**Strategy for Evangelizing Armenians**

In the United States of America and Canada

**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 301 A. D. it has been defeated by successive conquests from Turkey, Arabs, and Muslims and more recently Armenia was annexed into he Soviet Socialist Republic. Only in 1191 was Armenia declared independent. 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, the second largest city in Armenia.

**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 passersby devour and abuse it. Yet, Armenians always seem to be able to survive and prosper.”

70,000 Armenian migrated to the U.S. during 1885-1914. Since World War II, the Armenian population in North America has multiplied through several waves of immigration. 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 survivalists. They are often identified with their surname which typically ends with an “ian” or “yan” such as Deukmajian (former governor of California) of Janoyan. Sometimes they are described in this way: “Beneath an outer veneer of hardness and fierce independence, they carry deep inner wounds and suppressed feeling of rejection, isolation, and hurt.” Many Armenian immigrants come with the overlay of a second culture, such as Lebanese, Iranian, Syrian, Russian and Iraqi, 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. Several Nazarene Armenian pastors have earned doctorate degrees. Indeed their written language is seen as an inspired gift of God. In Armenian the Bible is called: “The Breath of God.” 2. They love the 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 very patriotic towards the homeland and the Christian faith. Over 92% of Armenians at least are nominally committed to the Armenian Apostolic Church from birth. The remaining belong to the Catholic and Evangelical Church.

**The Missional Task of Evangelizing Armenians**

**General Suggestions**

Understand their 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, Germany, Iraq and Greece, which either facilitate or impede cultural bridges.

Honor the positive aspects of their culture-their Christian history, their longsuffering, patience, diligence, work ethic and their adaptability. Find connections not only in Christianity, but with their icon of Mt. Ararat, where Noah’s ark rested.

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**

Identify Armenian populations and Armenian organizations in the community, especially other Armenian 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, while keeping current dialogues that respect both cultures ‘gifts to each other.

Encourage Armenian ministry networks, both within and outside of the denominations, i.e. evangelistic meetings, Armenian national events such as the Genocide commemoration on April 24, breakfast gatherings…etc.

Work intimately with the denominational Armenian Facilitator.

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**

Identify Armenian Nazarenes who already participate in existing non-Armenian 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 no 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 eh theological assets of the Nazarene Church, rather than the differences in tradition of the Apostolic Church.

Choose leadership that is not dictatorial and domineering, 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 healthy Armenian relationships.

Do not be pushy or manipulative. Armenians have a rich cultural identity that only over time will adapt to their new environment.

Be sensitive to their unique cultural hurts. Don’t argue about eh Armenian genocide by the Turks, the Russian communism, the Iraqi War, or the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. Their historical perspectives are quite different from yours.

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, and also invite them to participate in the local worship service. Many Armenians are multi-cultural and can participate across cultural barriers.