

## **“A Trip to Armenia: Friends Bring Friends”**

**Youth Life International**

**Articles by Robert John Andrews**

**Photographs by Noah Zakarian**

### **For the Price of a Frisbee**

An invitation to throw a Frisbee encouraged a young woman named Ani to spend five days in July at the Young Life Sports Camp located at Camp Zepyur, a rented facility tucked up along the Mirmarik River at the base of a highland mountain range covered in nettles and rocky outcroppings.



**[Photos of the Mirmarik River and scenery]**



The camp site, one of several popular summer family resorts in Armenia, is located near the town of Hankavan, an hour drive northeast of Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia.

**[Insert map of Armenia???)**

*"I came here last summer,"* said Ani **[photo – girl]** through the Young Life leader, Narine, who served as interpreter for her interview.



*"I came alone, no friends, but I had my Frisbee team. It started with me in park watching the team play Frisbee. They invited me to play. My team is the Zeytun team. There are seven on a team. I like everything about camp along with that part about God and Jesus. I like the small group. We get to know each other better. To love everyone. The way it should be."*

Ani was one of seventy young people, approximately forty boys and thirty girls, aged fourteen to eighteen **[fact check]** participating in the Young Life Sports Camp, an annual camp sponsored by Youth Life, an international Christian ministry dedicated to loving adolescents so that: **"Every adolescent will have the opportunity to meet Jesus Christ and follow Him."**

In Young Life Armenia that vision of opportunity often begins with the chance to throw a Frisbee. You can throw a Frisbee back-handed, slingshot it far with two fingers and a thumb, or pretend you are throwing an axe (backhand, forehand, hammer throw). Once you perfect these basics you can move on to the more experimental passes: the chicken wing, the forward flick, the elevator pass.

A Frisbee was how Simon **[photo – boy in blue]** found himself at the Sports Camp. Ultimate Frisbee is even more inexpensive and more convenient to play than soccer.



*“Two friends were in the park throwing the Frisbee,” he said. “They saw me watching and invited me because they know I am interested in sports. Basketball. Football (soccer). Here is a warmer atmosphere, honest. Much more different than my other friendships. Here it means trust.”*

The young campers arrive in vans and buses and settle into the dorm style rooms of Camp Zepyur. The days begin with hikes to reach to the peak of those nettled filled mountains, soon followed by calisthenics and other drills to ready muscles for a day of games and competition.

**[photo of activities – especially Frisbee]**









Games at the Young Life Sports Camp include basketball, small sided soccer matches, and, as the highlight, a variety of games involving the Frisbee, including Ultimate Frisbee and capture the flag Frisbee. Young Life leaders who are experts in the various sports demonstrate and drill the young people in order to increase their skill levels. Young Life Armenia was the first to bring Ultimate Frisbee to Armenia. For the price of a Frisbee, everyone is invited to play, boys and girls alike. Boy and girls play together. An inexpensive Frisbee becomes the bridge linking the young people to the message, vision, and friendship of Young Life.

This camp was Mika's **[photo – black shirt]** third Sports Camp.



*"I come to develop [my] qualities of playing. I learn about sportsmanship and spiritual learning." When asked what this Young Life Sports Camp has made him think about himself and what he will take back home, Mika answered: "How God connects us and each other. Move toward Jesus. Love each other like Jesus."*

Sports Camp is as advertised: sports camp. Sports is one approach Young Life Armenia takes in serving the young people of Armenia. The cost per camper for the Sports Camp is \$10 per young person (4761 Armenian Drams).

Young Life sponsors other camps, such as English Camp to help the young people become more proficient in speaking English. Considering Armenia belonged to the Soviet bloc of nations from 1922 to 1991 and given how the two nations continue strong relations, many Armenians speak Russian. Half of the television channels in Armenia broadcast Russian news, comedy, and dramatic shows. Some of the campers spoke Arabic as well. For five weeks in a row from mid-July to August Young Life Armenia also sponsors five Camps designed for team building, fun, and worship, drawing from the one 112 Young Life teams of young people located throughout Armenia **[fact check]**.

Love of sports is what drew Isko **[photo – gold hair]** to the Young Life Sports Camp.



