

Pioneer to the Middle East

Nairy Ohanian's story

by: Shannon Whiting

Imagine getting a five-year assignment far from home with no program. This was Nairy Ohanian's venture into the Middle East to begin student movements.



“There was nothing for me to enter into,” Ohanian, a Washington, DC Armenian American said. “I definitely see myself as a pioneer.”

Ohanian first heard the call at age 16 on her first short term missions trip with Teen Missions International in a small village outside of Paris.

“That’s where I really felt I wanted to spend the rest of my life sharing the Gospel,” she said.

She received clarity and confirmation at West Maryland College where she plugged into InterVarsity—a program which also helped her better understand her identity and ethnicity. In 1984, her sophomore year, Ohanian attended what became her first of many Urbana missions conferences. After receiving her degree in graphic art and business administration, Ohanian moved on to Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary for an MA in world missions and evangelism.

The French-speaking Muslim world attracted Ohanian, and she began entertaining ideas of ministering in Morocco or Belgium. But before she could book a trip, another offer came along.

“InterVarsity came after me and asked if I would stay stateside and pioneer international student ministry in Boston,” Ohanian remembered. She agreed to it “just out of gratitude for what InterVarsity did for me.”

Ohanian committed herself to five years of student ministry in Boston, yet kept Morocco on her agenda. But, as planning missionaries often find, “It didn’t happen like that,” Ohanian said.

In the midst of those five years, Ohanian opened an invitation to join Armenian businessman Steve Lazarian and InterVarsity Missions Director Dan Harrison to begin a chapter of International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) in Armenia. Until this point, Ohanian hadn’t even considered returning to her homeland, a part of the formerly closed Soviet Union.

“That letter was a real shock for me,” she said. “I didn’t even think InterVarsity knew where Armenia was. I was just so excited, so blessed, because [before] I felt like I lived in two different worlds.”

Those two worlds joined in 1996 when Ohanian and a British co-worker began teaching French and English and initiating Bible studies at an Armenian university. Within four years, she was

able to hand her ministry over to the nationals and return home to begin a career in law and social justice. No sooner had she started studying the LSATs than Ohanian received another invitation from InterVarsity, this time to a personally controversial part of the Middle East.

“That was the last thing [on my mind], she said. “I was open to anywhere, but I didn’t even have a category for [that part of the Middle East].”

The place of choice was confirmed for Ohanian in the topic of discussion at Urbana 2000.

“I was kind of set up by God,” she said. “I didn’t even have a choice.” Ohanian explained how, aside from IV’s interest in the country, her co-partnering Presbyterian group had purchased a café in the Middle East without any student workers to run it. “By then, God was like, ‘You’re it,’” she said.

Because her family shared her negative feelings about the country of choice, they were Ohanian’s biggest barrier. Still, without her mother’s blessing, Ohanian endeavored on the trip to run a coffee shop and a language club among Muslim students.

At first she felt at home, but “as soon as the ministry started, within the first six months, it was the constant stress of opposition, being watched, being questioned,” Ohanian said. As a single Christian, Armenian-American woman in business, Ohanian’s opposition was doubled.

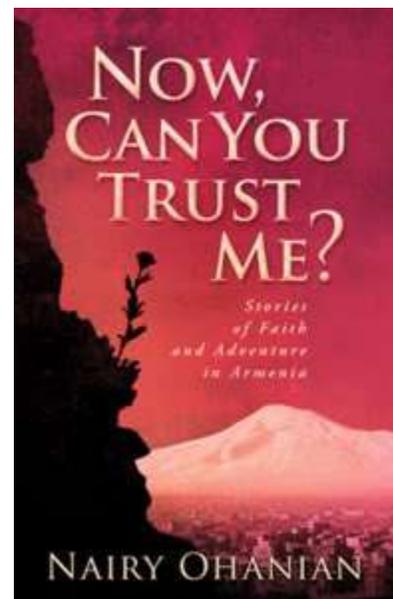
“I wasn’t aware of it every morning, but when I left my front door, everything that I represented was an offense to them,” she said, in reference to the locals she was trying to reach.

Some of this opposition included a two-year court case over running what the country’s government considered to be an illegal language school. Yet she and her colleagues were inexplicably delivered from the case, even after a witness used the fatal words “missionary subversives.”

“As challenging a time that we’ve had, clearly God was using us,” Ohanian said. This was evident yet again when, through a holiday program, her staff was able to share the gospel message with students who were hearing it for the very first time. Intermittently, the police interrupted under suspicion, yet only at the exact moments when nothing religious was being shared.

Eventually, Ohanian’s coffee shop closed due to the overwhelming number of legal fees and fines the government sent her way.

