



# **LIBERTY YEARS**

**Through My Eyes**

**Inspiring stories of  
missionary journeys  
in the nations**

**By Helen Blake**

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## Through My Eyes

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*"If your life is poured out, spent for the sake of the hungry and afflicted, then your nights will be bright as midday; like the dawn light breaks through darkness."*

Isaiah 58:10

## **SOMETIMES**

Faith plunges us into the deep

## **OTHER TIMES**

It is about choosing the right stepping stones

This little book is about some of the journeys and humanitarian work of Steve and Helen Blake and their friends ministering together as 'Liberty for the Nations'.

It spans 25 years from 1987, and will take you the reader briefly into countries and cities and the lives of people from Eastern and Northern Europe and the Mediterranean to villages in the islands of the South Pacific and Asia.

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More about the work of Liberty for the Nations (now Liberty People) can be found out by visiting the website

[www.libertypeople.com.au](http://www.libertypeople.com.au).

## Perapedi Village



### EARLY SPRING

Six weeks based in Cyprus early in 2012 provided me with the surprising opportunity to write! The island's quiet mountains and countryside were so perfect for inspiration. Thank You to Costas and Vasiliki, for lending us your peaceful summer house in Perapedi. Most of the beginnings of this book were written during our stay at the village, between meetings and other travels.



*Our first morning in the sleepy Cypriot mountain village, I've awakened to pleasant sounds of little birds chirping, fluffing their feathers in the early warmth and tap-tapping their beaks on the roof gutters. Outside, the streets and the few clay tiled houses are empty and silent. The gentle sun has spread across the small*

*valley below, lighting on wintered trees and nudging their first blossoms into a gradual, glorious display. Like hope and faith, the trees are waiting patiently for their transformation. It will certainly come and soon, the fine and old branches laden with white and pink petals will become fruitful again. Soon, the valley will be greener, and the limestone houses scattered among the hills will become sun-warmed and whiter. The last patches of snow visible on the two higher peaks will be gone. The forest will come to life and its pines, always unchanged by the seasons, will still provide their constant, darker shades of beauty.*

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to all those younger people who will read its pages. You are the real reason I ventured into this project of writing! Your own stories can be equally as significant if you follow after Jesus, whose life was never ordinary. May you do **MUCH GREATER!**

Also, I dedicate it to our many friends who through the years have walked and worked closely with us. We admire you for your commitment and love. We have shared some great adventures and seen God do amazing things!

Finally, I dedicate it to our four wonderful children. You shared some of these events with us and saw everything happening around you through your own eyes. These pages are for you and for your children, our beautiful grandchildren.

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## FOREWORD

*The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me: He has appointed and anointed me to bring good news to the poor! He has sent me to heal the wounds of the broken-hearted, to proclaim LIBERTY for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.*

Isaiah 61:1&2

For more than twenty years, we have travelled to many parts of the world under the banner 'Liberty for the Nations'. A visiting prophet once told us that we would go to "the blackest of the black, and the whitest of the white". She had no way of knowing we had just returned from a visit to Bougainville in the Pacific, where the People are blacker than anywhere, and were about to fly to White Russia in Northern Europe!

Through the busiest earlier years, we led a church family that was at the heart of our trips, fund raising activities, financial miracles and administration. People gave of themselves sacrificially, helping us in every way imaginable: working extra hours, making and selling Christmas puddings and snow cones, raising and selling cattle, selling chocolates, lamingtons and art works, organizing walkathons, buying and selling cars and tractors, holding garage



sales, and even shaving heads! Sometimes, our meals were made and our children cared for by friends.

The vision and work spread and gained trust and favour. Other churches, mostly in our area, became involved both at home and overseas. Our children sometimes came with us on trips; they have all been overseas to various countries. Hundreds of others have come with us to serve in practical ways, pray, preach or teach. Their gifts, skills and professions have been put to work to minister help to the needy. A few have spent months or years in places we introduced them to.

For years, people have suggested one of us should write about our experiences in the nations. I have always quickly dismissed the idea as being impossible, and it certainly has been! Now, though, the opportunity has come and I am grateful for it.

