1939. It was a time of anxious expectations for all members of the parish, particularly for the members of the building committee. They visited the construction site often, to make sure the plans and specifications they had agreed to were being followed to the last detail. It was too important to be left to the vagaries and whims of the workmen. The funds were hard come by, and they took their "supervisory" role seriously. Members of the Building Committee were constantly at the site, checking progress and making sure that construction materials were not left unprotected from vandals and robbers.

The church began to rise. The foundations were poured, the bricks and stones were laid, brick by brick, stone by stone, until the towers were capped with their crosses and the dome finally in place.

Then, Briffa and his men went to work. The interior became a beehive of activity with Briffa and his assistants busy on the scaffolds, plastering and painting the walls and ceilings, composing and putting together the iconostasis, creating the iconostasis oils and the murals.

The building committee met regularly to review the work accomplished, discuss the next stage, and authorize payments according to the schedule. There were a thousand details to attend

to. It was a time now of excited anticipation as the various elements of the design drew together, toward completion.

In April, 1940, the church almost completed, the committee turned its attention to promises of donations by parishioners of items such as chandeliers and silverware for church services and to purchases of whatever other small items were necessary.

The committee meeting also began preparations for the inauguration. The secretary was requested to write to Archbishop Bashir, asking him for "a convenient Sunday to inaugurate the church". At the twelfth meeting of the committee, on the ninth of May, 1940, the final payments for Briffa and the construction company for work done were authorized. Construction and decoration were finished. The church was done.

The dream, finally, had become reality. The total cost was well over fifty thousand dollars...huge at the time.

It would be difficult for future and younger generations to truly understand the depth of the commitment and the steadfast conviction that drove the building committee members to the realization of that dream. Their old-world total devotion to their religion and their church was ingrained. It was in their everyday lives. When the church was completed, they and the families they represented must have been supremely proud. So, too, was Father Makarios Moore, who had been among the originators of the dream and one of its staunchest advocates and supporters.

- The Inauguration -

St George was opened for worship in the summer of 1940 but it would be yet a few more months before the official inauguration. Parishioners, in the meantime, came to services in admiration of their new church. They had never seen anything quite so beautiful - it was the talk of the community.

Preparations for the inauguration continued. Invitations were sent out to high-ranking Archdiocese leaders - Bishops and Archbishops - pastors and leaders of other Orthodox parishes, leading clergy of other denominations, dignitaries and VIP's from Montreal, New York, Ottawa, Toronto as well as faithful from Trois-Rivieres, Shawinigan, Grand-Mere, St. Hyacinthe, Sorel, Sherbrooke and other places. Arrangements were made for celebrations to be held in the church basement immediately following the inaugural service.

Then, the day was at hand: September 29, 1940.

Michael Darwish, a noted poet of the day and member of St George parish, reported on the event for the Samir newspaper. In Arabic, he wrote:

"In the dawn of that historical day, and it was a clear and beautiful day, people came individually and in groups as if they were groups of pilgrims, to the church that was decorated in flags and on its closed doors there were ribbons of silk. A wonderful cortege was outside and a religious procession started around the beautiful church. The Most Reverend Pastor of the parish and the

clergymen composed of Archmandrite Basilios Sidawi, Archmandrite Michael Khaluf, V.Rev. Makarios Moore, (Reverend Moore had been elevated to the rank of Archpriest and was back in Montreal for the inauguration by special invitation), the pastor of St Nicholas Church in Montreal Economos Michael Zarbatany and the Protosyngelos Isaiah Juri were walking and chanting prayers - behind them the worshippers holding candles. The voices of chanters were mixed with the fragrant perfume of incense. When His Eminence (Archbishop Antony Bashir) reached the great door, there he stood and exclaimed: "Oh Earthly Doors,... Open, so the King of Glory may enter". Then, the silk ribbons were cut and the doors opened."

"Inside," Darwish reports, "the liturgy was "even more sublime and dignified by the voices of the chanters". Archbishop Bashir's sermon, in Arabic and English, was "wonderful", on the theme "What good is it for a man if he wins the whole world and loses himself".

After the sermon, unexpectedly, Archbishop Bashir ordered that the doors be kept closed and urged those attending to donate generously to help pay off the remaining loan on the church, adding that the inauguration ceremony of the church was like Christening a child. Immediately, someone pledged one hundred dollars and others followed suit!

Later, the church basement hall was vibrant with celebration, completely full. Tables had been set up closely together in long rows to accommodate as many people as could be jammed into the limited space. Food and drinks were served. Every seat on every table was occupied. Darwish writes, still in

Arabic, "after so many years far apart, the relatives met their relatives and friends met their friends in Montreal". Among the guests was Emmanuel Briffa.

Darwish says the festivities carried well on, later, at parishioners' homes. Wherever there was a member of the parish, he noted, there was "a sign of joy on his face".

It was no doubt the greatest day in the history of St George.

IX. A Democratic Church

- The Commission, The Board and The Council -

The mutual encouragement and support given to each other by the laity - the Board of Trustees - and the clergy, in this case, Father Moore, was important in nursing the dream of a new church to reality. But it was not only the clergy nor the Church that had the decision-making power or held authority in building it. In fact, the Archbishop had supported a minority within the board that, looking to the future, suggested a larger building. Bashir's view on that occasion was not enough to convince the majority in favour of building bigger. The majority on the Board felt that the parish was paying the bills, so the parish should have the say. It was their church! In later years and in hindsight, well after the Church was built, the wisdom of the Archbishop's plea and his foresight became clearly evident.

Unlike most other Christian denominations, the Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox Church was limited to the canonical sphere in its exercise of hierarchal authority on local church affairs. To be sure, the Church hierarchs had considerable influence in such important matters as building a church. Their knowledge and guidance was necessary and often sought. That kind of authority was accepted. But in managing local church administration, the Board of Trustees and especially the earlier Commission was always protective of its freedom of action and the democratic process, as has been the laity everywhere in the North American Church.

A highly-developed sense of rugged individualism in the Lebanese-Syrian community had early on drawn a line of jurisdiction between the laity and the clergy. Local Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox churches, including St George in Montreal, more or less ran their own administrative affairs while leaving religious affairs to the clergy - more or less because much depended on the personal popularity of the pastor and the personalities of members of the board at any given time.

Sometimes the line between administrative and religious wasn't clear and conflicts arose. The clergy and the laity were often at odds. Compromise was difficult, sensitivities were easily offended and positions and opinions hardened even among the governing laity itself. Heated discussions at Commission and Board meetings were known to occur in those circumstances! In the end, the majority ruled. Such was the democratic process at St George.