“That’s how they break you down,” she said. “We just couldn’t keep going any longer. “And yet, Ohanian reported, God is continuing to work there. “Six years ago, I was the only IFES worker in the country,” she said. “And now there are nine full-timers, in two different cities.”



In 2006, the pioneer returned home for various writing projects, including her recent book *Now Can You Trust Me? Stories of faith and adventure in Armenia*. Thanks to the stories of suffering told in the book, Ohanian is able to encourage other missionaries who are still on the field.

Currently, Ohanian is spending a transition year on recruitment and training for InterVarsity's Link and IFES departments. She is simultaneously starting a doctor of ministry program in pastoral counseling for missionaries.

"There's definitely a cost," Ohanian has told other missionaries. "It's been the greatest thing I've ever done and the most difficult thing I've ever done." Yet looking back on all the Muslim students who heard the gospel, Ohanian would not have changed any of it.

"I think the cost is worth it," she said.

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[Models](#), [Women](#)

Little Women, Big God

by: Nairy Ohanian

When on the mission field, never underestimate the power of a woman filled with the Spirit of God.

On both of my overseas assignments, I was baffled as to why God would send me as a single woman. Both nations were highly male-privileged. Women leaders, Bible teachers, or administrators were not easily appreciated, and were instead viewed with suspect. I understood well the roles of women in both these nations and had no naive agenda to change them. However, I was very open to God using me as an alternative, influential model upon the culture, if He so chose.

Even in such cultures, women should not hesitate to enter and minister. As a result of my obedience, God actually used me, as a woman, for more good than I could have anticipated.

On my first assignment, my male British colleague and I entered Armenia together to pioneer the student movement for the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). Though invited by the university to come, our first semester brought much opposition from the Orthodox Church authorities. Para-church ministry was a novelty, especially in classroom scripture studies with a woman.

By our second semester in Armenia, my male teammate had to return to London for academic purposes. Within weeks of his departure, the classroom spies, interrogations and telephone threats all ended. When the local priest discovered I was now alone in the city to lead the ministry, he determined that since a woman could accomplish nothing, he no longer needed to be concerned with our ministry. The fact that he thought so little of a woman's ability allowed the

student ministry great freedom and relief to develop the work. I firmly believe that if a man had been in my position, the opposition would have continued and hindered the ministry. Needless to say, when I met with the priest and archbishop several years later upon my departure, they were furious to discover how this large student organization had blossomed under their noses.

My second assignment involved evangelism amidst Muslim male students. For the first three years of the student ministry, I had no male teammates; there were four of us American women. We taught English at a center, where we did have national male colleagues to help us with logistics and hospitality. In this safe and defined environment, the four of us women would daily teach our Muslim university students—the majority of which were men, who had more freedom in that culture to attend our programs. When we witnessed and shared gospel truths with these male students, they received our words. Rarely were there arguments or anger. Whenever male believers witnessed to the male Muslim students, they were often met with defensive answers in raised voices. The women, however, were able to disarm the normally charged, aggressive posture of our male students to provide a context in which they were able to listen and receive God's word.

In both of these contexts, it had seemed obvious to me that men were better suited than women for ministry purposes. But God sees best when there are areas where a woman can quietly and powerfully fulfill His purposes more effectively. Each context and nation is different and careful study and cultural observations must be conducted, before entering as a single or small team of women. There are unique challenges for women on the field which demand wisdom, counsel, and practicality as far as danger and safety issues.

Still, women most definitely serve a much needed, distinctive and influential role for the Kingdom of God on the mission field. I am always encouraged by our Savior's valuing women in choosing to appear first to a woman upon His resurrection. Though in that culture, a woman's testimony was not honored, Christ chose a different way for His purposes.

Let His female followers be faithful and obedient as women to go and let their faithful Lord decide how he wants to work through them. And may they never forget they are not simply women, but women with the power of God in them.



Nairy Ohanian served as a Link staff worker, pioneering student ministry in Armenia and the Middle East.

Tags: [Women](#)

Must Singles Be Lonely?

Advice for the Mission Field

by: Nairy Ohanian

It was a frigid February morning when I arose and watched my breath hanging in the air before my face. I knew today's priority had to be finding kerosene to heat my apartment. Oil delivery to Armenia had been limited this winter, making kerosene purchases an exhausting hide-n-seek game.

As I ate my chilly goat cheese and flatbread, a host of thoughts joined me at the breakfast table; I really don't like eating alone. Does anyone know my struggle? What if I freeze to death? Must I always be brave? Why do I have to do this alone? Who can help me? Where are my students when I need them? Why don't I have a husband? Why won't Thomas ask me out? Suddenly I was astounded at how a simple lack of kerosene led to utter loneliness and sadness.