Some nations we have journeyed back and forth to are not included in this book. I have not mentioned most of our mission activities in Australia, even though they have been significant. My purpose in writing has not been to give a detailed account of all that we have done.

For simplicity's sake, I have not mentioned most of our friends who have worked with us. They are numerous, and many of them

played essential parts! Once or twice in a story I have named people where it was helpful.

Our roles are changing now. It's time to walk more with those who are younger; time to guide others into the future. We are not really trainers, but we know that our lives and God's gifts at work in us can inspire and be an encouragement to many. May these pages contribute to the realization of all that God has for you and for the people you influence.

# INTRODUCTION

## Cyprus

**YOU are the LIGHT of the world!  
A city that's lit up on a hill can't be hid!**

**Matthew 5:14**



## 2012 IN THE ISLAND OF CYPRUS

*It is late in the month of March, 2012, and we are to be based here in sunny Cyprus for six weeks. We have been visiting the island briefly to preach and encourage believers once or twice a year these past four years. This time we are able to stay a little longer, between visits to other countries nearby. There are so many new things happening here, and we want to serve and strengthen the fresh growth!*

*We work here among people of various nationalities: Filipinos, Sri Lankans, Russians, Bulgarians, people from Western Europe and Africa, the Cypriots and people from the Middle East. They need spiritual and emotional encouragement, salvation, guidance and training. They need us to be here as a gift; a catalyst for new, good things from God.*

*In the cities and some villages, are thousands of Filipino migrant workers. They have come here to earn a living for their families back home. They toil six days a week in local households then on Sundays, they come together in small and larger groups. They sing and celebrate, and find a place of refuge among their friends, who are God's House here and home away from home. Some work easily, but most endure long and difficult days. They have many stories to tell and their lives testify powerfully to the impossible being made possible! I so admire their faith and willingness to sacrifice, their support and love for each other, and their commitment to serve their local employers joyfully.*

*Just two days ago, six hundred came together in the city of Limassol to celebrate. Crammed inside and outside of a hotel's large street-level open area, they sang and prayed and danced and listened to the Word of God. It was a highlight for everyone, the result of vision and excited, busy activities! The reason for the celebration was the sixth anniversary since the founding of 'Judah*

*Ministries'. The group is led by Mila, a vibrant, faith-filled woman we have known for many years. Her barangay back home in the Philippines is one where twenty years ago we helped plant a church, bought a rice field, and gave other practical help. Now, here we are in another part of the world with this little lady who is God's firebrand, loved and respected by hundreds of believers across Cyprus.*

*These past few years, we have walked alongside Mila as much as we've been able to. She is a gatherer and motivator. She is deeply devoted to her Lord and what God is doing in this island. Exuberance and a joyful expectation spring from her spontaneously and constantly. Good things happen around Mila!*

*How is it that we have come to be here, so far from home, with her and all these people?*

*We have been on many journeys, travelling from country to country, and seeds sown in the past have grown to maturity and sown their own. The things we are observing and experiencing in Cyprus began in God's heart long ago! Our part began there too, and with the preparation of our own lives in so many ways. For the sake of this story, though, it all started in 1987, at home in Australia.*

# CHAPTER ONE

## Vanuatu

HIS power at work IN US is able to do  
MUCH MORE than we could ever dream of!

Ephesians 3:20



### CALLED TO ANOTHER NATION

*It seems there is an emergency. Steve has answered a phone call and I am listening, trying to understand. I realise he is being asked to go overseas, TOMORROW! Somehow it feels right to me, but how will it be possible? He doesn't have a passport, and we have no money to buy a ticket!*

*The day is Friday. We search for papers and discover we don't even have Steve's birth certificate needed to process the*

*passport. There is no time to consider if this might just be craziness! By midday, we know the birth certificate will come through, with the help of friends interstate. But now, the local immigration office is closed for their long lunch break. There will be just two hours to complete the passport and buy a ticket!*

*About five o'clock in the afternoon, I learn the final outcome from Steve: "I have the ticket and passport in my hands. Yes, I'm leaving for Vanuatu tomorrow!"*

Vanuatu is a Y-shaped string of 83 small islands in the South Pacific, located about a three-hour flight north east of Sydney. It has a total population of about 225,000. Written history of the islands began in 1606 with the Spaniard Fernandez de Quiros' sighting of Santo Island in the north. In 1774, the Englishman Captain James Cook visited and named the islands the 'New Hebrides'. Traders and missionaries began arriving in the mid 1800's. The outside world with all of its influences good and bad, had come to stay. Europeans and some others settled and established plantations. In 1906, France and Britain colonized the islands and formed a joint Government. For the next 74 years, there were dual French and British systems of education, health, security and every other newly introduced area of service and development.