Isko was born in Canada but her father and mother returned to Armenia so her father could join the fight in the ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where Armenia contests Azerbaijani's claim to the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Said Isko in her own English: *"Friends brought me here. We met playing Frisbee. They said it would be great fun. Thought I'd try to succeed. At park saw them. One of my friends playing suggested me to play with them. Maybe I like it. I like it very much. Suggested I come to camp. Enjoy myself, basketball of course. Cannot imagine my life without basketball."*

Do your parents like you coming to camp, she was asked.

*My parents? If I enjoy it, I am free to choose. What I've learned here is communication skills. I know myself pretty well. Find here to think new a lot myself. Communication skills and many things about my friends and their behaviors. And interesting how to talk different people. Some people you can say what you think and some you can't. Improve that skills."*

When asked if she had anything else she'd like to say, Isko replied: *"About what?"*





## Who Do You Love?

Each night of Young Life Sports Camp concluded with Club, an integral feature of all Young Life teams.



### [The nose pass]

Each night the seventy campers and their leaders assembled beneath the tent of the Camp Zepyur concrete amphitheater for an evening of loud music, dancing, and comedy skits. One such comedy skit invited selected a series of young men to pass a tube of fabric from nose to nose. Another skit invited several young people to participate in a physical version of 'Whisper-Down-the-Lane,' where a leader acted out a series of movements that each person brought forward were invited to mimic and teach the next. A more enthusiastic activity came straight from the Russian Comedy channel with electric dog collars attached to the upper arms of older Young Life Leaders who were challenged to throw a Frisbee as many times as possible in a minute while being shocked. A more gentle game invited selected persons to demonstrate their skills in juggling a soccer ball, twirling a Frisbee, or spinning a basketball on a finger. One word game, with the crowd cued ahead of time, invited young women to respond to the leaders who told the contestants: *"Just tell me, who do you love?"* Some of the young woman would giggle and remain shy and silent. Some mumbled a certain name. The laughter from the crowd would puzzle and confuse the contestant because all she needed to say wasn't a secret name but the phrase itself: *"who do you love?"*

Entering the final phase of Club a video is projected on the large screen. The first night the video featured the Panyee Football Club of Thailand, celebrating a group of young boys who, despite living on a floating island, built their own football pitch and proceeded to surprise the

nation by distinguishing themselves at a national tournament. The second night featured world class soccer stars dealing with losing and failure, such as Portuguese star Ronaldo wiping his crying eyes following a defeat. The final video presented gifted Olympic champions who struggled in their sport, but who found purpose and motivation to their competition by discovering faith in Jesus Christ.

Arman Asatryan, the director of Young Life in Armenia, followed each video with a short message during which he would gently apply the stories presented to the lives of the young people seated in the amphitheater. His talk was as soft and as gentle as the way he greeted each young person throughout the day and upon their arrival for Club. With an eye for the lonely or homesick, the timid or skeptical, Arman would wander up to them, drape his arm around them, quietly encouraging them to move forward and join others sitting closer to the stage. His manner was all invitation and respectful encouragement without coercion. This respectful encouragement would continue following Club, when all the campers were invited to meet in small groups with their leaders for conversation and a closing prayer back at their dormitory.

Each night the baking hot days gave way to sudden downpours, dropping the evening temperature to a chill. Leaders had to push up the awning of the amphitheater with brooms to release the pooling water.

Arsen [photo – red] first came to camp in 2014.



He too became connected with the Young Life Sports Camp because he too was invited to throw a Frisbee and join a team. Arsen explained: *"Friendships are real here. Better friends because they trust and love like Jesus loves us. Your life really changes. It helped that I meet Jesus. I feel his love and he helped me leave my wrong life."*

**[Insert Box to the side with abridged biography of Lilit and Arman from Young Life biographies]**





## Camp Bujakan

The dirt road through the farm village of Bujakan that takes you to the Young Life Team Camp is more than eroded by rainfall, it is corroded by the extremes of Armenian weather, a land that boasts seven main landscape types (from desert to alpine) despite being a land mass half the size of West Virginia in the USA.

The roadway resembles a dry river bed, barely passable by car let alone by vans ferrying hundreds of young boys and girls from various cities and villages throughout Armenia.