In the early years, the outcome on any issue depended in large part on the force of personalities within the Commission. Strongly held convictions often left little room for compromise. Conflicts or not, however, the Commission always guarded its power of decision-making and exercised its claimed prerogatives, even in making its displeasure regarding the clergy known to the hierarchy if need be! Nevertheless, deference was given to Archbishop Bashir during that period, based on respect of his considerable leadership qualities.

In recent times, the Parish Council (so renamed from the Board of Trustees) and the clergy have tended to act more in concert and differences

are far less strained, perhaps because of greater knowledge of and respect for parliamentary rules of procedure, or perhaps because of a greater importance placed on consensus building and harmony over rugged individualism to achieve goals. The Church itself has gained strength and authority largely through the work of forceful leaders on the local as well as the Archdiocese level. But the democratic process that has characterized the workings of the Antiochian church, particularly on the local level has remained.

Within that context, however, the personalities and persuasive abilities of pastors and hierarchs in large part determine initiatives and directions. Some have had more, or less, influence than others. But the final word is still with the majority vote of the laity together with the pastor.

- The Clergy and the Parishioners -

The relationship between the clergy and parishioners not involved in church administration has always been on another footing. From the very beginning, parishioners felt and displayed an abiding reverence toward their priests and what they represented as "Men of God". The mere presence of the priest commanded deference. Some of the elders in the parish remember bowing their heads and kissing the priest's hand at his approach. The relationship was that of father to children and children to father.

That kind of reverence today is usually reserved for Archbishops and Patriarchs. Relationships between the parish priest and parishioners are on a more familiar basis. The awe

implied in the reverence formerly displayed gradually has made way to the familiarity and in many cases, the greater affection of a more equal rapport. But again...much depends on personalities.

X.

The Modern Church Under Archbishop Bashir

- A Giant Among Men -

No clergy has had a more imposing presence in recent times in the Antiochian Church and community in North America than the charismatic Archbishop, Antony Bashir. Parishioners at St George still today speak of him in awe and admiration. Archpriest Antony Gabriel, in a paper on Bashir's legacy, states "...he remains one of the towering figures of the Antiochian Orthodox Church in the twentieth century....The shadow of Antony Bashir cast itself over a major period of our history."

Indeed, he was a giant among men. Yet, with all his personal popularity and power, Archbishop Bashir always had an abiding respect for his peoples' and the Church's love of freedom and democracy. He was also himself a rugged individualist who liked to get things done quickly and efficiently, even if it stirred some controversy.

His own words, spoken to Archpriest Antony Gabriel, provide insight into his complex yet simple personality. Asked about the influences that led to his vocation, Bashir replied: "First, I studied theology at the Balamand Seminary and I became disillusioned with the higher clergy, so I studied law. Then I discovered that lawyers were worse and it would be in the Church that I could do the most good."

Many at St George remember his incomparable, moving oratory. They also remember his sharp intelligence, wisdom and great wit. The clergy remember his pragmatism, often displayed by comments such as those he made to seminarians once; that they had to be "God's salesmen", with the ability to sell religion to the parishioners as one would sell plots of land! "When there is a will, there is a way" became almost his motto.

Among Bashir's accomplishments was to organize a system of Archdiocese conventions. He put in place the Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization (SOYO) and expanded it to the whole Archdiocese. It became hugely successful in fulfilling its prime objective of knitting together the fragmented youth groups in Canada and the United States. The SOYO conventions were widely attended and lent fresh energy to local parishes. He encouraged and stimulated the organization of local and regional choirs; helped establish Sunday Schools; published and expanded the Archdiocesan publication, "The Word", as "Editor-in-Chief; created the "SOYO Digest"; published choir books and liturgical books in English; forged local and national consensus on constitutions and by-laws to govern the constituencies; issued a Priest's Guide which served to modernize archaic traditions foreign to North Americans; set up seminary scholarships; created organizations to address pressing needs in the Archdiocese, a clergy fellowship and a board of advisors including elected clergy and laity - a consultation team for the Archbishop; a Parish Assessment to ensure fiscal security for the Archdiocese; worked for a more professional wage scale for the clergy - the list of accomplishments goes on and on.

He was a leader in the formation of a federation of Orthodox Greek Catholic Churches in the U.S.; vice-president of the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops of the Americas; vice-president of the National Council of Churches; enthusiastically supported Pope John XXIII's ecumenism.

Bashir was the first Archbishop to open a session of the U.S. House of Representatives by prayer. He also met and stayed with President Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and General Eisenhower and was the first hierarch to boldly criticize the U.S. government for its part in the creation of the Israel, protesting the treatment of Palestinians. Later, to the irritation of the U.S. government, he saw Nasser as the Arab George Washington in the Middle East.

Bashir was a tireless worker for his Church and he took pleasure in accomplishing the tasks he set out for himself, for the benefit of the Archdiocese. He loved the Church and its people profoundly. He once said jocularly in an address at a convention: "Frequently, I am reminded of the sort of priest our parishes need. He must be an Oxford graduate who took his theology at one of the great seminaries, have a voice of operatic quality together with an exceptional oratorical ability, be as handsome as a movie hero, have the patience of Job, and most important of all, be willing to serve for the wages of a stenographer because he loves the Lord".

Bashir was a commanding figure - a great leader. He was a giant of a man in stature, a giant of a man in personality, in intelligence, in energy, in vision...and he accomplished a giant of a task. It

was a work that modernized, consolidated and strengthened the archdiocese, giving it stout footing for future growth and development, a work that touched, affected and reverberated through every local church and parish in North America.

- Archbishop Bashir and St George -

The Archbishop often visited Montreal. He had a particularly close relationship with St George where he always celebrated the Feast of the Holy Cross in September as well as attend Church affairs and special events and services. His presence and his influence were constantly felt even well after he had left. His words would be subject for conversation and discussion for weeks. He always left lasting impressions.

At his funeral in 1966, high-ranking prelates came from far and wide to pay their respects. As Archbishop Antony Bashir lay-in-state, Protosyngellos Ellis Khouri whispered: "In his death he still looms larger than most of these gentlemen in life".

- The Archbishop's Enduring Influence -

From his headquarters in New York, Archbishop Bashir's thoughts on the new church, especially its interior, had carried palpable weight in Montreal. At times, when arguments arose on the propriety or desirability of some of its elements and could not be resolved, Bashir was consulted. The building committee and the board of trustees had ultimate decision-making power. But the interior design and decoration was a departure from

established norms, namely, the art-deco and to a smaller extent, the western Renaissance elements, causing some uncertainty, perhaps even a little discomfort for some of the members. A nod of approval or disapproval from the Archbishop usually though not always settled the argument, such had been his influence.

