

## Chapter 9

### God's Work in and through Us

by Merinda Enns

Although neither Richard nor I knew it then, God was uniquely calling us from when we were very young to say 'yes' to Him. He was calling us to go from the known to the unknown in obedience, to say 'yes' to Him no matter what, being formed more into the likeness of Jesus along the way. Our story is one of God working in and through us. But, in the end, it is all about obedience.

My husband's story illustrates God's relentless pursuit. When Richard was young, his parents were not followers of Christ, and it took a tragic, near-fatal small plane crash involving his dad and older brother to bring the family to the place where they chose to follow Jesus. Already the tone was set: tragedy and suffering are part of God's equation. This first lesson was so critical in the following years.

God was pursuing Richard and preparing him for a life of dependency. Even before knowing about God, our Heavenly Father gave him a supernatural vision as a young child, sending him on a spiritual journey. Making no sense at the time, the pieces of the vision included a small plane, boxes of books, and a jungle. Only a decade later, after committing his life to Christ, God again sent the same dream in full colour! The call became clearer; Richard was to dedicate himself to going to those with little to no access to Jesus.

In contrast, I grew up in a family who loved and served Jesus in short-term cross-cultural work and encouraged me to listen to God and say 'yes' to Him. I became a Christ-follower as a young child and soon after that, believed God wanted me to go to the least reached, those with minimal access to learn about the love of Christ. It was through the encouragement of my parents and home church (Morden Alliance in Manitoba) that the passion was kept alive in my heart.

I remember one very significant moment at the age of thirteen. An international worker (IW), Elfrieda van der Bijl (then Toews), was speaking at my church. My heart was again softened as she challenged anyone to commit to going out to the lost world. I immediately went to the front to declare I was saying 'yes' to Jesus.

This moment was significant in many respects. Not only did I make a public declaration, but Elfrieda continued to correspond with me through air mail to "fan

the flame" God had set in my heart. What joy I had, years later, as we were about to move to Africa, when Elfrieda held our last child in her arms and blessed her and our family as we went.

God may have called us separately, but He brought us together to make Him known among the nations. And so, with two children in tow, having worked in a church for a few years and completing seminary training, we were ready to go.

## Ministry in Côte d'Ivoire: 1993 - 1997

Our journey to Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, in the summer of 1993 was different than anticipated. At the time, the Alliance process included an application form in which you could state your top three choices of location. Our list did not mention Africa, yet in the fall of 1991, we received official notice that our country of service would be Côte d'Ivoire, Africa. We immediately got out a map because we had no clue where this country was located. As the reality began to sink in, so did our confirmation. God gave me this incredible joy and peace in my heart. It was like I had always wanted to serve there but never knew its location.

For Richard, the confirmation came moments before landing in the country. As he gazed for the first time at the land soon to become home, to his amazement, the jungle in the vision from childhood returned. Just outside the plane's window was

the exact picture from that vision...the trees, the landscape, everything was as he had seen it those many years ago. Another confirmation that we were going where God was asking us to be. What a God gift!

These confirmations proved to be so critical in our journey. There were numerous situations where the Enemy tried to discourage us, to make us want to give up. We held on tightly to the knowledge that we could make plans, but God is the One who brings about



The Enns family in Africa, 1994

His purposes. All we could offer was a daily surrender of saying 'yes' to Jesus and taking opportunities to share the love, hope, and truth of Jesus with those who had not yet heard.

One of the most significant lessons we learned early on was that we could depend on God no matter what. A week after landing, we drove inland to our

first home and place of ministry. Divo is a large town, and it had a large Alliance church. The pastor, Michel, and his wife took us under their wings and graciously showed us how to minister among the people.

One of the earliest lessons was to sit back and watch. To make us into the most useful tool, God knew He needed us to be humbled. And so, Richard found himself driving Pastor Michel from village to village, sitting around fires or in courtyards, listening and observing. Eventually, Richard was released to train village lay pastors, but likely he learned more than they did.

