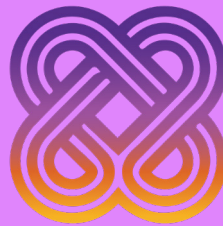




# Next Gen

## *Leaders of the Eastern Diocese*

*This outline is a summary of recommendations based on the experiences of the New York City-based NextGen Leaders, which we hope will assist others in recreating this group in other regions within the Eastern Diocese.*



**BY ORDER OF HIS GRACE BISHOP MESROP PARSAMYAN**  
*Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern)*



# PURPOSE, VISION, AND MISSION

## Purpose

Many young adults in their 20s and early 30s are often transient as they pursue their career and life goals. Many choose to move away from their hometowns and/or decide to move out of their parents' homes to explore other regions of the country and/or live closer to friends and work. During this period of their lives, with many demands on their time, they are often occupied with their work and spend most of their free time with friends, leaving little time for their faith and spiritual life. Many will usually continue to socialize with their Armenian friends, but not necessarily attend activities organized by their local church. This is not about a lack of faith, but rather a new set of priorities that pulls them away. The NextGen Leaders group is designed to provide a new way for our Church to reach out to this important cohort in a deliberate, fresh, and modern way—“meeting them where they are,” in a sense.

## Vision

To create a vibrant community of next-generation leaders who will actively engage together to grow and deepen their ties to each other, the Armenian Church, and our faith.

## Mission

The organizing committee will be responsible for hosting activities that will:

- Bring this group together in fellowship, reaching those who are already active, currently inactive, as well as those who are new to the area.
- Explore how our faith guides us to a richer, spiritual life within the context of today.
- Put faith into action within the broader community.
- Make faith more relevant in their daily lives.

## Additionally

Many may have read about a recent trend happening globally, where traditional churches are seeing an increase in this age group attending and exploring their faith (at the moment, there is a slight edge to the male population in this age cohort). The NextGen group in NYC has also seen evidence of this. While we don't yet know if this is a permanent trend or one that is just in favor now, we are encouraged to see young men and women (more men than women) being drawn to our faith-based activities with a keen interest in going deeper to discover our faith in a different way and making it more practical and relevant.

In light of this, we may consider offering seasonal spiritual themes, such as *“Resilient Faith,”* *“Calling and Purpose,”* or *“Living the Gospel in the Workplace.”* These could guide both faith-based discussions and practical service projects. We should also remain attentive to emerging spiritual curiosity and offer mentorship opportunities or small group pathways for those who desire deeper learning or spiritual direction—without adding formality or pressure.

# IDENTIFYING THE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

## Regional Approach

We recommend not limiting this group to a particular parish but rather a region that includes several parishes that are within driving distance, making events easily accessible. The advantage to this approach is that it will ensure a critical mass necessary for success, draw a new mix of people who may not already know each other well, and likely provide a mix of people from different backgrounds and experiences to enrich the group. The other advantage is that there will be several priests in the geographic area to draw upon—capitalizing on different personalities and strengths will help create a “newness” to the events and ensure there is always a representative from the church in attendance to mingle and meet others.

## Organizing Committee Size

We recommend not making the group size too big (no more than 7–8) and consisting of people who have demonstrated leadership within this cohort.

## Characteristics for Selecting People to Be on the Committee

- Should have time and passion around organizing events (i.e., “doers”) and socializing with other Armenians in their age group.
- Have a broad network of people who they can draw on to come to the events.
- Have warm, engaging personalities (it is important not to have a clique of friends, as that may make others feel like they don’t fit in).

- Willing to meet and encourage new people to participate and take leadership roles, and not just stick with who they know.
- Be committed to their faith even if they are not regularly going to church.
- Representation from the different parishes in the area.
- Possibly consider a few who don't represent leadership from known youth groups so there are a few who can provide an "outside-in" perspective.
- Specialized skills – It is helpful to have someone with graphic design talents (to create flyers/tiles) and social media capabilities to create presence and promote events, etc.