Bashir also had a large hand in persuading members of the community to donate good sums of money to pay down the mortgage as quickly as possible. With that added stimulation, four short years after the inauguration, the church celebrated the burning of the mortgage, in February 1944. The fervor in contributing to the church expressed itself in material as well as cash donations. Among the items proudly donated was an intricate, hand-made, lace tablecloth for the altar, still in use today for high celebrations. Skyee Beachamp had spent one year in its weaving. Others donated oil paintings for the walls of the church, some in the name of family members who had loved the church and had passed away.

- The Bells -

There were more cash donations to come for an important item that was still missing - the church bells! But it was an expensive item. The price of the bells was four-thousand-six-hundred dollars. It was not a minor sum to gather at the time, only three years after the mortgage had been retired. But the church had to have its bells! The community was mobilized once again and it was done. Funds were donated, monies collected, the bells were cast. They were paid, transported to the church, installed in the towers and blessed, in 1948 - three bells, averaging

about one thousand pounds each, named after St George, St Nicholas and St Michael. Once again, the ardour of the community's devotion to its Church and their pride in its concrete expression had come through. The ring of the church bells began to reverberate through the district, proclaiming services with distinctive identity.

XI. Growth and Expansion

- Changing Times -

It was not long after the burning of the mortgage before the church structure and its activities were expanded. The end of World War Two signaled the beginning of an era of prosperity. Father Gabriel Salhany had succeeded Father Sidawee. A period of significant growth had begun. Second and third generation families and a wave of immigration had added substantially to parish numbers. The Canadian-born now represented a much larger proportion and the composition of the lay organizations had begun to change.

In the month of April, 1947, the minutes of the Board of Trustees were recorded in the Arabic language for the last time. Henceforth, they would be written in English and for the first time, a Canadian-born layman, Edward Saab was elected to act as temporary secretary for the General Election Meeting.

The demographics were changing. Second generation Syrian-Lebanese, born in Canada, were going further in their education, on to colleges and universities, urged on, sometimes insistently, by their parents. English was their first language in Montreal; French in cities and towns beyond the metropolis. Many were trilingual - English, French and Arabic. Arabic was often spoken at home with grand-parents and to a lesser extent with parents. The community was integrating into their social surroundings, in Montreal and elsewhere. At the same time as branches were beginning to grow

within the Church, organizations were also forming in the wider Syrian-Lebanese community.

One of them formed in 1946, the "Syrian Canadian Fellowship", distributed a newsletter reporting on a number of events and happenings within the Syrian community. It provides a glimpse into the life of the wider community of the day and sets a context for life at St George. "The Voice" newsletter was considered to be the voice of the "young generation".

In the June, 1946 issue, the leading article commented on the need and suggested ideas for union between St George and St Nicholas churches, still an on-going discussion. Another article reported on the sod-turning ceremony for construction of the Syrian Canadian Association building - the S.C.A.. Montreal's Mayor Houde was among the V.I.P.'s and wielded the shovel himself. The Canadian Arab Friendship League, which had been formed the year before, invited Dr. Costi K. Zurayk, First Counselor of the Syrian Legation in Washington, to be guest speaker at a banquet at the Windsor Hotel. His address contained a comment that reflected the thought of the times: "Be good and loyal Canadians first but try to preserve the good traditions of the Arab such as loyalty, generosity, hospitality and honour".

The gathering was one of many events on the Syrian community's social calendar in 1946 in Montreal. The Syrian Cooperation Society held a dinner, also at the Windsor Hotel (served at 8:45....7:30 Syrian time, the report notes!) followed by Arabic music in one hall and western music in another. Six hundred people attended the gala. The

proceeds were earmarked for charitable donations both at home and in Syria.

Among the lesser events, the Junior Syrian Girls' Club held a mother-and-daughter tea. Teas were popular social gatherings for women. There were engagement teas, shower teas, even trousseau teas,... at the Windsor Hotel, the Queen's Hotel and the popular Eaton's Gold Room.

The immediate post-war years saw a flurry of social activities....and weddings. 1946 seems to have been a grand year for weddings. "The Voice" reports that Archbishop Bashir performed some of the ceremonies. "The Voice" reported on seven weddings that were celebrated within a span of less than thirty days. Of course, the social events columnist described the brides' gowns in the smallest detail!

In a column entitled "Education"...The Voice reports that "university results in 1946 showed a marked increase in the number of Syrian boys graduating from Montreal Universities"....Fred Assaly received his B.Eng. with honours and the British Empire Association medal: Ray Ayoub, a M.Sc.degree, honours in mathematics: Edward Rossy, a B.A. degree in economics and political science: Daniel Aboud, adding a B. Com. to his B.Sc.: Ramsey Barakett, a B.A.: Maurice Courey, a B.Com. The Syrian community was taking pride in their sons' educational achievements.

- The Choir - The Sounds of Heaven -

Meanwhile, at St George, serious discussions were taking place with a view to forming a choir.

The voices of the priest and the chanters were the only ones heard at church services, mostly in Arabic. The creation of a choir, in its place on the rear mezzanine, would add an entirely new dimension and sound to church services. It would be as though the sound of heaven was floating through the church.

The formation of a choir had been under discussion for a while with Archbishop Bashir's encouragement. Father Gabriel Salhany, then pastor of St George, approached Bernice and Marlene Merhige and Gladys Beauchamp to form a nucleus. The Merhige sisters' father, Anise, was a chanter at the church. Among those aware of the discussions was Florence Courey, whose father, John, frequented non-Syrian "ethnics" including Russians around the Craig street district where they socialized.

John Cury (as he spelled his name) was born in Palestine where he learned the Greek and Russian languages in school. Russia had an established presence in Palestine through a Consulate and the Russian Orthodox Palestine Society. Probably, the Orthodox school Cury attended had some connection with the Society and had included the teaching of Russian in the curriculum. Cury's knowledge of the language and friendships among Russian immigrants brought him into contact with Professor Ivan Voronkov.

Knowing about the desire to form a choir, Cury spoke to Father Salhany about Voronkov and his background as a student and teacher of music. A meeting was arranged between Father Salhany and Voronkov. Voronkov was appointed director and the choir was formed with the help of Gladys

Beauchamp and the Merhige sisters, Bernice and Marlene. The year was 1947. Cury's 16-year-old daughter at the time, Florence, joined not long after.