Richard often ventured out with Michel to villages with no Christian presence or believers. These moments usually took many days of sitting with the chiefs and elders, seeking their permission to share the Gospel publicly. Often, the most enticing method was to project the *JESUS* film. This would require a reel-to-reel projector, a generator, sound equipment, and a bed sheet to be draped on a strategic hut's wall.

Given how many things could and did go wrong (like running out of fuel or the only bulb burning out), Richard's humble duty was to ensure everything worked out in the jungle.

Quickly he realized the antiquated projector needed help to operate. From the first showing and the dozens to follow, Richard had to place his finger into the intake reel and manually gather the film before it spilled on the ground. At the same moment, he needed to hold the mic to the speaker with the other hand. He also had to change reels in complete darkness. Even so, nothing can describe the joy of witnessing people not only seeing a film for the first time but of Jesus becoming real and salvation in Him making sense to the audience. Bringing the truth and hope of Jesus to those who had not yet heard impacted our hearts for all the years to come.

We also began to develop a deep burden for those who were either in bondage to spirit worship or those who followed Islam. On one occasion, a young man, Bak, came to our door begging for food. Fascinated by a Christian helping a Muslim, he became a regular around our home. For months Bak was intensely opposed to discussing or hearing about Jesus. But God was pursuing him through our friendship. After months of living out Jesus to him, Bak finally asked his burning question, "Why do you love me? You have shown love to me. Why?" Richard explained to him that we were vessels of Jesus' love; what Bak was experiencing was Jesus' love through us. That evening, Bak gave his life to Jesus. Richard warned him great persecution would likely come. Did he still want to become a Jesus follower? There was no doubt in Bak's mind that he had found the truth.

Shortly after, we moved to the capital city of Abidjan to work among Muslims.



Richard with district pastors, 1994

And so began a new journey for us. Due to a huge influx of people from neighbouring countries seeking a better life, there was a growing need to establish churches and reach out to these people groups. So for the next three years, we learned their language, established growing churches, and trained leaders. These people were the most marginalized and needy, but working with them was pure joy.

While Richard taught the men, I was delighted to teach women in small neighbourhoods to read in their own language and watch their eyes light up as they read God's Word for the first time. People like Deb, living in modest surroundings, forever impressed me with her gentle yet bold proclamation and living out the Christ life in her

Muslim community. Deb and Bak's story are but two examples of many who counted the cost and then, against the culture of their upbringing and society, chose to follow the Son of God, their hope for now and forever.

Jumping ahead about twenty-five years, Richard was in an Alliance World Fellowship gathering and met church leadership from Côte d'Ivoire. He learned that the small group of five churches we had previously seeded and watered had grown. There are now so many churches made up of local believers, they make up their own district. God be praised! What a lesson: be faithful in the small things and then step back and see the great things God will do.

## Ministry in Quebec: 1998 - 2009

God never wastes our time or efforts. Prior to going to Africa, we spent a year of French studies at a university in Quebec City. I recall thinking Quebec would be a wonderful place to minister. Little did we know then that our experience and connection with many wonderful Quebecois and their culture would be part of our future.

We had returned to Canada for a year's home assignment after our four years

in Côte d'Ivoire, knowing we would not be returning overseas. Our daughter Jenissa was born with a rare chromosome irregularity which results in global developmental delays. God was calling us to a new place where her special education needs could be met. As we mourned the loss of our overseas life and ministry, God gently opened our hearts to what He had planned for our next season. There were many days of wondering, feeling lost, and being "in-between," not knowing what would happen, where we would be, or what we would be doing next after our home assignment. But He was present and opened doors we had not anticipated.

While we had been studying French in Quebec City six years earlier, there had been other IWs studying at the university, and some of them had visa issues making it impossible to go where they had intended.

