

Research Article

The Humanitarian and Educational Assistance of Evangelicals and American Missionaries to the Armenian People (1915–1945)

Astghik Ghazaryan* 

Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan, Armenia

Abstract

Following the Armenian Genocide, the activities of the Armenian Evangelical Association of America within the diaspora focused on preserving and restoring national, religious and cultural identity. The genocide caused a social, spiritual and educational crisis that required comprehensive support, with evangelical churches, associations and American missionary organisations playing an important role. Their activities covered the spiritual, educational and social spheres, thereby contributing to community stability and the reorganisation of Armenian communities on social and institutional levels. Education was the primary focus of the missionaries' activities. From the 1920s onwards, educational centres were established and reopened, combining teaching with the promotion of Christian values and moral education. Alongside the study of Holy Scripture, evangelical schools placed great emphasis on teaching the Armenian language and literature, as well as prayer in the native language. This approach was crucial for preserving Armenian identity and transmitting cultural values in a foreign environment. The missionaries also played a significant role by learning the Armenian language, teaching in Armenian and helping to improve educational centres and provide educational materials. Historically, these organisations' activities coincided with the reorganisation and restoration of Armenian diaspora communities' identities. They promoted the development of education and spirituality, and served as a means of social networking, facilitating the formation of new communities and fostering clear internal relations. Evangelical schools and centres provided a cultural platform through which the younger generation could engage with the Armenian language, literature, and Christian values, thereby strengthening their sense of community and identity. This study aims to shed new light on the Armenian Evangelical Association of America and American missionaries by analysing their organisational structures and evaluating their influence on the social, educational, and institutional life of Armenian communities. These organisations' activities have therefore made an important contribution to the spiritual, educational and cultural restoration of the Armenian people, strengthening their national identity in the face of new historical realities.

Keywords

Armenian Missionary Association of America, American Missionaries, Charity, Humanitarian and Educational Mission, Schools

*Corresponding author: astx-1989@mail.ru (Astghik Ghazaryan)

Received: 3 December 2025; **Accepted:** 16 December 2025; **Published:** 16 January 2026



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1. Introduction

Starting in the second half of the 19th century, existing national and religious tensions within the Ottoman Empire intensified. The multinational structure of the empire, coupled with the growth of national self-awareness within various communities, resulted in a policy of distrust and increased control by the authorities. The national, cultural, and political self-organization of Christian minorities - in particular, the Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians - was perceived as a threat to the state's territorial integrity and internal security.

The outbreak of World War I and the Ottoman Empire's involvement in the armed conflict exacerbated the existing national and religious contradictions within the empire. One of the priorities was the Turkification of Ottoman society, which entailed strengthening the Turkish national identity and limiting the political, economic, and cultural influence of non-Turkish communities, especially Christian ones. These processes deepened distrust and hostility toward these ethnic and religious groups and turned into a targeted state policy. As a result, systematic repression, forced deportation, and mass killing were carried out.

The large influx of survivors of the Armenian Genocide who spread to different countries as a result of deportations and mass violence laid the foundation for the modern Armenian diaspora. Humanitarian and social needs were acute in the newly formed communities, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to organize aid systematically, both statistically and organizationally. Under these conditions, there was a need to create a structure that would provide coordinated institutional support. Charitable and humanitarian organizations played a decisive role in rescuing, reorganizing, and educating Armenians. Among these organizations, the Armenian Evangelical Association of America (AMAA) stands out [1].

Formed in Massachusetts in 1918, the Association was considered the charitable wing of the Evangelical Church, organizing educational and humanitarian work. The Association was called upon to support the spiritual, educational, cultural, and everyday needs of American Armenians and distant native peoples [2]. The association developed and implemented programs that aimed to alleviate the social, psychological, and material consequences of war and genocide, ensure the protection and care of orphans, and restore the educational and community environment of the Armenian diaspora. These initiatives relied on substantial charitable support. These initiatives were sponsored by various international and local charitable organizations, individual benefactors, and American missionary circles. These groups played an important role in coordinating and implementing relief programs.

Since the mid-19th century, missionaries have been active in the Ottoman Empire, establishing educational centers, orphanages, and printing houses [3]. As Nejla Güney notes,

"The missionaries protected the interests of the Armenians" [4].