Voronkov had studied music under some of the great masters in Russia in the early 1900's. The music he arranged for St George's new choir was as eclectic and beautifully unusual as the church's interior. It was Russian music with Byzantine melodies and a western harmonization. Under Voronkov's baton and discipline, the sound of the choir was uniquely St George. It was and still is a sound like no other. Voronkov gave and demanded nothing short of excellence.

Two of the early members, Florence, and James Arrey, still remember Voronkov's rigorous, very serious approach. Those who joined the choir for their own amusement, talking and chatting at practices, were summarily dismissed. Voronkov, strict as he was, simply kicked them out! All who joined the choir quickly felt a discipline worse than school! Many of those who were expelled and really did want to participate soon came back with a more serious attitude, sobered by the experience. The concentration and effort demanded by the director raised a group of amateurs virtually to the level of professionals though there were some with musical backgrounds, among them, Jim Arrey, who had studied music at McGill University.

The sound of the choir remained constant through the years and under the capable direction of Paul Jabara, who replaced Voronkov in the mid-1980's. Canadian-born with a Master's degree in music from Montreal's McGill University, Jabara continued in the traditions of the choir with slight

changes in some of the music, reflecting his western musical background.

- The Altar Boys - Duty and Service -

Altar boys have been an integral part of worship at St George ever since anyone can remember. Their invaluable presence and assistance each Sunday and during Holy Week are part of the services and add to the pious reverence. Many of altar boys later continued their keen interest and participation in Church affairs. Theo Boojady, Louis Makarios, Nick Kattas and Norman Beauchamp were among the senior boys who became its leaders. The alumni of this select group have always retained their memories of a deep sense of service to the Church and satisfaction of duty well performed.

- Sunday School - Passing on the Heritage -

Someone once said that a teacher affects eternity: he or she can never tell where his or her influence stops. Margaret David's influence on the children she taught at St George's Church School is immeasurable. As the founder in 1952 and first teacher at St George's church school, she took on the responsibility of passing on the Orthodox Faith and heritage to the young and the future, and she did so with remarkable competence and dedication.

Margaret David was a strong woman - she had to be. As a business woman managing her retail clothing store, wife to an ailing husband and later widowed, mother to four children, Sunday school administrator and teacher and member of the church

choir, Mrs. David carried on staunchly with the discipline that was so necessary to accomplish all that she had set herself to do. Her task in the Sunday school was lightened somewhat with the help of Nick Kattas who joined Mrs David a year or two after she founded the Church School. He eventually became the school supervisor. She, in turn, demanded discipline from her children at home and at Sunday School who remember her as being firm but fair. At the end of the Sunday School year, she would present the gift of a bible to children who had perfect attendance. Those who received them cherish their bibles to this day.

- The Golden Age and SOYO -

The 1950's ushered in a "golden age" at St. George. As the church approached its fiftieth anniversary, the parish formed its local chapter of the Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization - SOYO - in 1953. In some ways, it was a difficult time. The younger generation entering adulthood had become "Canadianized". The church was losing some of its younger members who, in the process of furthering their education, had become interested in a social life beyond that of the church. The Church no longer occupied the same centrality in their lives as it had for their parents and grand-parents. Something new was needed to inject fresh life and meaning in the church for that younger generation. It was essential that the Church respond to the challenge...and it did, with SOYO.

The Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization had its beginnings in New England, concentrated in Massachussets, in the late 1930's, as a regional federation. By the late 1940's, it had spread to the

U.S. midwest, and by the early 1950's, to Canada. It was a development envisioned by Antony Bashir early on, one that he wholeheartedly supported and encouraged as it grew. Its purpose was of course to foster devotion to the Church as well as to "water" the younger generations' roots in its Syrian Orthodox cultural heritage.

SOYO regional and archdiocesan conventions were the vehicles that would regenerate youth interest in their Church. They provided a Church framework for the kinds of social activities so enjoyed by the young generation of the day....parties, cocktails and dances attended by their own age group, as well as workshop meetings and worship. Conventions brought the youth of the Church together through the late 1950's and 1960's as nothing else had before. St George was well represented. They became events to look forward to and were well attended by young men and women of whom not a few hoped to find love and marriage. Many did. Some say that was one of the prime reasons for the conventions!

- Golden Jubilee Celebration -

In 1955, St George parish celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with special events throughout the year. Father Gabriel Samne had succeeded Father John Khoury as pastor. As important as the celebrations were in commemorating fifty years of its existence, St George was at the same time preparing for an even bigger event - the 1956 Archdiocese Convention in Montreal co-hosted with St Nicholas. It was one of the biggest and most successful Archdiocesan conventions ever held. Hundreds of people attended from parishes

throughout North America, including ranking clergy and laity... to meet, exchange ideas on Church organization and activities on the local as well as regional and Archdiocese levels, stimulate Church life, introduce and initiate new directions and programs and get together on a social level.

Archmandrite Michael Shaheen that year was appointed pastor of St George, succeeding Father Samne. He later became the third Bishop in St George's history.

One of his duties as convention co-host pastor was to receive both Archbishops - Antony Bashir of New York and Samuel David of Toledo. Each had led the separate Archdioceses since the 1935 election that Bashir had won, leading to the creation of the Toledo Archdiocese. In the intervening twenty years and many negotiations, the fracture had been healing, but only slowly, until in 1955, Bashir and David agreed to end the rift in a signed unity document. At the convention, both leaders reaffirmed their commitment. But it had yet to be implemented. Archmandrite Shaheen, probably present at all the meetings between the two leaders in Montreal, would later have a hand in bringing about implementation of a final, conclusive agreement, as Archbishop of Toledo.

Father Shaheen's credentials were impressive. During his pastorate in Montreal, he participated in the formation of a pan-Orthodox movement, published the Divine Liturgy in a French and Arabic parallel text and lectured at McGill University on Orthodox Church history. Father Shaheen is remembered as having the serious bearing of the intellectual that he was. He is also remembered as a man of great wit and humour... not above playful

behaviour. A parishioner actively involved in St George church affairs, recalls Father Shaheen's very human side - going on sleigh rides and tobogganing together, and Father Shaheen's hearty laughter after being pushed into a pile of snow!

Archmandrite Shaheen is also known to have had a very close friendship with Father Theodore Ziton, pastor of St Nicholas of Montreal. Both, together at St George, celebrated the Liturgy in the first nationally televised Orthodox Church service in Canada.

Archmandrite Shaheen became Bishop of Toledo in 1962, in a controversial election by the Holy Synod of Antioch. Archmandrite Michael Howard was his successor at St George, at the age of 29.

