

Mission in Partnership: Armenia and Ukraine, Post 1, Sunday, March 6, 2011

The pinks of a gentle, cold dawn tint the snowy slopes of Mount Ararat. Across the just-waking city of Yerevan, Armenia, the majesty of this Biblical mountain grows ever larger as morning sun now glints off the sides of the 16,854-foot peak. And, in the Book it says, “in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat” (Genesis 8:4).



I am in Armenia to learn. First, I will learn of the work of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation—the Armenian and Karabakh portion of the PC(USA)’s Jinishian Memorial Program. Second, I will learn from leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, and the Armenian Evangelical Church.

<http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/jinishian/>

<http://www.jinishian.org/>

With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Jinishian Memorial Foundation began its work in Armenia in 1993. Since then it has provided economic, social and spiritual assistance to more than 2 million needy Armenians and supported more than 160 grassroots and local NGOs through partnership and collaboration.

The host for this visit is Eliza Minasyan. Eliza has been the country director of the Jinishian Memorial Program Armenia in recent years. She and her family will soon move to Louisville as she assumes responsibilities as the executive director/coordinator for the JMP.

As we travel and learn, we will also meet with and listen to the perspectives of Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical leaders here in Armenia. Each expression of the Christian faith has faced its own challenges of renewal in this new era of national independence: the lingering

effects of the devastating 1988 earthquake, rebuilding church institutions after almost 70 years of communism, the impacts of the war in nearby Nagorno-Karabakh, the continuing impact of Armenians emigrating from the homeland, and more.

It is my hope to post mission reflections in the days ahead from Armenia and Ukraine. I ask for your prayers for the citizens of these nations, for their churches, and for those of us who travel this day.

May the Peace of Christ be with you this day,

Gary

Gary Payton
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Mission in Partnership: Armenia and Ukraine, Post 2, Monday, March 7, 2011

The story has been told for centuries. Two of Jesus' apostles, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, preached the Christian message among Armenians between 40 and 60 A.D. The faith grew. And in 301 Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity. With this history of two founding apostles, the name of the historic tradition is the Armenia Apostolic Church.

On Sunday I worshipped at St. Zoravor Church, a church built in 1693 on the site of a monastery destroyed previously by an earthquake.



The church was filled to overflowing; women, men, a few young adults, an occasional child. As the Divine Liturgy began, the active involvement in the service by worshippers was all around me. Father Daniel Findikyan offers a detailed explanation of the liturgy on this webpage of the Armenian Apostolic Church:

www.armenianchurchlibrary.com/files/introdivineliturgyfindikyan.pdf

www.armenianchurch.org

Did I understand the service in classical Armenian? No. Did I feel a sense of the holy through the incense, the reading of Scripture, prayers, and community response? Yes. Was I able to pray with intensity? Indeed, I was.

As I departed the church, I lit three small candles and lifted up my own prayers to the Lord: one candle for grandparents and father who have gone before me; one candle for my living family of four generations; and one candle for new life that will be brought into the world in April by our son and daughter-in-law and new life not yet imagined.

It is a powerful experience to be with so many Christians whose tradition goes back over 1,700 years. Faith in this form and in other forms of Christian expression has sustained Armenians through imperial occupation, genocide, war, and social upheaval. It was right to give thanks and praise on this first full day in Armenia.

Monday my learning continues with the leadership of Eliza Minasyan of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation and Doug Welch and Amgad Beblawi of Presbyterian World Mission as we meet with Armenian Catholic leaders and visit projects in the historic city of Gyumri in the northwest.

May the Peace of Christ be with you this day,

Gary

Mission in Partnership: Armenia and Ukraine, Post 3, Tuesday, 8 March 2011

Warm greetings to each of you on this Tuesday, International Women's Day!

(In the republics of the former Soviet Union this holiday is still celebrated with enthusiasm! Woe be it to the man who does not remember his wife or close female work colleague with flowers or chocolates this day! Last night the streets of Yerevan were filled with flower sellers ready to keep the guys who walked by out of trouble with the ladies on this Tuesday! Flowers are always good!)

So it is most appropriate that on this day I share with you the story of an amazing woman of the church, Sister Arousiag Sajonian of the Armenian Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

But first, a little background is in order.