For most of their campers, it is their first experience at a Young Life Team Camp. Many of the young people come from the countryside, many raised by single mothers who work in McDonalds, as cleaners, teachers. Their fathers are absent due to death, divorce, or having relocated to Russia to find work. Explained Arman and Lilit Astrayan, the directors of Young Life in Armenia, that is why they are grateful for the many young men who serve as Young Life leaders. *"It is important to have male leaders so they can establish relationship with men,"* said Lilit. *"When we know, we try to fill that."*

Camp Bujakan hosts five weeks of Young Life Team Camps for one hundred and twenty young people each week. Plus, Young Life Armenia sponsors a similar camp in nearby Georgia. The cost assessed per camper is \$20, though the actual cost to operate the camp costs \$60 per camper, resulting in \$7,200 per week for the rental of the building, a rental cost which has increased each of the three years they have rented this particular facility. Additional costs include hiring the cooks, paying for food, and supplies. Older campers are invited to return and volunteer as guards for the night shift, other to help clean and gather the trash.



**[Photo – trash bin]**

Campers, in gym bag or small piece of luggage, bring their own bedding to reduce costs. The five story building of Camp Bujakan with its two internal stairwells once served as a sanitarium during the days when Armenia was a member state of the Soviet Union. “*A place to relax,*” said Young Life volunteer leader Ashot Khanamiryan with a smile. A squat and tiered yard fronts the building, with the lower area serving as a cramped and lumpy soccer pitch.



[Photo of building]

Camp Bujakan still is a place to relax and recuperate, and have fun. The Young Life Sports Camp fills the day with sports, training, drills, calisthenics. The Young Life Team Camp at Bujakan offers, according to one directors of the Young Life Armenia, Lilit Astrayan, a “*more homey camp.*” Floors alternate between where boys and girls have their rooms, with members of the opposite sex disallowed from entering each other’s rooms. The ‘homey’ advantage of the former sanitarium, despite its disrepair – mildew, broken toilets, exposed electrical wires, wobbly wooden chairs in the dining hall -- are its several open lounges and couches to which the young people readily gravitate. The building’s pervasive tile keeps the interior cool. One lounge, with its snack bar and old tires turned into coffee tables painted in multi-colors, invites the young people to play soccer on a PlayStation 1 video game. Messi still sports a Barcelona uniform.



[MC Escher Stairwell...]



[snack bar]



[Playstation 1 – Pastor Edo and son]

Club held each night follows a similar high energy format to the Young Life Sport Camp, but with a more intentional fostering of the young people's connection with Jesus as friend. Said Arusik: *"It is boring if not connected to Jesus. If you keep coming, the biggest reason is for Jesus."* To the tune of the Monkee's "I'm A Believer," blindfolded partners tried to feed each other containers of yogurt. Small tissue boxes were distributed, then, upon signal, it became a race to see who in the crowd could empty the box first by pulling out the tissues with their mouth. Two fellows in Sumo-suits competed as Hip-hop dancers, and then to see who could first shake a plastic soda bottle filled with M&M's into the one attached to it like an hourglass.









[Photos of club]

Each camper was given the chance to feel special as their photographs were displayed on the large screen hung to the side of the stage. The participants for the various games and skits were selected by a random rotation of these photographs first taken upon their arrival at the Young Life Team Camp. 'Anekdot' time included videos of a variety of persons offering brief testimonies during the day's events. Winners from the day's competitions were announced.

Moving toward the closing reflection time of Club, calming music was sung by Aram [last name please] with the young people joining the refrain about caring for Jesus and being cared for by Jesus. Several of the first time campers, it was reported with a smile to the author, assumed that Aram's love song was about his wife. A video presentation was followed by Arman Astrayan, the director, delivering a Bible lesson along with an invitation to meet Jesus as a friend.

With the grounds inadequate for a water slide, a favorite activity among the campers, they remain fine for camp leaders keen on improvisation and adaptation. Tons of dirt were trucked in during the night and dumped on a gigantic tarp, then watered from the water tanks stored at the roof of the building, inviting the young campers to frolic in the mud, their 'mud fest.' Throughout the rest of the week there would be scavenger hunt day, treasure hunt day, game day, a carnival and a closing celebration day with inexpensive prizes awarded.

The second day of camp is dedicated to team building activities.