Towards the end of colonial rule, an independence movement arose under a local Anglican Bishop, Father Walter Lini. With Britain's help, Father Lini eventually led the formation of the Republic of Vanuatu in 1980. So much change and challenge had been introduced. A little over 100 years earlier, each village or region in an island had been its own little kingdom! Despite substantial foreign assistance, the infant Republic floundered. Seven years later, early in 1987, violent winds and rains devastated many of the islands. Uma was the worst tropical cyclone to have hit Vanuatu for a very long time. Many people died, especially in the south, and houses and crops were destroyed. Steve's introduction to Vanuatu happened a few months later, in the aftermath. The nation was still reeling from Cyclone Uma's devastating force. Churches were filled with repentant people calling out for God's help.

**1987:**

The church we were leading in Australia was in a remarkable, fruitful season, but Steve was feeling restless and we sensed it was time for something new. The day of the telephone call was a series of miracles! Everything moved quickly, and God made the impossible possible in just a few hours.



That weekend, Steve found himself suddenly in a nation we knew nothing about, less than a four hour flight away. As he landed, he caught sight of the colourful red, green, black and yellow flag painted on the tail of a small outward-bound plane. He could hardly believe his eyes! He had seen the same design in a flash of vision only a few months earlier, during a Sunday Church service! We had discussed it and searched unsuccessfully for a match in our old World Atlas. Now, he understood! Now, here it was: the new flag of the new Republic of Vanuatu. There was no doubting that God had led him to this place!

In Tanna Island in the southern province of TAFEA, Steve preached and prayed for the sick in open air meetings that were wild with joy and celebration. It was an incredible time of revival. Prophecies flowed and people sang together, whirling and dancing through the long nights. A young Pastor-Evangelist, Am Tuprick and his wife Helen, were in the crowds. They would become and remain our good friends and co-workers from that time on. Just two years later, they would take their young family north and begin a work with us that would bring hundreds of Australians to the island, and alter our own family's makeup for ever!

The miracle of Steve's first visit to Vanuatu will always be one of our favourite stories! God must have known that in the years to come, we would need such a dramatic event to look back upon.

Steve returned home from his trip excited and enthusiastic about what he had experienced. We had started out on a path that would lead to countless visits and serious involvement in the nation's needs, into the future.

## CHAPER TWO

### Eastern Europe

Just as the Father has sent Me out,  
I am sending YOU.

John 20:21



### FIRST VISIT TO THE FORMER USSR

*The unfamiliar road signs and alphabet are so strange to us. Which direction should we take now? I search for clues again, and compare the map with what's around. This might be the city's name, but how are we to know?!*

*In Eastern Europe for the first time, Steve and I are driving across country to the city of Bourgas on the Black Sea. Sunflowers cover fields alongside us and far into the distance. We have passed by horse drawn gypsy wagons and carts top-heavy with hay,*

*countless abandoned concrete buildings with broken windows, pollution pouring from chimney stacks and old cars, children begging at traffic lights, and shops with almost nothing to sell. We have been through border check points where the waiting lasted hours and armed guards demanded bribes of coke or biscuits.*

*Ahead of us now, spanning high across the road, is a solid concrete structure that seems to have no real purpose: yet another sightly statement to the former might of Communism. Soviet power has been overthrown, but the reminders are still here. LEST WE FORGET!*

**1991:**

We had been in a traumatic season, when pain was constant and at times hardly bearable. Tears were always in my heart. It was God's opportunity to point out to us a different path: *Go this way!*

We started out on the new journey, and quickly formed an enterprise we called *Liberty for the Nations*. We knew God wanted our lives and vision to be focused on other nations.