As we witnessed our peers living through the realities of changes in plans, we talked about "what would we do if this happened to us?" "Well, we would definitely consider staying here," we said to each other. God brought the conversation back to our minds when the opportunity came to work in Quebec. And thus began more than a decade of Montreal life and ministry both in the city and beyond.

God knew we needed confirmation that this was His plan. I still remember July 4, 1998, when we were at Assembly in Ottawa. We had to move our family and a few possessions to Quebec in a few short weeks. So we needed to find an apartment in the specific school's catchment immediately.

In Quebec, most rentals are advertised in April and May, so the pickings are sparse by summer. We knew if God called us to Montreal, He would have to provide an apartment in the four hours we had. It was nearing the end of the afternoon, and we had stopped at a parking lot to pick someone up when we noticed a second-floor balcony with a "for rent" sign. Richard ran across the street with little hope but was willing to ask. The woman who answered the door said she was sorry, but the upstairs apartment was rented. As Richard turned to go, she called, "Wait...let me call my husband." It turned out they were moving, and they said, "We feel that we should rent our place on the main floor to you." God's provision! It was a miracle; we called that place home for the next three years—another beautiful confirmation from God. We were following His leading, and He provided what we needed.

We began our new ministry in church planting by working alongside a Quebecois couple in East Montreal. It was our privilege to witness God at work in the lives of people growing in their young faith. Seeing how God spoke to them through His Word and convicted them of how they needed to live their new life in Christ now was a humbling experience. We learned much about God's grace, forgiveness,



Hochelaga Alliance Church, c. 2000

and being reconciled to God and each other. We are deeply grateful to God for allowing us to be among those who are a light on a hill among some of the least-reached people in North America. Encouraging smaller church groups among francophones and allophones was a joy for us. People from many ethnicities in Montreal call the city home for both shorter and longer terms; we were delighted to have the chance to work among various groups and be part of their journey with God as fellowships and individuals.

Another highlight was mentoring students at Institut Biblique V.I.E. (IBVIE),<sup>1</sup> the Alliance's Bible school in Quebec. These students were sponsored by their churches to study for the ministry. Regular prayer times and discussing how Scripture integrates into our lives were a great joy. All these years later, it is a delight to know many of these students are in formal and informal ministry and leadership roles in their various faith communities. They have grown in skills and mostly in listening to God and His call on their lives to serve Him within the church and the community.

We distinctly noticed the profound need for hope and connection in people's lives in our neighbourhood and other community groups where God opened doors. One specific way we loved connecting was our yearly "corn roast" at the end of August, where we invited our neighbours to get together for a Quebecois tradition. They were so happy to share this cultural event with us. God opened the doors through this annual backyard event to a deeper relationship with

1 Present-day École de théologie évangélique du Québec (ETEQ)

neighbours, allowing us to pray for them, listen to where they were in their spiritual journey, and answer questions about what it meant to be a Christ-follower. One of these connections, in particular, has continued to this day nearly fifteen years later. We pray for those dear people to hear the call of Jesus personally.

We also served as the team leaders for the Quebec Global Ministries team spread across the province. Together we prayed, believed God for miracles in people's lives, and moved into our communities to live among those who needed Jesus for their hope for today and forever. Apprentices in the Global Ministries program came under our care and supervision, and we had the privilege of listening to God with them, growing together in our faith and trust in God, who directs our paths. What a lesson we learned during these years: invest in leaders to multiply the ministry.

And then God called us to another chapter and new ministry. Over the eleven years we spent in Quebec, God grew a deep love in our hearts for the Quebecois and those who call Quebec home. We learned we did not have to give up the heart we had for Africa but could also have a heart for Quebec. Neither detracted from the other, but each reflected God's heart for the nations. So, when He called us to take another faith journey, we could remember His faithfulness in giving us all we needed and more for the next season.