Missionaries' activities became more relevant and in demand during the years of the Armenian Genocide, when the region was in a state of deepening political and military instability. Operating in a high-risk environment, American missionary organizations developed multi-layered, coordinated strategies to provide assistance. These strategies combined spiritual care, educational support, social protection measures, and medical assistance. This approach not only responded to the immediate humanitarian crisis but also formed sustainable support mechanisms that contributed to the shelter, medical care, and socio-educational rehabilitation of communities affected by the genocide, especially children and vulnerable groups. Studying that mission is important not only in the context of overcoming the consequences of the Armenian Genocide but also in analyzing the history of international humanitarian policies and mechanisms for involving non-state actors.

2. The Society's Educational and Enlightening Activities

Under the initiative and patronage of the Evangelicals, educational and enlightening activities in the field of child rearing became of primary importance and aroused wide interest in missionary circles. The Evangelical communities' emphasis on educational development fostered deeper cooperation with missionaries and the implementation of joint programs aimed at providing pedagogical, moral, psychological, and social support. According to James Barton, the foreign secretary of the American Joint Missionary Council for Foreign Missions, "Christians were hardworking and progressive. They had a desire to obtain an education and therefore accepted the support of American missionaries." [5].

Although the schools operated in conjunction with the churches, the educational institutions' priority was not only to teach religious and cult subjects, but also to teach the native language. The latter was considered essential for national self-awareness, cultural continuity and preserving community identity. Subjects such as philosophy, science, logic and grammar were also considered important historical subjects [6].

American missionaries certainly took education seriously, paying special attention to Armenian youth with the aim of turning them into 'educated translators, instructors and Protestant missionaries' [7]. It should be emphasised that becoming evangelical was not mandatory for children, some of whom also attended Apostolic Church services. For comparison, it is worth noting that from 1878 to 1915, seven colleges operated in the Ottoman Empire [8]. The most famous of these were the Central College of Ayntap, the

Euphrates College and the Anatolia College of Marzvan, which received direct support from American missionaries. Many of those who graduated from these schools and colleges became doctors. The author of the book Voskematyan, T. Khlorobyan, mentions that, during this period, there were 99 doctors, 25 pharmacists and 10 dentists. There were also graduates in other professions, such as architects, merchants, lawyers and teachers [9, 10].

The above indicates that education in the evangelical system was not limited to spiritual, evangelical and biblical teachings. The schools also aimed to produce the specialised personnel necessary for society. Consequently, evangelical schools performed both religious and educational-professional training functions, thereby contributing to the social and cultural development of the community.

Genocide of the 20th Century destroyed the vibrant Armenian Evangelical Community of Turkey, which had 137 churches, 179 pastors and preachers, 13,891 communicant members and about 51,000 adherents, hundreds of elementary schools, 34 secondary schools, 7 colleges, and 3 seminaries [11], there were 163 functioning churches, each of which had a Saturday or Sunday school. Following the genocide, these churches were converted into mosques and many schools and hospitals were burned down.

From the 1920s onwards, the aforementioned structures began to reopen in newly formed Armenian communities, particularly in the Middle East. From the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the unions of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Middle East played an important role in the spiritual and educational-cultural life of Armenian communities. As well as religious structures, these unions were cultural and educational pillars. The association combined educational and spiritual activities, encompassing everything from preschools to higher education institutions. Educational institutions were located next to almost all churches, including preschools and primary and secondary schools, as well as theological seminaries and schools for girls. Later, a university was also established.

In the Middle East, between 1920 and 1923, the number of Armenian Evangelicals reached 20,000. There were also 20 churches and 20 schools, which were reopened through the efforts of missionaries [12]. It should be noted that, alongside Armenian, Assyrian and Arabic were also studied in these schools.

According to T. Khrolbyan, the total number of evangelical students in Syria and Lebanon reached 2,798 in 1926, 2,564 in 1929, and 2,703 in the 1938 academic year. The number of students remained stable at 3,071 in 1944–1945, indicating that educational institutions continued to operate despite social and political difficulties [13].

3. American Missionaries' Humanitarian Work in Education

Since 1846, American missionaries in the Ottoman Empire have not only organised spiritual and educational activities, but have also actively participated in protecting the Armenian population from the empire's political oppression. Alongside the periodic restrictions imposed on the Armenian community by the Ottoman regime, Armenian institutions often fell victim to this policy. For instance, the activities of schools and other educational and cultural organisations were suspended. In such circumstances, American missionaries acted as mediators with the Ottoman authorities, alleviating the pressure and ensuring the continuity of educational and cultural life within Armenian communities. After the Armenian Genocide in particular, missionaries became a vital source of support for the Armenian people. They systematically supported the reopening of schools, colleges and seminaries, ensuring the continuity of educational institutions and the social and spiritual recovery of communities.

