

THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST IN THE US – 1919-2019

The very first clergyman of the Church of the East to visit the United States was Mar Youkhanan, the bishop of Urmia. Originally from the village of Gavilan, he was born in about 1799 and was the bishop of the Church of the East for the plain of Urmia. At the invitation of the American Presbyterian missionary Justin Perkins, Mar Youkhanan travelled to the United States and remained here for about two years (1841-1843), and visited many congregations. In 1842, he visited Washington, D.C. when John Tyler was president, about 19 years before the beginning of the American Civil War. He returned to Urmia in 1843, after the massacres of Bedr Khan Beg on the Hakkari Assyrians had taken place.

The first religious activities of the Church of the East began from 1906 onwards, when Archdeacon Nestorius George Malik visited to Chicago, coming from the village of Superghan, Urmia (Iran). In 1914, distinct services began to be held by the Church of the East congregation under the guidance of Shamasha Benyamin Odisho of Oramar, apparently with the permission of the late Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun XXI. This group met at St. James Episcopal Church in Chicago.

By 1917, Qasha Shimun Yonan of Barwar mentions that there were two priests of the Church of the East in Chicago, with many deacons and about 300 faithful. In 1919, Qasha Shimun left Chicago for New Britain and became the priest there. In the same year, 1919, Mar Yalda Yawalaha, the bishop of Barwar and Amedia arrived in Chicago. He was elected the 'honorary president' of the first Assyrian Convention of the US. He ordained two priests there, Qasha Benymain Odisho and Qasha Gewargis Azoo, both from the tribe of Tkuma. Qasha Benyamin then went to Gary, Indiana, and the parish of St. Peter was established. Qasha Gewargis served for a time with Archdeacon Nestorius Malik in Chicago. On December 19, 1919, Bishop Mar Yawalaha of Barwar ordained two deacons for the New Britain-Yonkers congregation: Shamasha Patros Yonan of Sad, and Shamasha Eramya Bakus of Ardeshai. The ordinations took place at St. Mark's Episcopal church in New Britain.

Then, in late 1924 Mar Abimalek Timotheus, the metropolitan of Malabar and all India, arrived in the US and spent some 16 months in the country. He collected funds while in the country, apparently under the authority of the Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, who was in Iraq at the time. Mar Timotheus established an office for the Church and bought the property on 1801 N. Hammond St. (which was later renamed Orleans). On July 27, 1925, the congregants of the Church of the East in Chicago formally incorporated the Church. During this period, Qasha Tarvardeh Ismail moved from Yonkers lead the growing congregation in Chicago, and served with Qasha Gewargis Azoo. On December 14, 1924, Metropolitan Mar Timotheus of India ordained Shamasha Saul David Nissan as priest for New Britain. On the same day, he ordained the following deacons: David Yonan of Tekah, Israel Benyamin of Tekah, David Sargis of Tekah and Aprim Shimon of Shenabad. It is also said that the Rev. Yaroo Neesan, an Anglican priest of Assyrian ethnicity, served the Church of the East in Flint with services from 1924 until his death in 1937.

By the time of Mar Timotheus' return to India in 1925, and up until the arrival of the Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, there were four priests in the greater Chicago area: Qasha Eshay Sliwo, Qasha (Rabban) Rehana David, Qasha Gewargis Azzo and Qasha Sargis Benyamin. However, the canonical priest was Qasha Tarvardeh Ismail.

In 1937, the Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun appointed Qasha Saul David Nissan as the chairman of the *Church of the East Executive Committee for all of America*, thus being an official representative of the

patriarch who was still abroad at the time. The following year, 1938, the patriarch *in absentia*, appointed Qasha Saul as the chairman of the 'General Convention of the Church of the East' in Chicago.

The first church of the Assyrian Church of the East built in the US is that of Mar Shimun bar Sabbae, in Flint, Michigan. The church began to be built in 1924 (with the basement utilized for services), and finally it was completed in 1939. It is named after the famous martyred patriarch who died in 341 AD.

Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun Comes to America

The life and history of the Assyrian Church of the East would change forever in the year 1940. For on July 29, 1940 Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII arrived in the US, docking at the New York harbor. His arrival in America was published in *Time Magazine*, dated August 12, 1940. The young patriarch, then only 32 years of age, took up his residence in Chicago, Illinois, and immediately began to organize the Church of the East in the United States. An important part of the patriarch's plan of organization was the establishment of the 'Patriarchal Council Inc.', and the purchase of a patriarchate in 1946—the very first in the US—located at 6346 N. Sheridan Road, Chicago. He received his citizenship on April of 1949.

On October 11, 1940, Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII ordained Yonan Yonatan of Gawar to the diaconate.

Mar Addai church in Turlock was built in 1947, and completed in 1948.

The new Mar Sargis church was consecrated by Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun on Palm Sunday, March 29, 1953.

Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII moved from Chicago to California in 1954. He settled in Modesto for about a year, and then moved to San Francisco in 1955. In that same year, the parish of Mar Narsai was formally started. Mar Narsai church in San Francisco was built in 1958.