Lilit Astrayan described the concept of the Young Life Team Camp as follows: *“We want them to have fun, to enjoy themselves, get dirty. We make it not very formal – growth comes from the Holy spirit – they can be normal a camp -- if get into trouble we are faithful to them and they can come to camp – with each kid you have to have personal relationship. In home world, they are told ‘don’t get dirty, don’t get wet.’ Here we break the barriers -- want them to just enjoy, give them permission to be free.”*

In addition to freedom to be free, they give plenty of permission to talk, to lounge, to have time for fostering new friendships and strengthening old friendships. *“You have to bring faithfulness to relationships,”* said Lilit. Friendship remains the key to Young Life Team Camp. *“Friends bring friends,”* explained Ashot’s wife, Arusik. *“If not bring a friend, what’s the reason? Every Young Life camper has to bring a friend. If this is your second camp, you bring two friends. Third camp, three friends.”*

## Team Building Games

Team building games were signaled by Aram [last name please], a volunteer leader whose life before coming to Young Life was spent in crime and violence. Aram blew his whistle, shouted through his megaphone, and formed ten groups from the five team colors (identified by their pinnies of red, yellow, lime, orange, blue). Leaders assigned to each group helped shepherd the teams through the various team building exercises:

- 1) Colored balls spilled out on the ground, and each person given goggles to wear to blind them. Then, as directed by oral instructions, they had to cross through the mass of balls without stepping on balls and falling.



- 2) Water bucket where they were to dunk their face and time who could hold their breath the longest.



- 3) With two ropes laid out in curvy parallel fashion along the ground, each person had to find a partner and stretch and arch across the gap formed by the ropes and, either pushing against each other hands or are pulling on each other, the two persons must move sideways over a the gap toward the finish.



- 4) With two persons swinging the jump rope in a circle, each member of the team had to dash through the whirling rope, at first 1 at a time, then 2x2, 3x3, 4x4, finally with the entire group. If the rope catches someone, you start over.



- 5) With the team on ropes pulling, anchoring, the team must wobble and rock and walk the giant A-frame wooden structure (like the Stonehenge rocks) across the field to the finish line.



- 6) The team must hoist, pull, and maneuver a heavy timber via ropes to hook blocks and relocate them across a line.



- 7) The classic trust fall, as each person steps up onto a high platform (rock, utility box), crosses their arms, and fall back into the arms of the group without flinching or sitting.



- 8) Balloon pop: with ropes attached to a heavy beam the team must drop the point onto a balloon and pop it.



- 9) Two person partner up and each hold a rope that they use via a pulley, to support each other as they move across a tightrope rope toward each other and meet in the middle.



10) While holding onto a rope, each member of the team holds onto a higher rope as they walk from tree to tree across a tight rope, where they switch and haul themselves upside down across another rope to next tree.



## First the Bridge

The first thing, laughed Doug Browense of Petosky, Michigan, who sells construction equipment and has been involved with Young Life since [Fact check xxxxxx], was for them to build the bridge over the Marmarik River so they could deliver the equipment and materials and begin work on the new Young Life camp. Without that bridge, nothing could happen. All good things require a bridgehead.

*“We want our new camp to have the same homey, comfy qualities with better facilities for winter and summer,”* said Lilit Astrayan, one of the directors of Young Life in Armenia, as she described Young Life’s plans for their own camp, the grounds and facilities purchased for \$400,000 four years ago after having obtain the appropriate governmental approvals. To own their own camp frees Young Life from costly dependency on those landlords from whom they must rent facilities. The new site currently being prepared for future Young Life Camps is situated two miles upstream the Mirmarik River from the Camp Zepyur, the expensive site Young Life was obliged to rent to host to their Sports Camp.



[Pastor Edo's Wife, Doug, Arusik, Craig]



**[in the new dorm, Lilt and Arman with Helen (their daughter) and Eddie in background]**



**[Melanie, Doug Arusik, with Arusik and Ashot's son Leo getting paint on himself]**



[moving up toward the pavilion Doug and Adam in foreground]



**[Craig telling Adam of the plans]**

Brownense arrived with his wife to Armenia in 2015 to help facilitate Young Life Expeditions. Said Doug: *"I met so many here last year I wanted to come back and see them."*

Structural Consultant, Craig Cole from Walnut Creek, California (a town east of San Francisco bay), has over the years also donated time, talent, and resources into making the camp a success, his interest in Armenia kindled when he met leaders in Young Life ministering throughout former Soviet Bloc countries at a Young Life conference held at the Woodleaf, California, the Young Life Camp and retreat near his home.

Both men mentioned how camp hasn't yet been christened with a name. Doug and Craig both smiled when the subject was raised. Any name would need to appeal to the language needs of both the United States backers and the Armenians. No doubt, given the 'good friendship' between the two (good friendship 'bari – un gey rou zchyoun,' in the author's creative phonetics of the Armenian language) the right name will appear.