## **Return to Africa: 1999-2021**

It seems God loves to surprise us! Our initial appointment to Côte d'Ivoire had not been part of our plan, nor had eleven years in Quebec been something we had anticipated. So when leadership asked us to lead and serve back in Africa, we could hardly believe it. It was a huge step, and we felt inadequate to take on the task. However, we agreed to this new assignment by seeking God through His Word, praying, and hearing from trusted, godly, and wise people. Back to Africa!

In this move, we again saw how God prepared the way for us to live and thrive in another new context. Suddenly our focus shifted from one specific people group to overseeing the personnel and work in Africa. Even after more than ten years, we felt at home when our feet landed on African soil.

While God had provided a place in Montreal in four hours, this time, God came through with an apartment, visa, and school for Jenissa in less than two days! So, on December 1, 1999, only three months after that two-day trip, we once again settled into Africa.

During this era, we were welcomed into the Sand (Africa) family, as we affectionately called the IWs, spread over a dozen countries in various contexts



and ministries. Our hearts grew for the many people among whom they lived, loved, and served. It was our great privilege to serve and lead these workers whom our Heavenly Father brought to Africa to proclaim and live out in action the name of Jesus as the truth and the life. We celebrated their joys, cried over the deep sorrows, prayed for those they loved who had not yet said 'yes' to Jesus, and made creative plans for engaging in cultures and lives very different from those we grew up in. All this while holding these plans with open hands to God's purposes.

Imagine getting to sit in the first row of an event. Better yet, sit on the bench and see the action firsthand. We had the great joy of being first-hand witnesses to God's work in central, west, and north Africa. The stories of God at work in Congo, Guinea, Niger, Senegal, and several North African countries became the ones we shared with many around the world, with prayer and partnership increasing. God drew people to move to Africa, join existing teams, and start new teams to work in partnership with other like-minded organizations to bring the light of Jesus into places without access to Him. Their commitment to stick it out through thick and thin, their willingness to suffer for His name, and their selflessness in service were humbling.

Through years of seemingly fruitless work, time has yielded a harvest in many places, with people from these unreached groups choosing to "follow the Jesus road" and be baptized as a public declaration of their faith. Those who have chosen to believe often live lives of familial and sometimes life-threatening persecution. They continue to count the cost every day. And one day, we will see *"a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb..."* (Revelation 7:9).

Every chapter or season holds memories of great joys, sorrows, and everything in between. Political and economic crises brought uncertainty and upheaval, sometimes making it seem like the work could not go forward. Epidemics, endless malaria, and many other outbreaks of diseases kept us on our knees, pleading for the lives of people and the mercy of God over those who are often the most vulnerable. Food shortages, droughts, and floods wreaked havoc on a physical level for so many. And yet, in each situation, God was present. He showed us ways to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Sometimes, in great suffering, people realize their need for Him.

There were so many highlights that there is a significant risk of missing some of the greatest while writing as the "pen comes to paper." To name some...

- A private radio station preaching God's Word and praying for people to know Jesus.



- HIV orphan care.
- Audio and written Scripture available in languages of least-reached people groups.
- New believers gathering under a mango tree.
- New babies coming into the world with prayers of blessing and protection prayed over them.
- Spiritual conversations on a rooftop away from the crowds (think Nicodemus).
- National churches, strengthened through leadership development, becoming independent and sending out workers to other least-reached peoples.
- Secret believers standing strong when their faith was made known in their families and communities.
- Social media providing safe places for people from Africa and beyond to ask questions about Jesus, receive Scripture, and choose to follow Christ.
- People coming to know Jesus in prison and shining the light in the darkest of places.
- Young people and adults alike learning to read and gaining skills to help provide for their families.
- Training for believers to share their faith and become leaders in small and large faith gatherings.
- Compassionate medical care and prayer offered on behalf of those who needed both physical and spiritual healing.
- Answered prayer after answered prayer, which demonstrated the power and strength of Jesus in the lives of both believers and those not yet following.