On December 7, 1988, a massive earthquake devastated large sections of northwest Armenia. Four cities and 58 villages were changed forever, particularly Armenia's second largest city of Gyumri and nearby Spitak. At least 25,000 people were killed as stone and concrete homes, schools, business and government buildings collapsed in the midday quake and aftershocks. The Soviet government estimated 25,000 killed. More likely the death toll was in the 75,000 to 100,000 range with at least 500,000 people left homeless.



Yesterday we visited the many places in Gyumri where the Jinishian Memorial Foundation (JMF) has worked in partnership. And we met Sister Arousiag, the Superior of the Our Lady of Armenia Center. Seeing the plight of the many orphans and elderly in Gyumri after the quake, Sister dedicated this phase of her life to those in this place.



Inspired by the Lord and under her leadership, the ministry is nothing short of remarkable. Consider these projects, many of which have been aided by JMF:

- The Boghossian Education Center, an institution established to secure the development of orphaned, abandoned and needy children. Tightly focused, lovingly run, the small orphanage we visited is giving the children a chance at life they would not otherwise have.
- The Day Care Center for the Elderly. In contemporary American vocabulary, we would call this clean and well administered place a senior center. It clearly focuses on improving the lives of 30 to 40 elderly in the Gyumri area.
- The Diramayr Vocational School. For me, my greatest learning came with a visit to this new facility. Years ago Sister Arousiag recognized the need for vocational skills among members of the community. Some of the young adults have come out of the orphanage, many others from the nearby city, and some are in fact mature adults needing a trade to provide security for themselves and their families. Analyzing the employment opportunities and the needs in Armenia, Sister Arousiag led the way for tightly focused training: plumbing, electrical technology, computer graphic design, and culinary arts. Throughout the day we witnessed students working in first-class facilities preparing for their futures.

www.armeniansisters.org/

I must admit that I have enjoyed many wonderful meals prepared in Christian love in my journeys as a Presbyterian mission coworker: reindeer burgers for breakfast prepared by Baptist ladies in Salekhard on the Arctic Circle, healthy soups with faculty and students at the Novosaratovka Lutheran Seminary near St. Petersburg, and an extraordinary mushroom dish prepared by the mother of a Polish pastor near Lodz. But little prepared me for lunch on Monday!

The culinary arts program of the vocational school trains young people for service in the hotel and restaurant industry. Out front were two young people practicing their skills as servers. In the modern kitchen about a dozen young people prepared our wonderful meal, developing their own skills for later life. As the program was inaugurated only last year, we were but the second group for whom the students prepared and served a meal. The first was for the French Ambassador! (The teacher trained for six months in France.) A wonderful, memorable meal, skillfully prepared and served, and all a part of holistic ministry, allowing community members to move beyond the horror of the earthquake to find their path in life.



May your day be blessed, even as we pray for the ministries of the Our Lady of Armenia Center and the programs of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation here in Armenia.

In Christ,

Gary

Mission in Partnership: Armenia and Ukraine, Post 4, Friday, 11 March 2011

After an all-day journey, our small group (five staff from the Jinishian Memorial Foundation office in Yerevan, Doug Welch, Amgad Beblawi, and I) arrived safely Thursday night in the city of Stepanakert, the capital of the independent Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. For me, the journey was amazing. I live amidst the Northwest Rocky Mountains in northern Idaho, but the rugged, high altitude nature of this part of the Caucasus Mountains was simply spectacular: windswept passes, shining white snow fields, shepherds tending their hillside flocks, foxes hiding amidst bushes, villages tucked into protective valleys, etc.



But we are not tourists. We came from Armenia via the Lachin corridor with the focused purpose of seeing a part of Presbyterian World Mission’s ministry in this place as conducted via the Jinishian program. We are here because of the ongoing recovery from the violence and destruction of the 1991–1994 war that separated this largely Armenian enclave from Azerbaijan.

www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Karabakh

A little background is in order. Karabakh had for centuries been part of a greater Armenia. Yet soon after the Bolshevik Revolution and the creation of the USSR, Joseph Stalin assigned Karabakh to Azerbaijan. With Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of “glasnost” in the 1980s, the question of the alignment of Karabakh emerged again. Demonstrations to unite took place; pogroms and riots against Armenians followed in Azerbaijani cities. As the USSR was collapsing in 1991, a full-scale war broke out, lasting until 1994, when a ceasefire was negotiated. Today Nagorno-Karabakh is a de facto independent state about the size of Delaware with a democratic government and market economy. As a nation state without international recognition it survives with the support of Armenia and the Armenia diaspora around the world.