## A Better Facility



[dorm under renovation]



**[Dining Hall and Kitchen to be razed]**

The first two years following the purchase of the new camp site was spent picking up the trash left behind there by picnickers (among other visitors) who had frequented the grounds and buildings ever since the Soviet Union abandoned them after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of Stalin's legacy.

A headless monument stands overlooking the former parade ground, the stone paving now infested with weeds. The engraving on the monument reads: Kiroff 1886-1934. The bust of Sergey Kirov, a key Bolshevik leader at the time of the Russian revolution later who was assassinated in 1934, is now gone, along with the thousands of Young Pioneers who used to attend this Soviet camp every summer and stand to attention before his monument. Also gone is the Red Star that sat atop the Parade Grounds flagpole.

**[pictures from the Soviet days—supplied by Young Life]**

The disused and dilapidated dorms are estimated to have housed at each camp over 500 Young Pioneers proud in their red scarves, their small metal cots still tossed about the grounds. The metal mesh mattress supports are now used to sift sand for concrete for new construction.

Young Life projects it will cost a total of \$6 million to complete construction and modernize the facility. Because fundraising for this new camp and the ministry of Young Life is the commitment of Young Life International **[confirm]**, Lilit and Arman Astrayan are free to devote themselves full time to the ministry of Young Life in Armenia and building the relationships with the young people.

The development plan for the new camp, managed by the Young Life International Board of Directors in collaboration with Young Life Armenia, is guided by the expertise of a volunteer architect **[fact check -- name please]**. Plans call for demolishing the ruined dining hall and kitchen, clearing out the heavy brush which pervades the grounds as well as infesting the soccer pitch, fixing the maintenance building, replacing two large sheds with a building to host club meetings, plus a pavilion for lounging and making coffee and watching movies. Vital to the ministry is incorporating many spaces for conversation and prayer.



**[Old parade grounds]**

A camp once built by Stalin's Soviet Union for the Young Pioneers, a Soviet government sponsored children's organization designed to initiate adolescents into becoming dedicated members of the Young Communist League, is scheduled to be occupied as early as the summer of 2017 with young Armenians flinging Frisbees, performing comedy skits, dancing to modern Christian rock tunes sung in a variety of languages, and loving each other and Jesus.

There also was a game to paint in bright orange and purple enamel called Octagon (an eight sided half-wall in which players play a version of dodge ball). Another game to be built will be Snooker Pool (billiards, soccer style).





**[Interior of dorm under renovation]**



One of the dorms is three-quarters completed. It is projected to be one hundred percent ready by October of 2016. The camp will offer two dorms with two four rooms and two bathrooms for each floor, accommodating 200 persons in each dorm. A pool will replace the parade grounds. A central boiler will allow for camps during both the heat of summer and cold of winter. The water will be supplied by a cistern spring fed with pure water. They will tap into the existing sewer system. Stonework on the manager's house is nearing completion.



[Stone work]



### [Stonework]

Several shipping containers arrived from the United States and sit on the property storing lumber and other building materials. One also stores bed ready for moving into the dormitory. The beds have been manufactured as a Young Life project from the Washington Family Ranch, Oregon, USA.

*"A lot of sweat equity by teams,"* explained Eddie Esajian **[photo]** is how so much work in readying the new camp has been accomplished over these two years.



**[Narek, Noah, Ashot, Eddie]**

Eddie, himself of Armenia heritage, helps lead the First Armenian Presbyterian Church Fresno, California, along with their pastors Greg Haroutunian, Mike Mekredijian, Phil Garo, on mission trips to Armenia. *"They are so nice here I couldn't resist,"* he answered when asked why he keeps returning to work with Young Life Armenia. Much of that sweat equity, Eddie made a point to add, is accomplished by the Armenian Youth Life teams themselves coming here and putting in days of hard labor. There is plenty of brush to clear.

Observed Lilit Astrayan: *"It is a process, it is a beginning of a process. We are happy with that."*



**[Adam, (Kathy in background), Miraidy clearing brush]**



**[photos of Melanie FACT CHECK – wife of Narek and Arusik painting the Octagon]**

**Need more facts of Fresno, ARDA? ARTA? Young Life???**





**[Lilit, Kathy, Craig, Doug, Eddie, Noah, Adam, Miraidy]**

## Shoulder to Shoulder

Edvard Mierzoyan, **[photo]** pastor of the Bethlehem Evangelical Church of Yerevan, serves as pastor to Arman and Lilit Astrayan, the directors of Young Life in Armenia, as well as to many of the Young Life leaders and volunteers.