The mandate God gave us in those early days was to go, and to inspire and help others to go, to minister by speaking His Word and through acts of practical love, and to assist others who were

already working in the harvest fields. It would be *a vision in action; faith put to work*:

### GO AND SEND

Jesus went and sent, and so will we.  
Going and sending implies team effort

### MINISTER IN WORD AND DEED

Declare the Word of God,  
And love with action

### SERVE OTHERS

Work alongside others who are also  
Obeying 'The Great Commission'

The countries we first ventured out to under our new banner were Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria in Eastern Europe. A friend who had visited these places shortly after Communism fell, had given us some names and addresses and helped to arrange meetings.

We left our young children and flew to Europe, hired a small car in France, and then set off with our oversized road atlas on the wrong side of the road and in heavy rain. We had hardly any money, so our first night on The Continent we slept in the car.

The next night, we found some basic accommodation for the price of just seven dollars!

In those years of the early nineties, the formerly Soviet-controlled countries were only just coming out into freedom. The infamous Romanian dictator Ceausescu and his wife had been shot dead in Bucharest. The Wall dividing East and West Berlin had been pulled down. While driving through Hungary, we listened to news that the Russian reformer Gorbachev was being placed under house arrest. Circumstances were happening that would bring about monumental changes to the world! Economies had collapsed. For foreigners visiting from overseas, everything in East Europe was cheap. Shops were empty, or sometimes they displayed a few items: two or three pairs of shoes and a shelf-full of vodka. Petrol and food were in short supply; dozens of people lined up for hours for just a few litres or for a loaf of bread. Thousands upon thousands of unemployed men, women and youngsters wandered the streets, aimless and in confusion.

We arrived at the city of Debrecen in Hungary, where we stayed and worked with a pastor who had taken numerous journeys across the border into Romania during the years of oppression, to smuggle supplies in and people out. Steve preached in the city church he led and in its outstations in neighbouring towns. The many young people at the meetings were full of questions, and

ready for a touch from God! Hungary had definitely thrown off the old and come into the new. We left Debrecen certain that we would return, and willing to move there if God were to call us!

Before leaving Australia, we had been given the telephone number of an English speaking man living in Romania. We had been assured that Richard would especially appreciate visitors who spoke his own language, and so our first night in Romania Steve dialled the number. An American voice answered: "You're from Australia? Oh, I spent some time there a while back. What part are you from?" *Steve: "I'm from country New South Wales, a city called Maitland."* Richard, sounding very astonished: "Maitland? What did you say your name was? Steve Blake? Steve, it's me, Richard! Do you remember me?!" In the late '80's, Richard had served some months in a prison not far from the church we were leading at the time. He had attended studies Steve and other men held at the gaol, and had been baptised in a bath tub. Incredibly, his good behaviour had led to his being granted day release to attend a Bible College in Newcastle. Now, a few years on, here he was, in Romania!

Amazed, we drove on to Brasov, a beautiful old city, and stayed two nights with Richard and his young Romanian wife and her Germanic family. They told us about their work with homeless people living on the streets, and with abandoned, abused and

neglected children in the shocking orphanages the whole world was just beginning to hear about. We visited one of them with Richard, carrying books, games and sweets. The older children greeted us with excited chatter. Their American friend was obviously a favourite, always bringing nice things for them and making them laugh with his antics! Richard showed us the renovations and repair work that Christians from West Europe had done on the building. Now, the children could have warm showers and flushing toilets. The windows and doors would close properly to keep the chilled air out. They could eat at tables and sleep on beds.

(We learned that people across the border in Moldavia were even more desperately poor than in Romania. While we visited, Richard's father in law was filling his van with blankets and shoes sent from Germany, preparing to deliver them to needy families. The poverty in this part of the world was overwhelmingly tragic! In the years following, when we re-visited East Europe, we met many wonderful men and women who came volunteering their time to help the needy and to help build the Church. Christians came from as near as Switzerland, Germany, Sweden and England and as far away as Tasmania. They brought trucks and vanloads of canned and packaged foods. They renovated hospitals and orphanages and supplied them with hot water and furniture, led summer camps for children and youths, and helped churches to run



tent outreaches. Some moved from the comfort of their homelands, so that they could help more and for longer. Some of the people we made friends with back in those days remain our life-long friends.).