Over time, committees should plan for leadership rotation and succession, giving newer voices a chance to contribute. Consider developing a leadership onboarding brief for new committee members to ensure continuity and clarity of purpose.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

We have found that this age group prefers less structure. So, having formal "officers" is not necessary. Instead, you will need people to "own" the following responsibilities (which can be rotated if necessary):

- Scheduling meetings, securing the location and/or Zoom link.
- Creating a meeting agenda and circulating it a day or two before the meeting.
- Note-taking during the meeting with clear accountability around who owns doing what, by when, etc.
- Circulating meeting notes so anyone who is not in attendance can be caught up.
- Everyone is responsible for suggesting activities, and depending on the activity, tasks can be assigned.

- Creating flyers/tiles for events.
- Promoting events via social media.
- Being responsible for finances. We have found Eventbrite a useful tool to have people sign up and pay before the events that have a cost associated with them.

Add a shared digital drive or collaboration tool (e.g., Google Drive or Trello) to keep records, plans, and photos accessible and organized for current and future committee use.

## **ROLE OF THE PRIEST, NEXTGEN ADVISOR, AND PARISH LEADERS**

### **Priest**

The primary role of the priest is to be present during activities, meet/mingle with people, build deeper relationships with those they don't know well, and relate to them in an authentic, casual way. Priests will be involved in delivering on the faith-based activities in partnership with the committee, who can advise on the format, topics, and approach. They should be copied in on all communication so they can stay apprised of things overall.

The NextGen events in NYC will very often attract young adults who have never been to the church—some because they didn't grow up in the area and many others who have but have never been to the Cathedral. It is so important to make them feel a sense of belonging—they may not know anyone, so the priest and committee members play an important role in making sure they feel welcomed.

It's essential that priests be invited to lead with hospitality and authenticity. Those clergy who have a natural rapport with young adults should be highlighted as spiritual companions—not instructors. Short spiritual reflections, honest Q&As, or simply showing up as a



non-judgmental listener can have a transformative impact. If needed, regional clergy can be supported through brief training or resource tips for casual engagement.

### **NextGen Advisor**

The advisor will work alongside the committee to guide, encourage, and break down barriers as needed so activities can be executed free of too much hassle. The advisor, together with the committee, are the ones responsible for the logistics and mechanics of all events. The advisor should attend (almost) all events. This person is in many ways the “glue” to help this group form as a team and can be the organizing force to ensure things are progressing, all details are covered, and communication is flowing. This person should not be in this age cohort and should be active in their church and faith. Depending on the committee, this person may need to put in more effort in the beginning to help the team form and make creative suggestions around the faith-based activities if this group is not confident in this area.

This role benefits from having a clear written overview of expectations and a list of “starter resources” (event ideas, sample reflections, speaker lists) that the advisor can keep on hand to help coach the team without overwhelming them. The Diocese might consider holding a brief Zoom orientation or peer advisor meeting for those serving in this role across regions.

### **Parish Leaders**

There is no formal role for the parish leaders. They can stay updated through the priest and advisor. It is important to make this feel casual, creative, and fresh. Sometimes having too many “older” people can make this feel “heavy” and traditional. This should be free of too

many rules and restrictions.

However, we may suggest that parish leaders periodically celebrate the work of NextGen leaders—whether through public prayer during Badarak, a mention in the bulletin, or a thank-you reception—so these efforts are both known and supported at the parish level without being co-opted or controlled.

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

There should be an appropriate mix of activities depending upon the group. We, at the Cathedral, thought it was predominantly social events that this group was interested in, but quickly found that they were craving faith-based activities in addition to Badarak that strengthened their bond with the Church.

### **Socials**

We recommend starting with a social(s), as it is important to have events that allow people to meet each other in a casual, modern setting. These social activities can take place on church premises (rotating amongst the different parishes within the “network”) or outside within the community. Ideally, you will want a mix, as it is important to position the church as a “home” to these young adults, many of whom may be new to the area and not familiar with the different parishes.

As an example, the NextGen group in NYC uses St. Vartan Cathedral space (i.e., plaza, K, G, and Y halls) to host events. In all cases, we create a casual atmosphere with the room set up so there is space to mingle. Music provides an upbeat atmosphere, and the refreshments

provided are light (e.g., cookies and coffee, pizza and beer, wine and cheese).

## **Faith-Based Activities**

These activities are designed to bring our faith into the modern world. Many in this age group are searching for more meaning, and our churches sometimes are not viewed as places where they can easily access that. This is where the priests are vitally important in making sure these activities are not “heavy” with protocol. Instead, letting the heart of our Christian faith shine through candid conversations and exploration. It’s not always about having all the answers but rather about listening to each other and being supportive, open, and honest.