**[Pastor Edo]**

He became the pastor of this congregation three years ago because of the influence of Young Life. The Bethlehem Evangelical Church rents space from another congregation. They meet and worship every Sunday at three in the afternoon.

Fifteen years ago he first met Arman and Lilit when they began attending the church he was pastoring at that time. That was around the same time when Arman first felt the call to serve youth through Young Life.

Pastor Edo, as he is affectionately called, shared this prayer: *“I pray and dream for many people to give their life to church and ministry. Many years ago Good news came to us. I dream and*

*pray every county will be like the twelve apostles and do Jesus' work for their country. In the Kingdom of God we have our plans and our work, each other is really important. We pray for the camp to be a blessing with many, many kids."*

Pastor Edo's journey with Arman and Young Life began to take a new direction when Arman described to Pastor Edo how frustrated he was because church members told him how upset they were by him reaching out beyond the walls of the church to all types of young people. The members would approach him and ask: *"How can a very good person like you associate with unbelievers?"* Nowadays, described Arman, the Protestant churches are beginning to ask him and his wife how they can help the churches reach out to and organize their youth.

Arman's motto? *"People want bread, not religion,"*

Young Life is prospering in Armenia in much the same way the New Testament flourished amongst both the pagan and the traditional religions of its time.

There are now one hundred twelve Young Life teams in Armenia, averaging fifty to seventy young people active in each team. **[Fact Check]**. In Yerevan there is offered a special club for young people with special needs, both mental and physical. Autistic young persons are welcome. They named it the Pottery Team, housed in the Fellowship House.

When asked if there is a chance for more Protestant churches to come on board and support Young Life Pastor Edo answered how he hopes other churches will see it works, and *"want to join us."*

Even so, Pastor Edo admitted that his congregation at this time can only give spiritual support to Young Life, not financial support. As he confided to the author, also a pastor: *"You understand it is hard to be a pastor and touch many people."* This reluctance to share the stewardship of church financial support with Young Life has begun to raise questions among some of the young life volunteers who contribute their tithe to the church and hope some of their giving will return to support the ministry in which they've invested their lives.

During a meeting of the Young Life leadership held in one of their homes in the outskirts of Yerevan, during which platters of grapes, cherries, apricots were passed around, Arman added: *"I am church, you are church. The Bible should be shining to you. We have lots of pastors but few who have...well, we are called to love sinner and not sin but churches still insist on it on their terms. You have to spend time with them, just as you have to spend time to be with Jesus. I love my friend Ashot, but I have to want to be with him to be a good friend. Friends walk together shoulder to shoulder."*

**[Photo of that meeting]**



### [Young Life leadership meeting]

Pastor Edo echoed this sentiment, saying, *“Churches don’t welcome them. They ask when someone new comes: who are you? Really a hard problem in Armenia. See there is a need for many young people established in church, Different thinking from others. Evangelical churches worship with open heart, open hands, singing, dancing, not conservative. And people are leaving them, I had to leave them. The churches are not growing because they think like that church, thinking like grandfathers. Now young people needs are different, worship in another way.”*

When asked how the Protestant community helps Young Life, Arman grinned, *“They don’t help us, we help them.”*

## Morning Is Wiser

The volunteers and leaders of Young Life do need help from the churches and they will need it even more as the Young Life volunteers grow older and assume more responsibilities. Some leaders have asked Arman and Lilit if they can say Young Life is their church. Arman and Lilit

Astrayan say, “No,” strongly encouraging the need for active church life. Lilit summarized the popular attitude about traditional Christianity in Armenia with a familiar Armenian proverb: *“Everybody comes, nobody goes.”*

One Young Life couple voiced their frustration that their church absorbs more from them than it feeds them even as their sense of calling and commitment asks them to help feed the young people. The wife suggested: *“How can mother feed her child if she isn’t fed? Change happens best not outside-in but from inside-out.”* The couple asked the married team members from the United States if they could recommend types of resources about becoming Christian parents. The young woman lifted her little boy in her arms and snuggled against him even as he struggled to escape her arms, saying: *“We need help in raising our son as a good Christian.”*

Some volunteers rely upon the internet for spiritual sustenance. That is the case with a young woman named Narine Melikyan, who has been a Young Life volunteer leader for three years. Her friend could not join her at Camp this year because her friend had to work. She realizes how that might happen to her as she grows older, perhaps marries, perhaps has children, and has to accept more conventional responsibilities, but for now, as with many of the Young Life leaders, she plans to take a part time job so she can do what she really wants to do, and that is the Young Life ministry. Many of the leaders do this, as welders, event MC’s, teachers, in offices. They do what they have to do so they can do what they want to do. They work for the sake of the Young Life ministry.