In recent years Jinishian has extended its programs to help meet critical needs in Karabakh.

- Through the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Center (a facility founded by Baroness Cox of Great Britain) 100 permanently disabled veterans of the war receive life-sustaining services.
- Through the Village Nurse Training project dozens of nurses in rural villages learned new skills. The nurses, assigned one to a village, provide essential care and midwifery. They had had no update training in the 20 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

- Through the arts program of the Narakatsi Cultural Center dozens of children in the war-scarred community of Shushi have the opportunity for classes in theater, dance, pottery, painting, wood sculpture and more. In our personal experiences today their self-esteem was a joy to see.



From the Republic’s Minister of Health, from the Rehabilitation Center’s director, and from a veteran confined to a wheelchair lifelong due to his spinal wounds from a sniper’s bullet in the war, the Jinishian Memorial Foundation and by extension the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received heartfelt thanks today.

I have served as a mission coworker for 12 years, and I never cease to be amazed at the multitude of ways and places the Lord has called us to do “mission in partnership.” Holistic ministries that bring God’s love, nurture, and healing are a joy to be a part of and to see.

May the Peace of Christ be with you this day,

Gary

Mission in Partnership: Armenia and Ukraine, Post 5, Sunday, 14 March 2011

Once more Mount Ararat looms large on the horizon as dawn breaks over the city of Yerevan. My first visit to Armenia and Karabakh is near an end. I came to learn about the outreach of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation and from leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, and the Armenian Evangelical Church.

Throughout my journey the extraordinary Jinishian ministries have filled my days. Individual images come to mind:

- A plaque in earthquake-ravaged Gyumri announcing the “Jinishian Electricity Workshop” to provide adults, young and old, with skills for self-sufficiency and dignity.

- Beehives, a milk-cooling tank, and the informed talk of rural farmers joined in a cooperative aided by a Jinishian loan. Organic products are an outcome and so is a piece of revitalized agriculture after the spirit-destroying collectivization of the Soviet regime.



- An 8-year-old boy painting an “illuminated Bible” scene with skill and patience. In the Karabakh city of Shushi, children enjoy a host of art classes providing a creative outlet in a city still ravaged by recent war and destruction.
- The enthusiastic presentation of a young university student in Goris explaining an ecology project to clean their city and its river and to change the attitude of older adults regarding the environment. A strong and healthy civil society can be enabled by programs to care for God’s creation.

www.jinishian.org

And how to encapsulate the learnings of a land that adopted Christianity 1,710 years ago?

- Bishop Hovakim Manukyan, Father Barouyr Avetisyan and Dr. Karen Nazaryan shared the history, the current challenges, and the hopes of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

www.armenianchurch.org

- Visits to historic Apostolic churches and monasteries underscored the centrality of the faith keeping Armenian culture alive through occupation, genocide and oppression. And regular, visible reminders were the hundreds of khatchkars, ornate stone crosses, that mark the landscape and tell the story of faith across generations.



- Sister Arousiag Sajonian of the Armenian Sisters of the Immaculate Conception demonstrated extraordinary commitment to “the least of these” through the orphanage, senior center, and vocational school. These Armenia Catholic programs and projects are the visible signs, but at the heart it is about Christ’s love to be received and to share.

www.armeniansisters.org/

- Reverend Doctor Rene Leonian of the Armenian Evangelical Church and the Armenian Evangelical World Council traced the history of the Protestant presence in Armenia and detailed its role in the country today. More important, his sermon and greetings during Sunday worship welcomed us warmly into the life of the congregation now and in the future.

Meetings and seeing projects are now over for this trip here. Now I ask for your prayers for the Armenian people, here and in the diaspora; for Christ’s churches in all their forms, which are renewing themselves in this time of independence; for the leaders and staff of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation; and for our prayerful discernment of “next steps” in which Presbyterian World Mission may “come alongside” these pieces of the body of Christ in this historic place.

May the Peace of Christ be with you this day,

Gary