Father Howard was also something of an intellectual, lecturing on comparative religion at Sir George Williams University. He is remembered as an affable man, humorous and candid - qualities that endeared him in particular to the youth at St George. His keen interest in the Church's young people expressed itself in strong support and encouragement of SOYO, the Sunday School and the Choir. They flourished during his tenure.

- The Wave from Egypt -

It was also during his tenure when a new wave of immigrants began arriving in Montreal - Lebanese and Syrian emigrants from Egypt. Many had gone to Egypt to live and make their homes instead of the new world - North America - over the same period in the early 1900's that had seen

emigration to the United States and Canada. They began leaving Egypt during the rise and height of Nasser's Egyptian nationalism directed against the West in the late fifties and early sixties. It had consequences for all Egyptian Christians as an economically prominent minority. Nasser's nationalization squeezed the Christian community until the pressure drove many to seek new homes elsewhere.

The Syrian and Lebanese Egyptians who arrived in Montreal spoke French as their second language. They were educated in tuition-free French Catholic schools in Egypt. The Catholic influence and their French language expression led the majority of them to St Sauveur's Melchite Catholic church. Those who remained Orthodox chose St George as their new church - a church that had always been open and inclusive. English being the main language at St George with the liturgy reflecting that reality, changes were considered to accommodate the new arrivals. In the meantime, Arabic was still to some extent a familiar language common to all, though the younger Canadian-born members spoke little and understood not much more. The character of the church was changing in more ways than one.

Before much adjustment could be made, however, Father Howard's life was tragically cut short, at the age of 37, in an automobile accident near Toronto, Ontario, in October of 1969. It was a time of great sadness for the parish and for all of the community in Montreal as they mourned his untimely death with a Requiem Liturgy.

XII.

New Leadership for the Archdiocese.

- Expansion Under Metropolitan Philip -

It was during Father Howard's tenure at St George, in May of 1966, that Archbishop Bashir passed away. Father Howard assisted in the meetings and deliberations among the clergy of the Archdiocese to support Philip Saliba who was elected by the Holy Synod and consecrated Archbishop of New York and All North America on August 6th of that year.

It quickly became apparent why Philip was chosen to be the successor who would lead the Antiochian Church in North America. It could not have been a better choice. Metropolitan Philip was as much of a dynamic, pragmatic man of action as was his predecessor and the Archdiocese was about to embark on a period of unprecedented growth and expansion. It would need a leader who would be resolute with a firm guiding hand, a leader with an analytical mind and comprehensive views, a leader with the sweeping ability to understand the movements of history and take control of the helm while charting a clear direction in unknown waters strewn with reefs, where none had gone before. Philip was such a leader... a different leader for different times.

But first, before getting under way, the Archdiocese had to be consolidated and strengthened to prepare for the journey. Many matters needed to be studied, courses of action given thought and plans mapped out.

Three years after assuming office, Metropolitan Philip began implementing decisions that would affect the future of St George and all of Antiochian Orthodoxy in North America. He immediately began the process of reforming the constitution and by-laws of the Archdiocese, revising and revamping them to give the Archdiocese the basic structures needed for the times ahead; he did away with the ethnic self-designation of the Archdiocese, dropping the word "Syrian" from the official title; he began a process of change in clergy-laity relations so that pastors would have a central role with the Parish Councils and he began a long process to bring about balance in relationships between the hierarchy and the clergy on the one hand and the Archdiocese Board of Trustees and local Parish Councils on the other. A clergy insurance plan was put in place to provide priests with some security where they had little security before. These steps alone were crucial to provide the underpinnings of growth and expansion. But there were more.

Philip provided financial support for the Balamand Academy of Theology, assuring solid formation of the next generations of clergy and the advancement of theological education; he began Archpastoral Missions to the Middle East as well as arranging three Patriarchal visits to North America, at once strengthening the ties between the Old and New Churches and raising the image of the Patriarchate in North America to renew closeness to it. New headquarters for the Archdiocese were put in place. All these steps solidified the North American Church for what was to come.

Bold initiatives were taken signaling marked and sweeping changes eventually defining the

course of the Archdiocese. For the first time in hundreds of centuries, the New Old Church, under Metropolitan Philip, undertook the formation of missionary parishes, in the New World; support was given to the formation of an autonomous Orthodox Church in North America; and in a superbly daring move in the mid 1980's, Philip opened the doors of the Antiochian Church to former Evangelical Christians who wished to enter into the Orthodox Faith. Other Orthodox Churches in North America feared their presence would irretrievably alter the character of their Churches. Philip stood alone, unafraid and confident that the spirit of the Church of Antioch was large enough to accommodate the newcomers. The Patriarch, Ignatius IV, visiting North America at the time, endorsed Philip's action with the warm words, "Welcome home!", addressed to the new Faithful.

Under Philip's leadership, the Antiochian Church in North America has grown from 60 parishes in the mid-1960's to more than 200 today, served by 300 clergymen. It is the fastest-growing Orthodox Archdiocese in North America. That this exceptional growth has been orderly and under control speaks volumes of Philip's unequalled administrative and organizational talents and competence, partly founded also on a rare ability to attract and inspire others to be a creative part of his team, including laity. The creation of the Order of St Ignatius for just that purpose is a good illustration. Many parishioners from St George are members of the Order.

His progressive outlook and foresight is also evident in many other ways, for example, admitting elected representatives of teen-agers to full voting status in Archdiocese conventions and authorizing

a comprehensive survey to determine future possibilities of the Society of Orthodox Youth Organizations - SOYO. Younger adherents were beginning to drift away, a sign of the times, presenting a major challenge - to keep the Antiochian Orthodox Church in North America relevant in a changing society. It is a problem that has faced Christian Churches throughout North America. Metropolitan Philip's keen awareness and understanding of that challenge also contributed to the creation of a Task Force for the Twenty-First Century whose recommendations will likely have impact on all parishes including that of St George.

Some programs directly affecting parishes throughout North America have already had considerable impact, including the creation of the Antiochian Village Retreat and Learning Camp and Center. Children are able to meet other children from around the continent. The creation of the Antiochian Women of North America has made room for wider participation and greater visibility for women in Church affairs.

Of all of Metropolitan Philip's ministries, two projects are especially notable for their humanitarian relief and assistance to the people of the Middle East and to those in need everywhere. One project, Food for the Hungry, established by a group under the auspices of the Archdiocese, has distributed more than one million dollars around the world for victims of war, devastation and other circumstances creating need.