**[Photo of Narine]**



A spring graduate of Yerevan State University, she majored in International Relations but doesn't like the prospect of government work or politics. Her internship took place at the airport and she supposes she'll be able to find work there, not behind the ticket counter but in some office doing paperwork, ideally in a position which would allow her to travel.

Narine yearns to travel. She speaks English, Russian, and Arabic. She has never traveled beyond the borders of Armenia. She'd love to be able to visit her grandparents, uncle, and cousins who emigrated to the USA and settled in the California bay region in the 1990's when immigration was easier. She hasn't seen them since they left Armenia; given the price of Visas and the financial requirements the United States stipulates to insure that visa-holders return, it is unlikely she will get the chance to visit them.

"Well," she shrugged, as she quoted a Russian expression, *"Morning is wiser than night."*

Narine's father died two years ago. Narine and her sister became involved in Young Life by watching some young people play Frisbee in the park and they invited her and her sister to join them. *"Frisbees,"* Narine says, *"is a really good way of serving."* Her team is the girl's team named the Zeytun team. *"We spend time in prayer and read the Bible."*

She has remained active in Young Life although her sister no longer participates in Young Life, her sister objecting to the serving aspect of the ministry.

Her mother actively objected to Narine's involvement in Young Life. *"You don't need that,"* her mother contended. *"The Apostolic Church is enough. Don't like you going to Young Life or the Protestant Church. If you want to serve you should serve only in church."*

~~~

The brain of the Armenian Apostolic Church may be Etchmiadzin, the Mother See with its ancient cathedral, seminary, and seat for the supreme priest of the Armenia, but its heart is Khor Virap. Miles west rises the famous Mount Ararat, the mountain where legendary Noah's Ark is said to have settled and preserved humanity. Ararat rises as a solitary mountain from the stretching plain, its snow-covered peak, like a sloping table, oft covered in the mystery of clouds.

Khor Virap, high on one of the seven arid hills, invites pilgrim to visit the stone monastery and basilica, both which hearken back to the very beginning of Christianity.

A personal reflection by the author:

Is the issue you serving the church? Or you serving Christ? We grieve when God and Country are considered synonyms. When the author pointed out the problem with any state run church, his comment was met with loud 'amens.'

We equally grieve when Christ and Church are considered synonyms.

I did confess to our Armenian guests my peculiar, irreverent view of buildings and sacredness. For there I sat on a bench in the shade, Mount Ararat behind me, looking at the ancient church, and – couldn't help but think of Jesus and his peculiar way of looking at things, appreciating what matters, and Jesus saying: "Cast down these stones and I will build it up in three days." God forbid a temple of stone; church is people, people of faith, wherever there is love.

"People want bread," explained Arman, "not religion." His explanation for evangelism also can be heard as a warning of what happens when religion replaces love. On the outskirts of Yeravan, west of the Hradzan Gorge, I visited the second Genocide Museum in my life. My first was the holocaust museum in Jerusalem when I was in eighth grade. I saw soap made from boiled Jews. After our returning from the Young Life Sports Camp we toured the Genocide Memorial and Museum. Its eternal flame surrounded by flowers, the split spire, the memorial trees, the twelve curving pylons represented the twelve provinces in which massacres occurred, and the historical displays stand as witnesses reminding the world of atrocities committed by the nationalistic Young Turks against the Armenians more than a hundred years ago. Children were tied together and drowned, babies bayoneted, young women sold and shipped off as sex slaves, their faces tattooed to mark them as property. Over 1.5 million Armenians were murdered.

People are sacred, never things. I hold fast to the theological view that sacred never is what or where but when. The most sacred thing at the Khor Virap site to me was when the little boy of our guides --

mom and dad named Arusik and Ashot, little boy named Leo – tripped on the stone pavement and started to cry and his mother rushing to him and comforting little Leo.

There was another reason for us to cry during our journey to Armenia. On our last night at the Sports Camp we were invited to gather with our Young Life Armenian friends for a time of prayer mingled with tears. The leaders at whose home we had first met the Young Life Volunteers had to leave the camp suddenly. The wife had begun contractions four months into her pregnancy. While the hospital in Yerevan offered its ministry, the group of friends – American and Armenian -- miles away offered theirs. It was reported a day later the pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage.

Khor Virap's greatest claim to fame is a hole (Khor Virap meaning 'deep pit') specifically the dank dungeon into which the father of the Armenia Apostolic church was thrown at the end of the third century AD for being Christian, and there in that hole, beset by poisonous snakes and stinging insects, Grigor survived for 13 years. Grigor, who is otherwise renown as Gregory the Illuminator. There's a rickety ladder upon which pilgrims may now descend. In the cell, dozens of candles suck the air out of dark hole.

When in a hole, it helps when someone pulls you out. In Armenian, the word for life always is plural. Life can never be singular: you are my life, I am your life.

