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Armenia Service Project
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The Armenia Service Program (ASP) was properly organized, but a much greater amount of detail in all aspects of preparation is necessary for future groups. A well balanced group is important in order to get the most out of the program (eg. proportionate number of males and females)

ORIENTATION

Before we leave for Armenia, a longer orientation is necessary. At least three full days and nights should be spent at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary or another retreat area. It is important to feel comfortable with the group members before you are in Armenia together. This also holds true for the clergy or group leader accompanying the group.

During orientation, the group must learn the basics, like Hyer Mer, Soorp Asdvadz etc. which will be taught to the children in Armenia. Popular Armenian songs and dances should be learned during orientation so the group can participate with the local people more. This caused a huge problem for our group this year. Although the language is difficult for anyone to understand at first, we should also have a brief lesson on common Armenian phrases and words we will encounter during our stay. The more you can speak with the people, the more everyone gets out of it.

At least one member from the previous year's trip should be present during orientation to give practical insight and understanding as to what the new participants are going to encounter and witness. *(besides the clergy)*

All members of the group must know what the strategy is for the trip. How are we going to approach the different aged children at camp? What are our goals while at camp? While sightseeing? What about physical labor? What should we do if relatives from Armenia want to visit members of the group? These are all questions that must be discussed at length before arriving in Armenia. Of course, the strategy can be altered once you arrive but you should have firm guidelines established ahead of time.

SUPPLIES

We should contract companies in America that make pens, pencils, gum, markers, etc. and ask for donations. Some companies might be willing to even ship things for us. If we do not make an effort to approach companies, whether it is for gum, spaghetti, socks, pens, coloring books, we will not know.

We should consider buying some of the camp supplies in Armenia next year. We would be putting money into their much needed economy. Some items, of course, can only be purchased from America but I saw sporting equipment being sold at a department store in Yerevan. This must all be taken care of before the group arrives by the camp director or assistant in Armenia.

SCHEDULE

All the members of the group, plus the bus driver, camp workers must have a detailed itinerary of our trip. It should state when we meet in the morning, when we eat etc. Obviously, everything is subject to change, but we will be better prepared if we know when we are going to leave the children at camp for a few days or where our next bus trip will be.

Before the group arrives in Armenia, a representative from the camp (i.e. Fr. Abraham) should come to the Diocese in New York and/or the group's orientation, to go over our itinerary and answer any questions. This will eliminate all surprises. This year all our planning and scheduling of events beforehand was a joke and completely disregarded once we arrived in Armenia. We lost valuable time because we spent much time standing and waiting for decisions to be made. Our time is precious and we can not afford to waste it. Better use of our skills should be used, especially at the campsite. Even if it is as simple as weeding or painting, there was ample "free time" which should have been used in a more productive way. The camp directors should have projects ready for us to do during our stay.

More religious materials should be brought to distribute. The children were eager to learn about God and Christianity. We should bring Hyer Mer prayer cards for the campers and other people we meet along the way. If possible, each card should have the same picture. Once people see there are a few different pictures, they want one of each. It is inexpensive but a valuable resource that they will always possess.

Whether it is distributing prayer cards, t-shirts or hats, we must do it in a better fashion. We can not have all forty campers crowd around one person and grab from them.

Members of the 1995 ASP trip should be part of a board for the planning and implementation of future ASP trips. Their suggestions and constructive criticism should be taken note of for the future. Overall, the Armenia Service Program was a very successful and rewarding experience.