

Starting Home Church in Turkey where any kind of religious activity is illegal

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Harold Unger and his son

Turkey is a Muslim country; therefore, any kind of religious activity is illegal. We cannot witness. But it is not only we who cannot witness, even Muslims cannot witness to other Muslims. Furthermore, if you try to change some idea of society, even though it is not religious idea, that also is illegal. So it is not just our situation, but everybody's situation.

My husband, Harald, became a missionary in Turkey late in 1969, having been sent alone from Austria. I joined the Church in Turkey in 1971. I had been sent from the United States to Turkey in 1968 as a missionary by the United Church of Christ. I never expected to change to another kind of mission. I had gone to Turkey knowing nothing about the country, filled with the childish kind of idea of "converting the heathen."

When I arrived, I discovered that I would be teaching music in a Turkish girls' school supported by the mission. I was very frustrated by the missionary community that I found there; everyone had nice houses on the hills overlooking the Bosphorus; they had big cars and big families. They did their jobs very nicely, but had little contact with the religious world. On Sundays, they went to church and sang hymns, but they would never confront a Turkish person and speak to him about religion because they were afraid of being kicked out of the country.

As a result, I became very anti-mission. I did my job because I liked teaching, but I lived away from the missionaries. I decided that I would just live in my own way. The first year I was a pretty dedicated missionary teacher. The next year I was just a pretty dedicated teacher and a very selfish lady. The third year I was desperate -- desperate in terms of really wanting to serve God in some way, but feeling that I had entered the wrong situation.

In 1971, I heard about a group in Turkey that tries to promote the development of Turkish youth, but not in a religious way. They set up a dormitory in a city called Tarsus, to house young boys from the villages while they attend high school. I was offered a job as a housemother, teaching the boys English and watching out for them. It paid a very low salary -- just a place to live. I thought this was the answer to my dreams, this was the way I could serve. During this time, I had been having many dreams in which my grandfather, who had been a Baptist minister and missionary in Japan, was leading me towards something, but I did not know what. I just assumed that it was this job.

So everything was arranged. I resigned my position at the girls' school and wrote to my parents that I was not coming home. Then, the last week of April, I received a telegram saying that because I was unmarried, too young and a foreigner, I could not have the job. I was crushed. In my prayers I accused God saying, "Look, I really wanted to do something right and serve you, and now you have closed

another door in my face. I just do not understand it at all." That night in my dream, my grandfather told me that maybe this was not the right thing. He suggested that what he was telling me about was still to happen, and that the next day might be the key day.

The following day was Sunday, and I thought that since I had not been to church in a long time, I would go to the local Protestant church. I sat in the balcony and looked down on the other people there. I could not see individual faces, but around the head of one young man was a bright yellow light. I could hardly wait for the service to finish.



Turkish children love "Snow Man" Unger

After it was over, I went rushing up to him and said, "I am Elisabeth Biro. I don't know who you are but I really feel that you are the person who is going to change my life."

Harald nearly fell over. He had been in Turkey for two and a half years, and had never found even one person interested in anything that he wanted to say. He was suffering very much. At that time, he was living with some students in a small apartment, trying to stay strong in faith in the midst of a terrible atmosphere.

He talked to me for a while, and soon afterwards came to visit me. All this time I was asking my grandfather in my dreams whether this was what he had been guiding me towards. He would only say that I had to be patient, and keep my heart open so God could let me know the truth.

So Harald would come, bringing Miss Kim's book, to teach me the Principle. His English was very limited, and I did not know any German, but we both knew some Turkish. Therefore, much of our conversation was in Turkish. To study the Divine Principle, I read the book in English and he followed along in German translation. There was no way he could teach me directly.

I had never heard of indemnity conditions before. He was very thin, so I would prepare a big meal for him when he would come. The first time he ate everything on the table. The next day he was to return so I made even more food. But this time he said he was not hungry. The following day I did not prepare so much food, but he was famished and ate it all. This pattern continued -- one day he would eat, the next day not. I did not know that he had set a condition of 144 fasting days during the year, determined to find someone who could accept the Principle.

I could understand the Principle very quickly. Since I had so many dreams during the previous year, I realized that it was exactly what I had been expecting.

Beginning in 1974, I traveled to the United States and Japan with the global team of the International One World Crusade. In early 1975, Harald went to Korea, where we were blessed together with the 1800 couples.

Because we don't have financial support, we had to spend what seemed like an inordinate number of

hours a day working at jobs. It is hard to decide how much time to devote to work and how much to mission.

It has been a challenge to discover what kind of activities we can do in our situation to serve the people and the country. Harald taught German at one of the universities. He had found quite a number of good people in that way. But it takes a long time because he has to drink tea with them for many months before he can form any kind of basic friendship upon which to begin to speak about religion.

After Parents' birthday, Harald started home church work in Istanbul. We chose a neighborhood close to our house. Since Harald is a landscape architect by training, he wrote a very nice letter to all the people in the area, offering his help in any way that he could, fixing their homes, making their gardens more beautiful, cleaning up the streets or repairing the fountains and roads. Together, they can try to push the city government to pave some of the roads, lay cobblestones or clean up the empty lots that are used as garbage dumps.

By the time we left Turkey for training at the end of June, he had visited all 360 homes once, and none of them rejected him. Many welcomed him very positively and they had already started various projects in the neighborhood. People are very amazed by this. They believe that only a foreigner could have initiated something like this, because no Turk could ever get other Turks to work with him. People tend to think, "Me alone, what can I do? I can't influence any change, so why bother. Why make a start?"

Last year, before we had actually started home church work, I felt very frustrated. Our son was born two years ago, so I was at home all the time with a small child. There was nobody else in the center with me. Sometimes I felt that I was not very different from any other mother anywhere else in the world -- just taking care of my little boy. Then I found out that the children in the neighborhood finish primary school about the tenth day of May, and classes do not resume until the first of October. The children have nothing to do during the whole summer. I searched and searched; what could I do, so that I could still be at home, but help these little children in some way? So I decided to start a library.

With a limited budget, I approached different publishers in Istanbul and got quite a lot of books. Then other people, especially foreigners, who heard about my project, gave me gifts of money to help get some more books. Now we have approximately 400 books, ranging from first grade through high school levels. Originally, I invited the children to come Monday and Thursday mornings between 10 and 12, to get books, but the doorbell was always ringing all day long, all summer long. It was wonderful anyway. They were so excited about having books to read that they could not wait many days.

My goal was not that I should be the librarian, but that the children themselves should take care of the books. So this summer, when I learned that we were not going to be in Turkey, I talked with two of the most mature high school girls and asked them if they would take care of the books in the downstairs of their house, which they were happy to do. So the project is continuing this summer, under their supervision.

Last year when I started the book lending, our son was only nine months old, so I was still tied to the house most of the time. It is working out very well, and the children enjoy coming and playing with him. Sometimes it is difficult to get them out of the house, but I don't mind so much.

I find that our son is a great door opener for me. Now two years old, he is still very blond, with blue eyes, whereas Turkish people are dark skinned, with heavy moustache and eyebrows. They are just amazed by this little white child, and call him "snow man."

If I go to the home church area, immediately the doors are opened. Everybody wants to have our son come into their house, play with their children, drink their tea, and eat their cookies. With many people, we have not been able to form a deep relationship yet, but at least they welcome us in a nice way and we can begin to serve them.

I also work with young mothers, trying to help them understand about raising their children, that it is not enough just to feed and clothe them, but that they must attend to the spiritual side of their growth as well.