~~~~

Narine felt the need to explain her mother further: *"I am tired of this. She can't accept I live with God. Judgment toward me and Young Life. She thinks I am doing something wrong and wants to put me on the right way. I will show her I am not doing wrong. I pray a lot for my family. I try to stay strong in my faith by praying and asking the Lord to give me strength. It is getting a little better. No more tears about going to camp. I try to turn things positive. The problem with Armenia kids is that we don't think about God until someone tells us. They don't believe in God in heart or dedicate life to Jesus. The purpose is to go to church and serve the church. There is a problem. They teach the Bible stories but the version used in the Apostolic Churches no one understands, it is old Armenian."*

Reminding herself of her key Bible text, Philippians 4: 13 ("I can do all things through him who strengthens me" NRSV), her hope for Young Life includes looking forward to *"camps full of campers, more kids known and dedicating hearts to Jesus, more branches [of Young Life], more comedy, more football. God will show us new ways to do it."*

When urged to consider looking for a job in Young Life International so she could both travel while at the same time find work to fit her sense of call to ministry, Narine Melikyan beamed.

When asked about the struggles she personally will face in the future, she again brightened, saying: *"When we have God we don't have anything to worry about."*



[Narine, her friends, and a new friend named Noah]

**Biography: Robert John Andrews**  
303 Maple Street Danville Pa 17821  
[revrjandrews@aol.com](mailto:revrjandrews@aol.com)  
[www.robertjohnandrews.org](http://www.robertjohnandrews.org)

### **Formal Education**

Doctor of Ministry, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, May 1994  
Thesis: *Christian Faithfulness at Work*  
Masters of Divinity, Princeton Theological Seminary, June 1978  
Thesis: *On the Naming of God*  
Bachelor of Arts, Hobart College, June 1975  
Major: English, with Certification in Secondary Education  
Thesis: *The Art and Politics of the Greenwich Village Bohemians, 1913-1918*

### **Work Experience**

Pastor, Grove Presbyterian Church, Presbytery of Northumberland, Danville, Pennsylvania. 1989 to present.  
Pastor, Penningtonville Presbyterian Church, Donegal Presbytery, Atglen, Pennsylvania. 1978 to 1989

### **Publications**

Novel: *Dangerous Curves*  
Novel: *Nathaniel's Call*  
Columnist, *Danville News*  
Mission Yearbook of Prayer, Northumberland Presbytery, 2006, 2004  
Physician, September/October 2003, "A Heart for Honduras"  
Presbyterians Today, September 1999, "The Hands of God"  
Vanguard Magazine, June 1996, "Christian Faithfulness at Work"

### **Service to Church and Community**

Moderator, Presbytery of Northumberland  
Vice-moderator, Presbytery of Northumberland  
Chairperson, Committee on Ministry  
Member, High School Scholarship Committee  
Chairperson, Special Committee on the Future  
Chairperson, Transitional Housing and Care Center Board  
Member, Merck Advisory Panel  
Member, Bioethics Review Committee, Geisinger Health Systems  
Chairperson, Montour County Recreation Authority  
President, Danville Soccer Club

### **Personal**

Married, Elaine Andrews, June 7, 1975  
Children: Margaret Olivia Andrews, McKenna Estey Andrews, Penelope Anne Andrews  
Ordained August 13, 1978 – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)