The other project is the Arab Refugee Foundation. St George's pastor, Father Antony, in an interview with the author, commented that the plight of the Palestinian Arabs displaced by war and

subject to repression and discrimination is part of a long-standing concern close to Metropolitan Philip's heart. Father Antony also pointed out Philip's similar concern for victims of Lebanon's recent "uncivil war". Father Antony added that in Philip's ardent pursuit of peace in the Mideast, he has met with every President of the United States from Ike Eisenhower to Bill Clinton, as well as with the presidents of Syria and Lebanon. Such is Philip's stature that his counsel is highly valued. That stature and unflinching loyalty has also been put at the service of the Patriarchate of Antioch, to defend positions taken by Ignatius IV during unsettled times.

- Unity, Finally, with Philip -

For the Church in North America, Philip's effort and success in achieving unity between the New York and Toledo Archdioceses was an indispensable key to its progress. Despite the agreements reached earlier between Bashir and David, unity had not been implemented. It was left to Philip and the former pastor of St George, Michael Shaheen, to seal, deliver and fully implement a final, lasting agreement. It was signed on June 24, 1975 and ratified in August by the Holy Synod of Antioch. It united the two Archdioceses into one, called the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America. Philip was named primate and Michael his auxiliary. Archbishop Michael had done his part in making it possible by accepting the position of auxiliary (three more auxiliaries were later added to cope with the additional volumes of work as the Archdiocese expanded). Metropolitan Philip had shown the strong, magnetic, mediating leadership so essential

in overcoming a major barrier to the successful growth of the North American Church.

Unity has been a major theme of Metropolitan Philip's leadership within the Antiochian Church as well as in his efforts towards a wider Orthodox unity in the Western Hemisphere.

For all his no-nonsense efficiency and coolness of mind that has served the Church so well Philip is also known for his warmth of heart and personal generosity towards others. Many stories of his kindness bear witness. Nowhere is his goodness more evident than in his great love of children. However, the Church and the demands of its work have grown so much in the thirty years during his tenure and his tasks spread over such a huge area that, inevitably, the intimacy of the pioneer days has made way to the necessity of a professional approach.

Meanwhile, at St George in 1969, a long-standing member of the Board of Trustees of St George and of the Archdiocese and one of the Building Fathers of the new Church on Jean Talon was honoured for his work for the Archdiocese and his parish. Moussa Souaid, who time and again drove long distances from Ste Hyacinthe to Montreal and back in the snow and cold of winter, served his parish and Archdiocese in so many ways so tirelessly and for so long, was awarded the Gold Medal of the Antonian Order of Merit. Archbishop Philip was in Montreal to bestow the honour himself.

Moussa Souaid on another occasion was also was made Knight Commander of the Order of Saints Peter and Paul, the Antiochian Patriarchate's

highest award, as well as Knight Commander of the Cedars of Lebanon, by the Lebanese government. Mr. Souaid was and is still the only member of St George parish to have been awarded so many and so high distinctions.

Still in 1969, Father Emile Hanna had replaced Father Howard. Father Hanna was pastor and provided guidance when St George again co-hosted with St Nicholas another highly successful Archdiocese convention in Montreal in 1974, attended in record numbers. It launched new stewardship programs for the Church in North America.

XIII.

A New Pastor for The New Age

- The Arrival of Father Antony Gabriel -

The arrival of Archpriest Antony Gabriel and his wife Lynn, at St George in September of 1976 marked the beginning a new chapter in the life of the parish. From the very start of his stewardship, his vital personality and leadership had an immediate impact in a way that had never been seen or felt before. His pastorship has been the most enduring, the most accomplished and most towering of any before.

Father Antony had been the founding pastor of the Church in Chicago at the tender age of 25, in 1965. After a ten-year tenure there and brief service in Washington, D.C., he was appointed to serve at St George in Montreal. His extensive and varied educational background includes a Master of Divinity degree from St Vladimir's Theological Academy in New York City. He later earned a second Master's degree in Sacred Theology from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.

Those and other studies served him well as a writer, teacher and communicator. He has authored four books, co-authored another, written numerous articles on Orthodoxy and the Church that have appeared in journals and newspapers, and has contributed to greater public awareness of the Orthodox Church and Faith through several nationally-televised C.B.C. and Radio Canada programs with St George as their focus. He has also contributed to Church manuals, delivered papers and lectured at theological schools, seminaries,

colleges and universities, including McGill's Faculty of Religious Studies, while attending to his ministries as well as helping organize inter-community associations and councils such as the Council of Lebanese Christian-Muslim Religious Leaders of Montreal, and helped found the Order of St Ignatius of Antioch of which he was the first national chaplain.

- A Beehive of Activity and Creativity -

At St George, Father Antony, in some cases with his wife Lynn, has initiated and has had a major role in the formation of the Men's Club, the Senior Men's Club, the Altar Boys Association, Teen Players, Teen SOYO, and the Byzantine Choir, among other church organizations, as well as having a hand in the establishment of the Mary Haddad Howick Fund, now the St George Benevolent Fund, to assist needy parishioners.

The prodigious growth of activities and organizations under Father Antony's tenure with a supportive Parish Council has made of St George one of the most active and creative parishes in the Archdiocese. The numerous activities for young people alone, undertaken by his wife, Lynn, has provided recreational and learning opportunities within the Church as never before. The Church also now provides a setting for continuing social meetings for seniors, men and women, university graduates, bible study groups and discussion groups as well as for simple get-togethers in the Church Hall for coffee after Sunday services.

The needy are not forgotten. Besides the St George Benevolent Fund, a host of organizations

provide aid and assistance of all kinds, administered by caring volunteers in the finest traditions of St George, among them, the Antiochian Women, continuing the spirit of giving and caring begun a hundred years ago by the Syrian Orthodox Ladies Benevolent Aid Society. Women providing sustenance in their roles as volunteers as well as wives and mothers have been the loving keepers of the Church and its values. Men have followed their example in the creation of the St George Men's Club to help the needy.

SOYO, the Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization, continues the framework for fellowship in and outside the parish begun some fifty years ago, now under the name of the Fellowship of St John Divine. Teen SOYO provides the same framework for younger parishioners.

Young, caring parishioners at St George continue remarkably to accept ways of helping others. The St George Foundation, affiliated with the Church, is the most recent example of that sense of care and concern. The Foundation was created by a humanitarian youth group to promote awareness and raise funds for specific causes. For its inaugural event this year, its members began raising funds in the hopes of finding a cure for multiple sclerosis.

