

Dear First United Methodist Church of Green Bay –

As Wisconsin deals with its recent cold snap, I want to tell you about just two Armenian families who are enjoying your hard work and generosity during winter here. They are the Asatryans from the Village of Lchkadzor, located in Tavush Marz, the farthest northeast corner of the country bordering both Azerbaijan and the Republic of Georgia. Last week, I had an opportunity to share a table with the two families as well as give them mittens from the pairs you sent via a Western Ohio Conference United Methodist Volunteers in Mission team and my sister, Theresa Kitzman-Kelley of Eagle, Wisconsin.



This particular Asatryan household—the majority of people living in the village are Asatryans—includes two brothers and their wives. One couple and their three children (a son and two daughters) live in the upper portion of the house, while the other couple and their daughter live in the bottom portion of the house.



The two-story, plaster house with a wide, wrap-around porch sits on a total of two hectares (about four acres) and includes a large garden for household use; some trees such as apricots, pomegranates, figs and hazelnuts; grapevines; a small flock of chickens; almost a half-dozen beehive houses; and an outhouse. I visited the home on the top floor, where there is no running water. There is a woodstove in each of the two rooms that each family lives in during winter. (In summer, there's an additional room they spread out into, but it's too much to heat in winter.) The sun porch-turned-kitchen

Cleaning the rabbit in the kitchen of the Asatryan house.



was aflutter when we arrived because of our surprise visit, but more so because the one husband had shot a rabbit that day and they would feast on meat.

They collect clean water from a nearby spring that has a small pipe driven into it. They wisely use the woodstove for warming dishes, as well as an electric oven.

The second room is an all-purpose room that includes bunk beds for the children, two twin beds for the parents, a table that serves as a desk when the children do their homework after school, several chairs or stools and a large china cabinet

(traditionally, these are a wedding gift to young couples and they keep them a lifetime because they are typically THE major piece of furniture in an Armenian home, filling an entire wall.)

Surprisingly, the floors were straight wood planks like you'd expect to see in an old Wisconsin farmhouse. Nearly every other wood floor I've ever seen here is wood, but done as parquet in sometimes elaborate designs.

A small television sits in the window sill and features a couple stations in either Armenian or Russian. I didn't check, but maybe it even picks up some programs in Georgian and Azeri languages.

The village is like most of those in Armenia that originally formed by a family that kept growing and growing. Thus, Lchkadzor (LITCH-kahd-zor) has a lot of Asatryans. And I'm guessing many of the men have names such as Armen, Tigran, Ashot, Sarkis and Davit. Many of the women probably have names such as Armine, Anahit, Hripsime and Gayane. On average, village families will have three children. (In the capital of Yerevan, average families have two children.) While unemployment averages 40 percent outside of Yerevan, some villages such as Lchkadzor can see that number rise to as much as 85 percent.



Upper photo, Robert Asatryan in the second room; at right, Roman Asatryan with his cousins in another view of the second room.



The Asatryan house is in the upper right-hand corner of this photo of the village of Lchkadzor.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Armenia's independence in 1991, the village has no major business or factory at which the people can work. Instead, there are some small shopkeepers who get goods such as toilet paper, soaps, candy, cigarettes, nationally produced and world-known sodas or carbonated waters, vodka, cognac and beer shipped in from other parts of the country or Georgia. Many of the men travel to Russia for most of the year to find work, sending money back to support their families.

These two families rely on the land to feed their families and to sell goods for the money they need to pay for electricity, buy household items and put natural gas in their car to get their goods to nearby cities to sell. They make their grapes into wine, bottling it in old, plastic soda bottles for sale to others. The same is done with the figs that are made into vodka. They collect the honey and put it in recycled jars for sale, but sometimes saving some of the honeycomb as a treat for themselves. They eat fresh fruits and vegetables in season, making jams or compote so there's fruit in the winter and pickling vegetables, except the potatoes, for the off-season. Some families gather wild berries or nuts from the woods, reserving some for themselves and selling the rest. The family with three children lives on about \$80 a month. It is typical for this situation. In fact, it is not uncommon for any working Armenian to support his or her own family with their wages, plus to share any left-over food, hand-me-downs and other extras with at least one other family or neighbor.