As an example, the NextGen group in NYC has a rotation of faith-based events. The most successful are our “*Church Chats*.” This is designed to be a small group of people who come with curiosity around a particular theme. The chairs are set up in a circle to create a space of intimacy. Thirty minutes before we start, we offer pizza and beer to provide time for people to mingle and meet (as well as time for latecomers). Then we invite everyone to the circle. The priest can kick things off (no more than five minutes) to frame the topic. We encourage the priest to personalize the topic if possible—so they lead with authenticity and allow for others to open up later. This discussion lasts no more than one hour. Afterwards, people may stay to mingle before leaving for the night.

Other examples that have also been well received include a 30-minute worship service and a Meditation service with Srpazan (which can be organized when he is in town). The Meditation service is often opened to all within the area—not just NextGen’ers—but having them sponsor it for the community is a nice way to have them show up as community leaders. Light refreshments follow for fellowship.



## SUCCESS FACTORS

- Selecting organizing committee members who have a wide network of friends within the area.
- Keeping things casual and free of “protocol.” Less is more with this group.
- Priests must be present at all activities to mingle and meet people in an informal, casual way.
- Making sure that the group does not become cliquy. This is a new opportunity to draw people into our churches that otherwise may feel alienated or even not very religious. At every event, everyone should feel welcome, and it is up to the committee members, priests, and advisor to purposely mingle to meet and draw these people in. The committee selection at the outset is critical to making sure that this does not become a clique.
- Let the cohort drive the way. Encourage them to think about ways to bring the church forward in a modern way and to draw their peers in. If you do this right, you may find the “older” parishioners getting jealous!

## RECOMMENDED WAYS TO GET STARTED

The first meeting should be in person with all clergy in attendance. If possible, consider having Srpazan on video conference to welcome everyone and say some inspiring words. During this first meeting, it is important to spend time getting to know each other. This

may be the most important aspect of the meeting because creating bonds will allow everyone to feel comfortable with each other. The advisor should facilitate the meeting so the priests can focus on the people and not the meeting agenda. You may want to consider a fun icebreaker activity that feels light, fun, and “modern.” During this meeting, you should start to brainstorm ideas—without too much judgment—to begin to open new possibilities. The more creative and fresher the better. Don’t feel pressure to decide everything all at once. It is best to let everyone leave feeling excited and engaged. Schedule a second meeting right away so the momentum continues.

We found it helpful to have a series of events planned for the first 3–6 months before going “live” so participants can plan on the lineup and it will not be perceived as a one-time thing. This should be a mix of social and faith-based activities.

The first event should be different, memorable and fun—something that most people haven’t done in a church environment. Our NextGen group in NYC kicked off with a “*Mezze on the Plaza*” event that was informal and different, that created a “buzz” and made everyone excited to come back for more.

- Assign 1–2 people to create an Instagram account.
- Assign 1–2 people to create a mailing list and a way for people to sign up. Since this group will be a cross section of people from across your region, it is likely that you don’t have one place with everyone’s contact info.
- Assign everyone the responsibility to promote events via their own social media with members liking other members’ posts.

Local churches should also post/re-post about this group so parents can make sure their young adult children are made aware of this. It should be included in Sunday Bulletins and sent to parishes' mailing lists. Be careful to be clear that this is for people in their 20s and 30s.

Be creative and modern in all you do. Everything should feel different than what is traditionally done. Focus on how we can bring our church to them in a way that brings forward our ancient traditions into the modern age, with relevance, authenticity, and freshness.

The NextGen group in NYC has sponsored faith-based events that are purposely titled in a provocative, edgy way to catch people's attention and project a new approach. Topics like: *Why Church? How to Walk with Christ to the Cross in Our Modern Lives, Do We Really Need to Forgive Everyone?* etc.

## SUGGESTED REGIONS

- Boston metro area
- Philadelphia metro area
- Chicago metro area

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLEMENTATION NOTES

The NextGen committee at the Diocese is available to discuss and review your planning to provide feedback from our experiences. Communicating this can be nuanced, and we have fine-tuned it over time based on our experiences.







**THE DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA (EASTERN)**

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