Organizations such as the Order of St Ignatius provide an opportunity for lay auxiliaries to contribute at the Archdiocese level, assisting the Metropolitan in all his activities. Beyond the parish and for the wider community, St George parishioners continue to contribute their time and funds to the Cedars Cancer Fund founded by Joseph Chamandy and the Cedars Home for the Elderly, a

project initiated by Wilfred Howick, John Lutfy, George Rossy and Albert Malouf.

St George's activities reach out as far as the Middle East, in the form of the Task Force Jerusalem, whose mission is to preserve and enhance the presence of Arab Orthodox Christianity in the Holy City.

Among all the activities, benevolent and extra-curricular, that have been initiated, supported or encouraged by the current pastor, the central *raison-d'être* of the Church - worship - has also been enhanced with the creation of the Byzantine Choir, originally directed by Abdel-Messih Zacharia, now led by Jean Mallouk with arrangements by Issa Isside, a noted musicologist in Byzantine music. The choir adds yet another note of heritage in its hauntingly melodious tones of Arabic.

- The Restoration and Renewal -

One of the most important of the many contributions Father Antony has made to St George's parish is his part in the renovation and restoration of the Church building. As much as it was Father Moore's dream to see the Church built in the late 1930's, it has been Father Antony's dream to see it brought back to its original beauty while adding space for its many activities. In 1992, a three million dollar project began to renovate and restore the building and its facilities. The parish hall has been completely redone, the Church exterior beautified and the bell towers renovated as well as the offices and classrooms in the parish house. "Habitation St George", a home for independent senior citizens, was built in

cooperation with the city of Montreal on Church property.

Finally, after much painstaking care, the splendour of the Briffa interior was completely restored. As the only existing custodian of Briffa's religious artwork, the Church building is presently being considered for designation as an historic landmark by the federal and provincial governments. Both governments together have contributed eight-hundred-thousand dollars for the restoration, a testimonial in itself of the preciousness of the Church interior artwork. Fittingly, in a sense, a gift in return, St George's restoration contributed to the rediscovery of Briffa's work, adding to his acclaim. The renewal of the Church's beauty is symbolic of its vibrancy today.

- New Ministries for New Challenges -

Responding to the Lebanese Tragedy

In addition to a reputation for dynamic energy, Father Antony is known for his humanitarian work... for orphans, refugees and the needy in general... a reputation that spread well beyond the parish to the Middle East. In appreciation of that work, he was awarded the "Knight of the National Order of the Cedars of Lebanon" medal in 1994. He had also received the Governor-General's medal in Canada in 1993.

Father Antony's acute sensitivity to the plight of the refugees in Lebanon's recent civil war was translated into action in a general mobilization of the Church's resources. Thousands of emigrants fleeing the war - Orthodox, Maronite, Melchite and

Muslim alike - hearing of St George's open arms reception came directly to the Church, mostly penniless, often having lost loved ones, desperately in need of help. No one was turned away.

Father Antony's urgent pleas on behalf of those who were suffering were poignant in an article he wrote at the time for the Archdiocese publication, "The Word":

"It is reminiscent of the days of my sitto and jiddo when they came to Montreal from Zahlé, Lebanon, at the turn of the century. When I see the old pictures and those sad but proud faces, I can see the same reality in the eyes of our new people.... middle-aged men and women who have little practical skills and have lost everything... young people...engineers, accountants, doctors, lawyers and all the professionals who find themselves doing menial tasks to etch out a living. I have gone to visit all the apartments and one discovers the barest necessities and many people sharing the same tiny living space and facilities. Thank God the parish and community has responded by offering jobs....Hundreds of beds and other household items have been delivered in the past six months to families in need. It is quite an experience to spend several days a week while people stream into our offices and the older men and women cry like babies because of their plight. No words can adequately convey how it feels to want to give solace in their agony and yet one feels so helpless.... A month ago, a family arrived. We sponsored them here. Their home was blown up. They lost a young daughter and the father had his hand blown off. They are a large family....When they arrived at the Church, they brought a jar of honey from Lebanon, just to say

thanks. Sorrow was so deeply etched on their faces that it pierced all our hearts to the core."

Church organizations - the Senior Men's Club, the Antiochian Women and new ones created specifically to help with the influx of refugees - and individuals gave generously of their time, efforts, materials and money. They were living examples of Christianity's meaning and of St George's good works for members and non-members alike.

Caring for this new, massive wave of immigrant refugees was a new ministry for St George's pastor - one that stretched the Church's resources to the limits and beyond... beyond to meet still more challenges, in the form of an orphaned children adoption program. In spite of lengthy and complicated legal procedures, the process undertaken by Father Antony bore fruit. It brought some twenty children from Lebanon to Canada, most of them to families of the St George community, where their future would be secure and free from the ravages of war while bringing the joy of love to the families who adopted them.

Responding to the Challenges of the New Age

Yet another new ministry instituted by Father Antony is that of the Family Assistance Program, for those whose needs go beyond those of traditional pastoral care. It provides assistance to parishioners facing difficulties such as marriage conflicts, parent-child relationships, family violence, care for the elderly, long-term illness, separation and death as well as financial and career problems, all requiring professional help. That assistance is provided from an Orthodox Christian

perspective, which, according to Father Antony, is necessary in light of current trends in today's society.

Today's current trends and the recent wave of immigration resulting from Lebanon's civil war refugees have brought about significant changes at St George. Many of the descendants of the early pioneer immigrants have married to spouses of other backgrounds. That inevitable trend as well as the general drift away from the Church, as from all Christian churches in recent years, has reduced attendance and the presence of these generations in Church affairs and activities. Combined with the increase of Lebanese and others from the Middle East of a more traditional Arabic background, the composition of the parish has altered. St George today faces a double challenge: communicating the relevance of the Church and of Orthodoxy to the life of the "Canadian generations" as well as bringing together people of similar heritage but different social background.

Some of those of the Canadian generations to some extent have been absent or attend Church services and activities only sporadically. The Church is no longer as central to their lives in the same way as it was for their forefathers. But ad hoc surveys have shown that, for many, they are not "far from home". Those who are closer to the Church and those who maintain an active participation have retained a more immediate sense of Orthodox relevancy and have continued to weave it into their lives.

