

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING ARMENIANS

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

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PROFILE OF ARMENIANS IN THE UNITED STATES

General Background

Armenia is a small landlocked nation, slightly smaller than the state of Maryland, bordered by Turkey on the west, Iran on the south, Georgia on the north and Azerbaijan on the east. Once, many times its size, it has been whittled down by its neighbors, resulting in serious dislocation of many of its residents who have become the diaspora in far-flung nations.

History has treated Armenia cruelly. From being the first nation to formally accept Christianity in the early 4th century, it has been defeated by successive conquests from Turkey, Arabs, and Muslims and more recently Armenia was annexed into the Soviet Socialist Republic. Only in 1991 was Armenia declared independent, though border wars continue to plague the economy. A pivotal tragic event was the 'genocide' of 1915, when one and a half million Armenians were killed or starved by the Turks. Furthermore, there is a long history of devastating earthquakes including the quake of 1988 which killed at least 30,000 persons primarily in the area of Gyumri.

Immigration Patterns

These factors and others, including economics and persecution, have contributed to the spread of Armenian immigration especially to North America. About three and a half million Armenians currently reside in their homeland, while an equal number live elsewhere. One writer has said: "Armenia lies on the crossroads of all the ways, bare and dishonored, and passers by devour and abuse it. Yet, Armenians always seem to be able to survive and prosper."

The first Armenian came to USA in 1607. 70,000 Armenians migrated during 1885-1914. Since World War II, the Armenian population in North America has tripled. The current U.S. population is over one million with Armenians in Southern California constituting the largest Armenian community in the Diaspora. Other U.S. cities with large Armenian populations include: Fresno, San Francisco, New York, Boston, Detroit and Chicago, etc.

Armenians are hardy and resilient. There are often identified with their surname which typically ends with an "ian" or "yan" such as Deukmajian (former governor of California) or Haleblian. Sometimes they are described in this way: "Beneath an outer veneer of hardness and fierce independence, they carry deep inner wounds and suppressed feelings of rejection, isolation, and hurt." Many Armenian immigrants come with the overlay of a second culture such as Lebanon or Turkey or Russia which makes their cultural adjustment even more complex.

Religious Heritage

Among the qualities that many Armenians share are these: 1. they love education and their unique language and script. Indeed their written language is seen as an inspired gift of God. Their Bible is called: "The Breath of God." Several Nazarene Armenian pastors have earned doctorate degrees. 2. They love artistic expression seen in their distinct church architectural styles, manuscripts, musical and art styles. 3. They are intensely family-committed with a strong degree of family loyalty and awareness. 4. They are intensely patriotic towards the homeland and the Christian faith with over 92% of Armenians at least nominally committed to the Armenian Apostolic Church from birth on.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing Armenians

General Suggestions:

Understand migration patterns. Older generation Armenians may be fully integrated into the majority culture and only reference Armenia with regards to patriotic remembrances of the Old Country. Newer migrations often involve mediatory countries such as France, Russia, Turkey, and Iraq, and these may either facilitate or impede bridges of connections.

Honor the positive aspects of the culture—their Christian history, their long-suffering patience, their diligence and work ethic, their adaptability. Find connections not only in Christianity but with their icon of Mt. Arafat, where Noah landed the ark in the Bible.

Celebrate their festivities, mourn their historical hurts.

Provide genuine hospitality and practical care for new immigrant Armenians. Research their arrival and transitional location patterns. Pair off identified new immigrant families with native Nazarene families to provide sustained emotional and Christian care.

Programs of ESL, citizenship adaptation classes, first aid, resource referencing, counseling, clothing, furniture, and food can all be helpful to build true relationships.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR DISTRICTS IS TO:

- Identify Armenian populations and Armenian organizations in the community, especially other Christian churches.
- Work with the advice of well established and known Nazarene Armenian leaders particularly those in Southern California.
- In the development of Church congregations, give broad license to indigenized leadership styles, forms of worship, and symbols and rituals (church architectural styles) while keeping current dialogues that respect both cultures' gifts to each other.
- Encourage Armenian ministry networks, both within and outside of the denomination, i.e. evangelistic meetings, Armenian national events, breakfast gatherings.
- Work intimately with the denominational Armenian coordinator.
- After locating potential leadership and participating personnel, identify a convenient and compatible ministry location, probably in an existing host church,

willing to invest emotionally and resourcefully in the development of the Armenian congregation.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR LOCAL CHURCHES IS:

- Identify Armenian Nazarenes who already participate in majority congregations. Find out what family and relational networks they represent. See them as “bridge missionaries” to the larger Armenian community.
- Learn something about the Armenian Apostolic Church as it represents not just the major Christian body among Armenians, but is also the repository of cultural identity. Do not denigrate or debate its theology. Because of its deep historical traditions, it offers symbols and rituals profoundly important to the culture. For Armenians curious about the Church of the Nazarene, speak about the theological assets of the Nazarene Church, rather than the deficiencies of the Apostolic Church. Know the connecting points. Dr. Krikor Haleblian has written a book that describes his own theological pilgrimage from the Church of the Nazarene back to an evangelical form of the Apostolic Church. The issues that it raises are instructive to understanding the similarities and differences between the churches.
- Choose leadership that is not dictatorial and domineering (i.e. “old school”) but rather “servant-leaders” who exhibit humility, patience, love and sacrificial service.
- Make clear to Armenians what the Church of the Nazarene has to offer: sound doctrine, cultural sensitivity, material resources, international vision, educational/training opportunities, and solid Armenian connections.
- Don’t be pushy or manipulative. Armenians have strength as a solid cultural identity that only over time will adapt to their new environment.
- Be sensitive to their unique cultural hurts—don’t argue about the Turkey genocide, or Russian communism, or the Iraq War. Their historical perspectives are quite different from yours.
- Recognize the importance of symbols. Use Mt Arafat or the Christian history to build legitimacy and warmth in relationships.
- Use Armenian literature especially the Bible which is so culturally significant. Place the Bible in a central location of the worship service.
- Encourage “home evangelism” and home Bible studies but also invite participation in the majority cultural ministry context. Many Armenians are multi-cultural and can participate across cultural barriers.