In Bulgaria, our final destination, we stayed in Bourgas on the Black Sea Coast, in an old apartment block near the city centre. Our hostess, Planyenka, was an architect whose work under Soviet rule had been worth less than that of an unskilled labourer! She told us about other professionals - scientists, intellectuals, and people in the arts - suddenly disappearing. People like herself who had remained in the country, were always treated with suspicion. Anyone who might think independently was considered to be a national threat!

Steve preached in Bourgas City to a thriving church filled with several hundred people. The young pastor there told us stories of what his life had been like, growing up under a heavily controlled regime that had tried to eliminate belief in God. He and his school friends from Christian families had been ostracized, and never allowed the same opportunities as the children of Party families. He wondered how this new-found freedom would influence his own children. Would an easier life without persecution really be good for them?

After the USSR collapsed, churches sprang up everywhere. Evangelistic meetings attracted huge crowds, and thousands of people responded to hearing the Good News. A sobering challenge quickly became apparent: there was hardly anyone to nurture the newborn Christians. Sadly, although many continued in their new faith, many more returned to their old ways and were lost in the crowds.

## CHAPTER THREE

### An Adoption

You have received the spirit of adoption.  
So now, YOU can say "ABBA (DADDY)".

Romans 8:15



#### OUR FAMILY'S NEW ADDITION

*Margaret Saul, the senior midwife at Port Vila Central Hospital, has telephoned and is waiting to speak with me. I hurry down the outdoors stairway of our coastal home in Port Macquarie to the office we have created underneath. Steve, his expression unfathomable, hands me the phone.*

*"We have a baby girl for you! Yes, she is staying with us at our home. When will you be able to come and pick her up?"! Margaret wants me to name the two month old baby! I ponder for just a*

*few moments before responding, "Her name is Sarah... Sarah Anna". It sounds Ni-Vanuatu. Yes, Sarah the Princess, blessed so that she could be a blessing, and Anna, the prophetess waiting for Jesus.*

## 1991 April:

The call came out of the blue! It had been some months since our most recent trip to Vanuatu, when we had last talked with Margaret about the idea of adopting a baby. There was no hesitation, though. We simply nodded to each other in agreement.

It was late in April, 1991, and we were about to register our new identity, Liberty for the Nations. I discovered they had spelled her name Serah. We liked it; it reminded me of the Hebrew word 'Selah', meaning *pause and reflect on that*.

Eight months later, after countless phone calls, faxes, letters, forms to be filled out and visits to the overseas adoptions authorities in Sydney, we were on our way to Vanuatu to meet Serah. Our children were fourteen, eleven, and eight years old. It was December 1991, Christmas school holidays, and everyone was excited! Would she like us? Would we like her? How would each of us bond with her (carefully, because in six weeks' time we would have to leave her here)?

Cathy, Jonathan and Matthew loved our baby from their first introduction. It was amazing, and a little unreal. Steve and I were her future parents, and we would all, together, become her new family. There were a lot of changes ahead, a lot of things to get used to. The children played with her, sat her on their knees, placed a paper cut-out crown on her little head: "Princess Serah".

While in Vanuatu, we visited the island of Epi. There, our family experienced our first tropical cyclone! We huddled together in a little corrugated iron hut and waited for two long days and nights for the howling, crashing sounds, roof shaking and darkness to stop! Later, back in Vila, we all enjoyed daytime hours again with our baby; then had to return home to Australia without her.

In June 1992, when all of the obligations and legalities were finally fulfilled, I flew alone to Vanuatu to bring Serah to her new home. I knew she would be leaving all that was familiar: people, sights, smells, sounds and feelings. I hoped she had not forgotten me, and us all, after so many months. She had been shown our photo regularly, but would she remember us?

A miraculous week later, with her new passport and all of the official papers, the two of us flew to Australia. At the airport in Sydney, her new siblings, daddy and grandparents were waiting

for us. Her eyes lit up when she saw them through the glass window frame that separated us. *It's like they're in the photo, I thought. She seems to remember them!*

That day, Serah became a Blake, an Australian. Now, as I write, she would not trade her life for what could have been, for anything!