It had snowed again two days before I arrived in Lchkadzor, but this day was sunny and water trickled down the dirt roads of the village. Any type of infrastructure repairs to streets, water mains and gas lines have not occurred since well before 1991. Yet, the warmth of the day allowed everyone to don only two layers of clothes—rather than the typical three or four—and enabled the children to run outside without jackets to greet us with big smiles and even bigger hugs. I was with a 20-year-old young man, Roman Asatryan, whom I tutor in English back in Yerevan, where he attends the state engineering university and is preparing to take an English language test and be interviewed in the hopes of winning a scholarship to study for a year in America. His 60-year-old father, Robert, lives in the city of Alaverdi, population 12,000, located some three hours by the public transportation mini-van out of Yerevan and 30 minutes from Lchkadzor.

Only Roman spoke English, thankfully, though the oldest boy and girl are studying it in school, which they attend six days a week. Besides Armenian, their parents also speak Russian, so the children are also learning it. By the time they graduate from high school at about age 16, they'll

know three languages, a challenge they welcome because they realize the more they know, the better their opportunities to maybe win a scholarship to a university in Yerevan and then a good job—to support their own families as well as their parents back in Lchkadzor.

We arrived bearing gifts. At first, Robert shared some hard candy he had bought in Alavardi. (Actually, I paid for it from some money given to me by a couple from the Western Ohio VIM team since Robert would have put it on credit because he has little money to support his own family and I had stayed at his house for several days, during which time they turned up the heat more than usual and ate more meat than normal.) The mothers evenly divided it so there would be no fighting and squirreled most of it away to parse it out over the coming weeks. Each mom also received a small package of finely ground coffee to make Armenian coffee rather than always drinking tea from the local herbs they collect and dry. (We know Armenian coffee as Turkish coffee, but since the death and displacement of some 1.5 million Armenians at the close of World War I by the former Ottoman Empire, it is known here as Armenian coffee.)

After catching up on family news and seeing the children's most recent homework and artwork, we opened a large bag of items I brought with me. It included some small toys, a few clothes and a pair of shoes my sister had sent, I brought with me and some Diaspora friends had left with me when they visited their motherland in December. I had also saved four pairs of mittens for the children (I distributed other pairs to new friends I met in Alaverdi the few days I stayed there before arriving in the village.)

Only the mittens were brand new. Everything else was gently used. But you would have thought that everything was new and we were Santa Claus! The pure joy and excitement on the children's faces was matched only by the bright sun shining that afternoon. They insisted on running outside for a snowball fight!



We then sat down to a meal of rabbit which I generally like and can be quite tasty. However, this was a male, they explained, and as chewy as shoe leather. But it was meat. There was also lavash, the unleavened bread they make that reminds me of flour tortillas. The meal also included pickled vegetables of all types—green tomatoes, cabbage, carrots and cucumbers. There were canned stewed tomatoes with fresh, raw onions added. Everyone drank a little wine and a little fig vodka. Few people drink too much; they can't afford it nor is it socially acceptable to do so. Tradition has the first toast going to God for bringing friends and family together. The second toast is for health and wealth. The third for children, while the fourth is for parents. But your gift of mittens too precedent and many thanks were sent to God for your generosity. It is always overwhelming to so many Armenians I've met to think that some American, so far away and with so much of their own possessions, would think enough of Armenia to send even used items.

Getting something is a treat. Getting something new is almost unbelievable. Your new mittens were very, very special gifts for these children. A luxury, really, since pants and jackets have pockets for cold little hands in winter rather than worrying about mittens or gloves!

There are still another good six weeks of winter here and I have a few more pairs of mittens I'll deliver to a different village in the southern part of the country near the Iran border. Meanwhile, many pairs were also given by the Ohio VIM team to the students at the special education school in Gavar, located near Lake Sevan, the major body of water you can see on a map of Armenia. The Peace Corps workers there keep forgetting to email me photos of the students with their mittens—their apologies.

Yet, each of you is making a difference in these people's lives and we want you to know it. You are doing what we all want to do as Christians—you are putting God's love in action! (That is, by the way, the motto of the VIM program!) You are reaching out across the miles to tell someone you will probably never meet that you know they exist, you care about them and you love them. That has a powerful impact on people and it has not been lost on anyone who has benefited from your generosity, your yarn, your time and your talent.



Father and son thank you for your kindness towards their extended family.

On behalf of the Asatryans and all the Armenian children playing in the snow right now thanks to your new mittens, Shnorhakilutzun (Shnore-ha-kah-loot-jee-oon... Thank You) and Aruchutzun (Ah-rue-choot-jee-oon... God Bless You) to all the knitters and their supporters at First United Methodist Church in Green Bay, Wisconsin!

Peace!

Pamela Karg

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