

Life devoted to the church

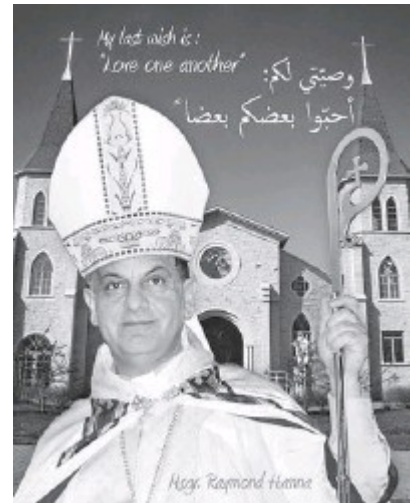
Lebanese leader built a thriving congregation and contributed much to the wider community *Published in the Ottawa Citizen - 29 Dec 2012 by CULLEN BIRD*

Monsignor Raymond Hanna dedicated his life to the Maronite congregation of St. Charbel's Church on Donald Street.

When Raymond Hanna moved to Ottawa to lead St. Charbel Maronite Church, his congregation had only recently acquired its own building after years of renting space for masses.

At the time of Hanna's death on Nov. 14 at the age of 57, the Maronite congregation of St. Charbel's Church had a beautiful, spacious church, a community centre and a large recreation field on Donald Street. Much of this is thanks to their tireless church leader and community activist.

Monsignor Hanna died after a long struggle with cancer, leaving a legacy of community projects, charity initiatives and a congregation of devoted parishioners. He is survived by three brothers, two sisters and his parents.



Hanna, born in Lebanon, was sent to Canada in 1984 to serve the Maronite community, an eastern branch of Catholicism in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. He spent two years in Montreal before moving to Ottawa, where he quickly became an important supporter of the Lebanese community.

When Hanna arrived in 1986, the Lebanese community in Ottawa had begun to expand rapidly, as people fled war in their home country. St. Charbel's congregation grew and there was a need for a bigger church.

In 1994, Hanna oversaw the move from Mann Avenue to the current location at 245 Donald St. The church spent \$3 million on renovations to the new property, yet did not have to take out any loans, said Tony Yacoub, treasurer of St. Charbel's parish council and Hanna's friend for more than 20 years.

“We are debt-free,” Yacoub said, proudly.

Part of the reason was the support that Hanna could call upon from the community through fundraising, Yacoub said.

An example of this support, Yacoub said, was in 1998 when the church decided to buy a nearby school property at 225 Donald St.

“In one night, (Hanna) called up the people and said, ‘I need \$300,000,’ ” Yacoub said.

“I was treasurer — in 45 minutes we collected \$300,000,” Yacoub said. “People, they just came and dropped cheques and things ... in 45 minutes, we were done.”

Support like that “doesn’t come overnight,” Yacoub said. “He was tireless.”

“He sacrificed his entire life for the church,” said Violette Hanna, Raymond’s sister. “He was very down to earth,” she said, adding that he would clean the church every morning himself, even taking out the garbage.

“He was someone I would say who was a leader by example,” said Maroun El-Hage, a church volunteer for the past 30 years. “When you saw him working, you just followed.”

The greater Ottawa community also benefitted from Hanna’s leadership. Instead of renting the downtown school space out to businesses, Hanna gave cheap office space to charities and not-for-profit organizations, such as the Snowsuit Fund and Children at Risk. During tough economic times and sparse government funding, it allowed those organizations to survive, Yacoub said. It’s now called the Hardini Community Centre.

“He made 245 Donald St. a centre for community service,” El- Hage said.

Hanna was always busy helping others, Yacoub said. “When he had a moment, he visited sick people.”

Even on his deathbed, Hanna continued to make plans for his church and his community, Violette said.

“The doctors, they were amazed at his attitude,” Yacoub said. “He took everything in a very positive way.”

Hanna’s impact on Ottawa residents and others was evident at his Nov. 16 funeral in the church he’d helped build. Thousands attended, spilling out the front doors to the street outside.

It was a beautiful day, unusually sunny and warm for mid-November, Violette said. People of all faiths and professions were present, including more than 20 church officials. Other community leaders also attended, including government officials at the federal, provincial and municipal levels. Yet, during the service, the huge crowd was completely silent out of respect for the man they had lost.

Adults and children alike were crying, Violette said, and some even broke into applause at points in the service. “We didn’t know how to express our emotions,” she said.

“It was something like a miracle happening.”

Hanna will be buried in Beechwood Cemetery, in a plot he set aside years ago for members of Ottawa’s Lebanese community.