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Ocean Voyage

Swing these gates wide open!  
Let the glorious King in!

Psalm 24:7-10



### A SEA AND LAND ADVENTURE

*It is an overcast, cool September afternoon. Our forty pairs of eyes scan the approaching wharf, searching for loved ones awaiting our return. There he is! There they are!*

*The little ship births to cheers and clapping. Shouts and laughter are exchanged back and forth, as we scramble ashore. Young people visiting from New Zealand are among the families welcoming, and they perform the Maori Haka. It's a dramatic, fascinating combination of Polynesian sound and movement!*

*Last minute photos of crewmen and fellow passengers are taken. Some of us are reflective, or hugging, teary-eyed, already missing each other and the bond we have shared on this extraordinary sea and land adventure.*

**1995:**

Tanna, the most populous island in Vanuatu's southern group, had been the primary focus of our prayers, planning and activities for several months. God had spoken to us clearly some years before, about bringing transformation to the remote north of this island. We and our teams had visited regularly and had seen some progress. Then, early in 1995, we committed to a bold plan that would make a major difference. We would hire the Christian missionary ship docked on the coast just a half-hour-drive away from our home in New South Wales, and transport workers and equipment from Australia to Tanna, to build!

Months of preparation followed. God provided us with all of the supplies we needed, the finances for hiring the ship, and the people who would do the work when we arrived at our destination. By September, we had gathered over 60 tonnes of cargo, and men and women from up and down the east coast of Australia. Our local newspapers and television station heard about



the project and covered the story. It was exciting, and an extremely busy time!

The day of departure came. Finally, after all of the activity, the ship set sail and headed out through the inlet to the open sea.

It had fallen to me to lead the team of forty men, women and young people we had collected, on board the ship. Daytimes, we all joined the crew cleaning the ship, making meals, and working in the engine room. Some members of the team ran classes in preparation for our time in Tanna: basic Bislama language, math and English teaching, and group singing. Others furthered their marine qualifications, or took turns at the steering wheel just for the experience. Despite the rough seas and sickness most people experienced, a wonderful sense of shared expectation and team-ship prevailed throughout the voyage.

During mealtimes and for those at work in the kitchen, the sea swell was challenging. Everything on the tables would slide back and forth, precariously close to the edge! Watchful eyes and speed were needed in the kitchen (hot dishes, sharp knives and heavy cooking pots moving about were hazardous)!

Our twelve-year-old son, Matthew, especially loved the rough seas! One time, he was frantically hauled inside from the front

deck, by a crew member. He had been enjoying the spray of the huge waves breaking over the bow!

At night when it was time to sleep, it seemed to me that the ship's hull was God's upturned hand undergirding us, carrying us safely through the waters. Outside, the black starry nights so far from anywhere were a spectacular display of God's creation and presence.

The team and ship's crew met regularly for worship, prayer, teaching and sharing what God was saying to us. On one day, three of us from different parts of Australia discovered we had each heard Him speaking the same verse, through song and Scripture reading: *Swing the ancient gates wide open! Let the victorious, mighty King of Glory in!* (Psalm 24:7-10)

Our fourth day at sea, we berthed at Port Vila where Steve and the last of the team members to arrive by air were waiting for us at the main wharf. Our plan was that they would join the ship for the final few hours of the journey. That evening, on the ocean and bound for Tanna, Steve prayed the same words God had already spoken to us on board the ship: *Let the gates be opened up!* This Scripture verse would remain His Word to us for North Tanna in the years to come: *Let the King of Kings in! Open up the way for Him to come and rule and bless with His presence!*

Our fifth day after leaving Newcastle, we sailed into the little bay tucked into the North Eastern coastline of Tanna.

Before God called us to Loanpakel Bay, the area was known by everyone local as sacred 'taboo' ground, dedicated to evil spirits. It was a feared place where chosen men appeased and pleased spirits in the caves and other hiding places. Am & Helen Tuprik from the south shared our sure sense of God's call to bring His light, life and love into the area. Disregarding warnings of sickness or death from other villagers, they and their young children had moved there, cut a clearing in the bush, and settled. Friends from Australia lived with them for several months and helped to establish a base for outreach. A stronghold had been broken into and was coming down!