And to God we say.... *"One generation commends your **works** to another; they tell of your **mighty acts**"* (Psalm 145:4).

## **Back to the Prairies: 2022-Present**

And then there is the present. We never thought our path would bring us back to the Prairies, especially Regina, the city of Jenissa's birth more than thirty years ago.

We knew God had something new, something on this side of the ocean for the next season, but what? We are again thankful for God's direction and wisdom from leadership who prayed with us through our move to Regina in October 2022, where Richard is now the assistant district superintendent in our home Midwest District.

How gracious of God to bring us to a place where we feel known and know some of the people and some of the culture (although significant changes have occurred since we last lived here). We are thankful to be part of a ministry team whose hearts are like ours, desiring to bring access to Jesus to people who do not know Him and to journey with those becoming more like Him. While we are newbies here, this ministry has been part of our lives quite a few times, and we know that as we keep listening to God, we will find the steps He has for us.



Richard and Merinda, 2023

## Family and Lessons Learned

God has provided miraculously for us to be able to live and serve in so many situations. We have trusted Him to provide for our family wherever He has called us, and we live with our hands open. God gave us two wonderful children; sometimes, it was hard to release and trust that the situations they would live and experience were the best.

Two years into our time in Côte d'Ivoire, Elliot, who was five years old, had malaria. It became so severe that Elliot only hung on to life and breath through God's intervention and healing. This was one of the moments when we again dedicated Him to God as we had in 1990 when he was just a babe being held in the Russell Alliance Church. Years later, as we were preparing to return to Africa, leaving Elliot, who was studying at Ambrose University, was one of my most challenging release and trust moments.

Just before getting on the plane for Côte d'Ivoire, we heard from the pediatrician that Jenissa, then eighteen months old, had a rare chromosome anomaly. The news could have been a closed door to Africa, but God's plans are rarely our own, and over the many years, He has made way for us to have care and resources for Jenissa in the most unexpected places. Her "disabilities" have created some of the widest open doors. It has not been easy, but God's faithfulness and provision have become miraculous stories and mile markers in our lives, shouting, "But God!"

In her pre-school years, God provided an English language stimulation playgroup run by an American speech pathologist within walking distance of our home in Abidjan. Arriving in Quebec, the public elementary school in the area we would be church planting was known for welcoming children of all abilities. Jenissa spent four wonderful years of friendship and learning in a most welcoming

environment. Unfortunately, when the educational transition was needed, the school we believed was best for her had a waiting list of seventy children...But God! Jenissa was accepted into the school where she learned and thrived in an encouraging atmosphere.

In the private sector, we sought out speech and language therapy where we found the cost to be prohibitive, but God laid it on the heart of a friend who did not know of our need to send us a significant financial gift designated specifically to the resource needs we may come across helping her to grow and develop. Our hearts were overwhelmed. This was a miraculous and most timely gift in the mail the day we came home from our meet-and-greet visit at the speech clinic.

Years later, preparing to move back to Africa, we asked God where He would provide for our family. He led us to Accra, Ghana, which not only had a good air connection to all our IWs in the region, a partnership with the Mobile Member Care team, which was significant in caring well for our whole regional team, but also a great school for children and adults with disabilities run by a godly Ghanaian woman. This would be one of the most tangible gifts God gave to us as we served in Africa over the upcoming years.

Global Ministries supported our family and ministry in countless ways, and we are beyond grateful for the excellent care we received as we lived out the calling God had placed on our hearts.

Now as we look back, there are some times when we can already see the reasons and purposes, and other times remain a mystery. But we know He is good, and His purposes will come about.



The Enns Family, 2023

How does one wrap up an unfinished story? We don't. There is so much left to be written in our own lives and hearts, in the lives of our children (now three... Elliot and Morgan and Jenissa), and in our new grandson Simon! And much to be written in the lives of those who have come across our path and those yet to come across our path. He is faithful! He will carry out His work in us and bring it to *"completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6).