



## My Church in Armenia –

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I had an interesting, though short, conversation the other day about religion. I mentioned to a woman I work with that I was attending the Evangelical Church of Yerevan right around the corner from my apartment. We ride together and I was just making a simple observation.

She said, “You mean it’s an organization?”

I said, “No. It’s a church.”

“But, it’s not the Armenian Apostolic Church. So it’s an organization,” she replied.

“No. It’s a Christian church. We’re all Christians. Apostolic or the Evangelical Church or the United Methodist Church. All believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,” I said. “You don’t mind working for the United Methodists and drawing a pay check, do you? So there are many types of Christian churches and all believe in the same Trinity.”

“But,” she said, “UMCOR is an NGO. It is not a church organization. It has nothing to do with the church.”

“Ahh, but on some level, there is support for it by United Methodists, Christians who are not part of the Apostolic church,” I said.

It was best to leave it at that and continue on our way. I’m not here to proselytize—in my job at UMCOR or at the University. However, I have found a community of good Christian people who have welcomed me into their midst. I have prayed with them and I attend Wednesday night Bible study with a group of English-speaking people who attend – Fortune, a football (soccer) player from Nigeria who is married to an Armenian woman with whom he has a two-year-old daughter; Canadian-born Aaron who is married to Mexican-born Ada; Marcia from Florida and myself. At different times, other English-speakers have also stopped in. On Saturday nights, I have been practicing with the bell choir (music is truly a universal language, though counting is best done in my head in English.)

The church was started in about 1994 by Syrian-born Armenian the Reverend Dr. Levon Bardakjian. He lived in Los Angeles for several years and speaks very good English, though the music, announcements and his sermons are all in Armenian. When he asks one of us English-speakers to pray or to witness, Pastor Levon serves as the interpreter. When we’re listening to the sermons, an interpreter sits by us in the last row under the balcony. Pastor is a towering man with

a good singing voice, a gregarious personality and a perseverance that drives him to grow the Evangelical Church in Armenia.

I can see where it could be an uphill struggle to bring Christianity to the first Christian nation in the world. Yet, Pastor Levon diligently tends to his flock via a TV station the church operates (on which Marcia and I were guests one evening and some of our co-workers even saw us!) There are Bible study classes across the city, nearer to people's homes. The choirs are magnificent and may be touring the United States in early 2006. The bell choir is getting better, though we could use a few more ringers, if you have the time! ☺ There's also Sunday school and other activities at the church.



A few weeks ago, all the Bible study groups got together for a potluck, which was interesting to participate in since it's a very foreign approach to a meal for Armenians. Rather than walk through the line, food was divvied up and put at each table. I was the only one to bring Jello! There were no potato, tuna or macaroni salads. No pork and bean hot dishes. Can you imagine such a church potluck?? ☺ The evening concluded with about 30 minutes of singing, including Fortune with a Nigerian song and Ada with a Spanish-language song.

The day before my conversation with my co-worker, Pastor Levon preached about the universal Christian church. His interest is in helping people develop a personal relationship with God. In whichever Christian church that can happen for people, Pastor Levon is happy. Yet, some people are not pleased with that idea. So he continues in his ministry to His people.

I find the religion situation here interesting. The first Christian nation, yet many people do not go to church on a regular basis. Rather, they stop at church, light a few candles and then walk backwards out of the building so as not to turn their back on God. Children are baptized at about age three and people are married there during a 10- to 15-minute ceremony. This week, after Armen, Anahit and I stopped off some UMCOR school kits at a church, the pastor said a special prayer over the three of us in the sanctuary. A few other people were also in the sanctuary praying.



*Marcia's last Sunday at church before leaving for the Republic of Georgia.*

Many people here also live according to His 10 Commandments, as well as the greatest commandment of loving one another. Yet, I believe that 70 years of Communism made people the way they are today towards *going* to church. People such as Pastor Levon are only trying to bring them back to their Christian roots in God.

Or, is *going* to church the way Americans think of it really that important? The Bible says that where two or more are gathered... So can people gather in their homes, light a candle and say a brief prayer, follow the Commandments...and still remain true to their Christian religion?

For me, I know that I need the connectivity with other Christians to sustain my faith every day. I'm so happy to have found this church and to have become involved in its life.

Peace!

Story and Photo by Pamela J. Karg,  
United Methodist Volunteers in Mission  
From the Wisconsin Conference Serving at the  
United Methodist Committee on Relief – Armenia office  
<http://www.umcor.am>  
[pjkarg@baraboo.com](mailto:pjkarg@baraboo.com)