Truths about Loneliness

Serving single on the mission field has numerous benefits of ease, simplicity, flexibility, time and exciting, adventurous possibilities. Singles tend to learn languages, develop national friends and adapt to culture, more quickly and smoothly than married missionaries. Housing and travel options tend to be greater and expenses fewer.

But as with most things in life, many pluses often include minuses. The solo servant needs to be prepared for periods of emotional and spiritual loneliness. I believe for many of us single missionaries loneliness is less a constant state of being, and more a feeling which comes in seasons and waves.

I will clarify a few truths about loneliness on the field and then consider some proactive responses:

Loneliness is Normal and to be Expected

The reality of loneliness is not only for singles but also for marrieds. All people experience times of loneliness: a feeling of being isolated, disconnected, unsettled and longing for relational connection. Though followers of Christ know that they always have God's Spirit within and beside them, the longing for human interaction is natural and necessary. God specifically designed us to be relational and connected to one another for intimacy, support, and comfort. God even calls His people a body, each dependent and linked to another. So it is actually expected for us to feel lonely when this God-intended aspect of life is missing.

Loneliness will be honored

God designed us for relational intimacy and he knows well the ache when it is lacking. God has provided several promises for His servants who experience loss of relations specifically for kingdom purposes.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

Luke 18:29-30

Without a doubt, God would raise up endless mothers for me on the mission field when I was ill, had a cooking crisis, and needed counsel or simply a hug. All that is merely the portion here on earth, He also promises we will receive in eternity what we forfeit on earth!

Loneliness is Part of our Own Decisions

In the depth of our alone pain on the field, missionaries need to remember that they chose to be where they are. Often in the darkness and trials, amnesia masks the truth: we are on the field because we responded to God's call and longed to obey Him.

During one of my emotional depths of despair in Armenia, because a close colleague had returned home, I went to see a mentor of mine who was teaching at the university. She compassionately reminded me that I feel the pain I do today because many years ago I made a choice that I wanted Jesus more than anything else in my life. And today's sorrow is simply a real part of that decision. When we choose to live and serve in radical ways, and to have Jesus more than anything, there are natural consequences to this choice.

Again, though loneliness is natural and expected, it will be honored and is connected to our choice of following Christ; at times the feelings for singles can be more intense, more frequent and less easily remedied.

Living Single on the Field

The question remains: how then shall we live on the field as singles?

Relate to Christ

First and foremost, loneliness can be a call of our soul towards Christ our Comforter, Companion, and Creator. Run to Christ, call out His name, and ask what new thing He has to reveal to you. Enjoy, rest and wait upon Him for assurance, peace and relief. Discover fresh ways to relate to God in prayer, reading, music, worship which you have not previously tried. Do not become stale in your relating to Christ.

Find a Mentor

Find an accountability partner locally. Whenever I move to a new city, my first priority after housing is to find a peer friend or possibly a mentor woman whom I can meet with regularly. Pray devotedly until God provides this one person for you on your field of service. This person will perhaps become your most valuable asset on the field. They need not be identical to you in personality, theology nor your best friend but a godly person of the same sex who is faithful and available.

Establish a Circle of Friends Back Home

Establish your inner circle back home. With easily accessible technology on nearly every field, orchestrate a handful of friends who know you well, to be ready ears and hearts during lonely bouts. Help them understand their role in your life and what you desire from them when you call or write. You need not hesitate or feel guilty about contacting them because they are prepared and eager to serve you in this way. But I repeat, though we need home friends, those with whom we have history, it is critical to have a local and physically present comforter on the field, as mentioned above.

Plan Ahead for Recovery, Holidays and Trips

Tiredness and weariness often evoke greater loneliness. Plan well after big events, outreaches, trips to other villages, departure of short term visitors, so you will have a person, or small group with whom to debrief, relax and refresh with. Plan this ahead of time, not when you are exhausted.

Similarly, plan ahead in regards to holidays and local celebrations. Again these can be desperately lonely times when the entire city is gathered with family and friends and you are home alone. Be creative, be honest about your need, take initiative, and gather some others together.

Next, plan ahead for vacations, trips and conferences. Long plane or bus journeys bring out the lonely blues in me. I try to travel to conferences, especially new cities with another person; even if I do not know them well. Travel companions can be so helpful in relieving the stress and pressure in going to an unknown place. Perhaps the day or hour will not be your ideal choice when traveling with another but some flexibility goes a long way in lessening the hours of loneliness and anxiety.

Track Your Blues

Know yourself well by tracking your lonely blues. For one month, keep a calendar of when you feel the most sad, discouraged, disconnected, or alone. Is it weekends? When overworked? During church? When traveling? At night? At language school? During a major decision time? Be honest and reflective about your periods of loneliness so you can better care for yourself next time that period arises.