H. Riggs, a missionary, deserves a mention. In memory of his wife, E. Barnum-Riggs (In 1923, missionary H. Riggs relocated to Beirut, Lebanon, to continue his work with Armenian refugees in Lebanon and Syria. He also taught at the Near East School of Theology. He later served as Executive Secretary of the Near East Christian Council), he built a school in Lebanon in 1932. According to Dr Berberian, it was one level short of being a full-fledged high school at that time [14]. The school continued the work of preserving the Armenian identity by prioritising the Armenian language, literature, and culture [15].

Elizabeth Stevens Webb also carried out a similar mission, thanks to which spiritual and educational work began to progress starting in 1922 [16]. The school mainly educated girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, and according to the missionary's "Memoirs of Memory" document, this number reached 200.

One of the missionaries, J. Marty, initiated the construction of a 'board building' [17] in Aleppo for refugees, which simultaneously served spiritual and educational needs [18]. Thanks to J. Marty, around 200 students had the opportunity to receive an education and attend Sunday school. Miss Forman made a particularly great contribution to the education of girls by opening the American Girls' High School in Aleppo in 1922, as a continuation of the 'Ayntap Girls' School'. The school operated under the jurisdiction of the Evangelical Church. Teaching the Armenian language, Armenian history and singing was paramount in the school, and it was interesting that the missionaries often studied and taught in Armenian. This school is a vivid example of how, having learned Armenian, the missionaries began to conduct all schoolwork in Armenian.

Notably, the activities of the missionaries were not confined to preaching the Holy Bible. By mastering and teaching the

Armenian language, they set a vivid example of how to preserve national identity. At the same time, foreign languages were also used in the educational process, including: English, French and Arabic, for example, which contributed to the development of multilingual education.

It should be emphasised that, particularly following the genocide, missionaries and evangelicals devoted considerable attention to medical education, for instance, the University of Beirut was considered one of the most renowned educational institutions of the time, boasting a medical school that was renowned throughout the Middle East [19]. The school trained doctors, and the medical profession attracted greater respect and attention.

Missionaries supported the Armenians in a humanitarian gesture, providing various types of assistance. Sometimes, however, they found themselves at odds with the authorities. For example, Dr Clarence Asher refused to hand over the pharmacy of an American hospital to the authorities so that he could continue to provide medicine to the Armenians [20]. L. Chormisian notes that the missionaries not only taught medicine, but also treated many patients free of charge [21].

The American University of Beirut, founded in 1920 had a notable medical focus. T. Khrolobian praised the university's activities, noting that the large number of pharmacists, dentists and nurses who graduated from the university "are a great testimony..."[22].

Interestingly, an average of \$28 per student per year was needed, compared to the \$12 provided by other institutions [23]. This demonstrated the association's commitment to organising education and creating a prosperous learning environment. The association received constant financing for the construction of schools and the improvement of educational institutions from various aid funds, as well as from rent income. Consequently, improvements and renovations to the building could be carried out. One such large-scale project was the renovation of the 750-seat hall, which cost around \$50,000 [24]. This hall was intended to serve not only as a cultural centre, but also as a platform for teacher training and business courses.

Thus, the significant role of American missions in evangelical schools is worthy of great appreciation. They prioritised education, modernising and refining their methods over time. Thanks to this, they continue to successfully educate and nurture the new generation in the national spirit, carrying out patriotic nationwide activities to this day.

4. Conclusions

The Armenian Evangelical Association of America's humanitarian and educational mission among the Armenian diaspora was driven by educational needs and the imperative to restore and strengthen national, religious and cultural identity. The development of the educational system within Armenian communities was inextricably linked with church structures and organisations. As educational institutions

primarily operated alongside churches, great attention was paid to religious education, particularly national education. Evangelical educational institutions primarily began opening after the Genocide, particularly from the 1920s onwards. [25] Notably, many of the educational institutions that were established out of necessity at that time continue to operate to this day. Evangelicals often operated under the auspices and support of missionaries, who helped improve unfavourable building conditions and provide schools with necessary equipment. Great importance was attached to the education of girls, with almost equal proportions receiving an education. In Armenian evangelical schools, alongside studying the Holy Scriptures, emphasis was placed on teaching the Armenian language and literature, and on praying in the native language to emphasise the preservation of Armenian identity in a foreign environment.

Abbreviations

AMAA Armenian Evangelical Association of America

Author Contributions

Astghik Ghazaryan is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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