The following comments from one such parishioner of the new generations, Canadian-born and raised and actively participating, is

representative of those to whom Orthodoxy and the Church have enduring relevancy in their lives, in today's world:

"The Church has a particularly special place in my life since it has always been my second home. Having grown up in the Church has taught me about having a sense of community - being part of a larger family. In today's society, growing up can be quite a challenge. All the outside influences, for example, peer pressure, the abundance of choices and the emphasis on materialism young adults face today can be a source of great confusion. With the continual support and love from the family unit, coping is much easier. However, we cannot shelter and protect our children from the different influences that may come their way as they grow up. Being deeply rooted in the church, having a strong sense of faith and fellowship and solid family values can keep a child grounded on a straight path, a very difficult thing to achieve in today's day and age. Having been very involved in the church throughout my life in such activities as Sunday school, teen Soyo, Soyo and teaching Sunday school and now having two young children of my own, I realize the great importance of teaching them about a sense of community and introducing them to Christianity from the start. At that young and very impressionable age, they are little sponges and are so responsive to learning. Teaching them about prayer and reading simple passages from the Bible can help them deal with different issues they face daily; telling them about Jesus' life and the miraculous work he performed; teaching them to apply his motto "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" to their lives. Showing children about the spirit of giving is such a valuable lesson in today's material, self-indulgent society. Young

children at that very egocentric age must be taught about a larger entity other than themselves and their own insulated families. The church through its different organizations and charities teaches children, young and old, how to go beyond themselves and reach out to others. The true spirit of giving must be genuine and requires effort and perhaps inconvenience. Through the church community, we can reach out and make a difference!

Having been a regular church-goer has provided me with a great sense of inner peace. In our fast-paced world, it is crucial to be able to constantly step back, reflect and put things into perspective. The liturgy on Sundays allows me to do just that. It's the one sacred time all week I stop all the running and take time out. The actual setting of the Church relaxes me in its serenity and tranquillity. The warmth of its parishioners embraces me and makes me feel very much at home. The service itself helps me reflect upon my life and how I can always work on becoming a better person, a better Christian."

Stephanie Rossy-Beauchamp

The rapid and deep social changes everywhere evident as the twentieth century closes and the new millennium dawns present a new reality and a new context for the Antiochian Orthodox Church and for St George's Church on Jean Talon. Much has been written, spoken, discussed and debated on how science in all its varied disciplines, combined with the age of information and a breakdown in social structures, has shaken the edifice of Christian Churches everywhere. In spite of the tremendous growth of knowledge and a plethora of information, much of it based on great advances in science, it has not been able to provide all the answers to the deep

mysteries of life. Many of the greatest scientific minds admit that science has fallen short.

The search for new truths and for a new "mystic" spirituality in today's different world, continues. The path in that search, for many, has led to the East and Eastern mysticism. Wherever it goes, it could well lead back full circle to the mysticism of the oldest, the first Church in Christendom - the Church of Antioch. It is a Church like all Churches in that it has its dogma. But unlike many others, it is not dogmatic. It allows for freedom of thought and expression, a quality that many people seek today in their search for a spiritually nourishing Faith.

The challenge for its leaders in the hierarchy as well as in local parishes everywhere including St George has been to show how its old Christian truths and values are universal and still profoundly, uniquely relevant in today's new world. It is an enormous challenge - the challenge of the times..... the challenge of the new age.

Father Antony has been a man of the times, for the times. His ministry has been boundless in energy, in creativity, and in caring for the suffering. Many parishioners see and recognize Christian example in the work of the pastor and find inspiration from it. Forthright and candid, he has had the community's love and affection since his arrival. Even his critics, who all men of action have, acknowledge the value of his leadership. His mark is evident on almost every aspect of life at St George, including the work of the Parish Council on Church affairs. That work has been remarkable for its close collaboration between laity and clergy that has produced a parish life unparalleled in its vigour

and vitality. With a dedicated Parish Council newly presided by the first woman, Viola Rossy, to head the laity in the history of St George and daughter of one of the founding builders, the strong pastoral leadership of Father Antony and a splendidly renewed Church building, St George is well prepared for the new millennium.

Ode to St George Church

In the northern part of our city,
'Midst the hub of bustle and din!
An Apostle of Duty stands there,
At St George's Church within!

Eastern Antiochian Orthodox,
St George, lifts an unblemished sword,
As Intercessor for Parishioners,
Who uphold God's Truth and Word!

The House is Dedicated, and Holy,
Where we worship our Sacred God!
It was built by our Forefathers
With love, who turned the sod!

Wide open the Portals of Welcome,
Through a smiling vestibule,
With elated steps we enter,
To Divine Eternal Rule!

The Nave's beauteous adornment
And Sweet Incense do proclaim,
Our awe, and deepest reverence
As we whisper Allah's name!

With petitions for all our beloved,
Or the shedding of tears in despair,
Of grateful prayers, of need, or want,
We beseech the Icons' care!

On the Dome of All Mercy above us,
God's Message is loud and clear!
"Come to Me who are heavyladen,
Your Rest is All Ways Here!"

Upon the Seat of Final Judgment,
On the Highest Altar above,
In this Purest Sanctuary,
Is the Spotless Lamb of Love!

Whether our Bells peal joy and gladness,
Or they toll our times of grief,
In every sound St George's name,
Calls the Faithful of Belief.

The Quest in Prayers, the Hymns of Praise,
Does soothe each searching soul!
"Oh Lord!
Imbed within our thankful hearts,
Our forefathers' shining role!"

Ruby Yared Shoofey Courey

Author's Note

St George Antiochian Orthodox Church in Montreal has had a long, varied and rich history. Many people have contributed to that heritage in many varying ways and to varying degree, throughout that history. This book is intended to tell the story of St George and its parish, its beginning, its growth and its development, in a general way, within the context of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Montreal and Quebec and the Archdiocese as a whole. It is a narrative that also attempts to bring to page the background, the causes, the chain of events and some of the principal, visible characters in the story.

It is by no means an exhaustive treatise nor an in-depth monograph. Time did not permit the kind of research necessary to make it so. Another writer perhaps another day in the future, given time, may one day write a history book based on the kind of thorough research necessary to pay tribute and do justice to all those who contributed in so many ways to St George, its community and to the Church - a history book that would fill in the details including names and personalities that could not be included this time, in this narrative, given the constraints of time. That would require years of work and research. It would certainly result in a very thick book! The story of St George and its people is an ongoing story. Hopefully it will be told again, in whole or in part, more thoroughly than this humble contribution means to do.

For the time being, I also hope that in some modest way, it will encourage among younger and future generations continued pride in a rich heritage

and in the many ways it has contributed to our society in Quebec and Canada.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Andrew Courey has been a journalist, writer, editor and producer with Radio Canada International for almost 30 years before retiring from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1997 and continuing to write as a freelance writer/journalist. In 1995, a program on the environment that he wrote, produced and hosted at R.C.I., "Earthwatch", was named by the best-selling international guide, "Passport to World Band Radio" as one of the ten best programs in the world on international short-wave radio. He lives with his wife in St Jovite, Quebec.