Journal

Finally, own a journal and open it regularly. Use this time to explore your feelings of emotional, relational, spiritual loneliness on the field. For nearly all single missionaries, the experience is for a season, a term, a period of time which will conclude. Make the most of discovering your faith, your heart, your dreams, and your desires more honestly and deeply in loneliness. Do not fear the intense feelings or minimize them but become acquainted in true and meaningful ways with loneliness.

Note, several of the above ideas suggest scheduling, advance planning and initiative. At times singles resent the added effort of doing many things themselves or working to build relationships. But remember families and married couples also need to plan and organize; their provisions do not simply fall into place either. All healthy relationships, companions, and families exist because of attention, energy and desire.

Jesus—the single missionary—said:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

John 14:1-3, Matt 28:20b

Tags: [Relationships](#)

The Missionary Soul Mate

Simultaneous Waiting and Preparation

by: Nairy Ohanian

Countless, dedicated Christians who consider themselves to be passionate world Christians, never end up in missionary service. They have every opportunity, gifting, skill set, resource, encouragement, even completed training for the field, yet they never enter service.

Instead, what they do enter is a relationship with another godly man or woman who does not have that same commitment to cross cultural service as they do. Sometimes the decision to not further pursue missionary service is direct and obvious and sometimes the decision is gradual and subtle, but either way a once fervent potential missionary never leaves home, but rather sets up home with a less-than-enthusiastic, non-missions spouse.

As single men and women, many of us long for discovery of a life partner to share in marriage and family life. The difficulty of the search can lead to compromise of some of our intended

goals, dreams and callings. We begin to negotiate what are essential requirements and needs and what are “nice but not necessary” elements in our future mate’s “portfolio of potential.”

This can truly be an excruciating process and one in which eager prayer and pursuit of Christ is absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, all too often, the desire and even actual calling for cross cultural, missionary service is demoted to the “nice but not necessary” pile. Rationalizations arise, “We will serve Christ in our local church,” “There are endless opportunities in our home culture,” “Over time, he/she, will share my passion for missions,” and “We just need more time.”

Similar to the Christian commitment to avoid serious involvement in romantic relationships with non-professing Christians, so must our commitment level rise to avoid serious relationships with non-missionary-minded partners. God is neither pleased nor honored when we compromise or surrender our callings for him and his service. Marriage is also a calling. But at times God wants us to wait or surrender as he fulfills his will in other life areas already made clear, such as missionary service.

As always, our dating standards and possible mate selection needs to be considered strategically, prayerfully and thoughtfully. It is always tricky to decide standards after entering a serious relationship. Conviction always precedes crisis. Our convictions of dating and marriage truth must come before the “mate crisis” of determining if this wonderful person is The One. We need to know now—even before we meet someone—the qualities we are seeking, and our non-negotiable criteria.

We can use several helpful, practical signs of observation and reflection, upon meeting a possible missionary mate. Below are some missionary-ready qualities and characteristics to look for in a dating partner:

- Dedication to, love and serious understanding of the word of God
- Listening and responding well to the Spirit in personal and ministry issues
- Love for the Church, involvement in community, and service in local church
- Mature understanding and practice of evangelism
- Enjoys and values people; serves and honors others above themselves
- Establishes goals and perseveres to reach them; words and actions match up
- Deep value in practice of prayer
- Communicates well, unafraid of tough discussion, confrontation, or conflict
- Spirit of boldness, potential risk-taker; appreciation for adventure and new things
- Dissatisfied by the Status Quo; desire to live “outside the lines”

The following are further practical and daily aspects to watch for and ask about in a potential missionary mate:

- Friends: are they missions minded? What do they discuss and do?
- Missionaries: does he/she pray for any? Have missionary friends?
- Finances: does he/she tithe, give to others generously?
- Lifestyle choices: materialism and comfort
- Travels: is there an interest in other cultures both locally and abroad?

- Missions trip: has he/she gone on one? Would he/she be willing to join you on one?
- Non-Christian friends: does he/she have any? Care for community, colleagues?
- Adventure: do you go on creative dates or are you resorting to same places and activities?
- Time: do you reach out to others together or only spend exclusive time as a couple?
- Development: what are his/her church involvements? Are spiritual gifts enhancing?

Both of these lists are merely *some* of the possible characteristics of a person or practical indicators for a missionary mate. Upon reading these lists, one must prayerfully and reflectively create their own “must have” list for a missionary mate and a list of “practical signposts.”

Finally, as we observe and search for these qualities and traits in a dating mate, are we developing these same areas in our own lives? Hopefully a fine future missionary is out searching for someone like us who is developing these very attitudes and behaviors as well.

May this generation of missionaries cling tightly to their missions call and choose well that right missionary mate to marry!

Tags:

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