Now, for almost two days, the Australian team offloaded over 50 tonnes of building materials and equipment, water tanks, agricultural supplies, medical aid, clothes, books and so many other things, onto the site. The work of transferring most of the load from the ship into a little punt, then onto the coral beach was an amazing achievement. Standing on the ship's deck watching the progress, I knew without a doubt that angels were at work overseeing everyone's safety.

The two tractors we had carried from Australia to Port Vila arrived safely on a trader barge. Driving them one after the other

over the reef and shallow waters onto the coral beach required ingenuity and some very careful maneuvering!

The building and outreach work started almost immediately. Every day, the little punt ran scheduled trips transferring everyone from the ship to the shore for work; then back again for the evening meal, a ninety seconds shower, and sleeping.

Just eight days of coordinated work by the team of Australians working with local men accomplished a three-bedroom house, a long multipurpose building (for meetings, school education, aid distribution and a medical dispensary), a large machinery shed, and the beginnings of another house. Water tanks, and a powerful generator and well-designed solar power system were installed. At the same time some of us visited nearby villages, held outdoor school classes for children, distributed clothing, ran first aid clinics, and worked on the ship. Youths, married couples and older men and women worked side by side, shovelling dirt and concrete, sweating, hammering, drilling, pulling and carrying timbers, connecting pipes and running cables, sorting clothes, treating sores, and cooking and serving meals. The oldest on the team, seventy-two-year-old Laurie, inspired us all every day with his stamina, and his enthusiastic determination to finish a job!

Our last day was a joyful celebration of completed work. We feasted and sang with the Tannese villagers, received their gifts and exchanged farewells. Late in the day, we crowded hurriedly in groups into the little punt boat, to return to the ship before the swell became too dangerous for transfers.

The return journey back to Australia gave us all time to reflect on the incredible two weeks we had experienced together. It had all been an unforgettable adventure, etched for all time in our memories!

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Estonia

How BEAUTIFUL are the feet of those  
Who come bearing Good News!

Isaiah 52:7



### MINISTERING IN THE FORMER USSR

*The now-familiar orange turrets and old church spires are visible in the distance. We are almost there! It has been a long journey, from our home in Australia to this little country in North Europe.*

*A little later, the ocean liner docks at the Tallinn ferry wharf in Estonia. We alight, expectant about what God is going to do. We know it's important to have come again, to be walking beside His people here for a season.*

*These Estonians are survivors, accustomed through their long history to being ruled by others. It seems to me that they have become subdued and reticent people, they have learned to live with and not fight the oppressor. In recent decades under the Communist regime, creativity, vision, motivation and a positive outlook have all died. For too many years, to be independent or express different thought has been dangerous.*

*Men here have no hope, and have turned to alcohol. Young boys roam the streets, drunk and aimless. Dysfunctional marriages and families are endemic in this country. Trust and loyalty among friends and even within families is rare, because enforced betrayal was the way for so long. Depression is everyone's shared illness, the legacy of those God-less years when suspicion and anxiety dominated people's lives.*

*For some, though, a new freedom has begun! With it has come a slow-dawning hope, a hesitant desire for better days. God's Children are learning a new idea: faith in Him and His promises! They are experiencing transformation and liberty, learning to believe Him. They are learning to laugh and be joyous. It's amazing, how God is able to change and glorify!*

**1996:**

We first flew in to Estonia in the early nineties to assist an

Australian missionary couple we knew, who were working there. Just after the little country's peaceful liberation from Soviet Communism in 1991, Harry and Jackie had moved from Australia to re-build a network of churches in the cities, towns and villages. They had come with big vision and a wealth of experience, and had plunged themselves into a variety of projects, including setting up a Bible College. Other Australians had since joined their team, and Steve and I were invited to share a part in the exciting work.

Our first visit, we arrived at the Bible College carrying babies' clothes and blankets in our suitcases. It was all we had space for, and it seemed an insignificant gift to us, but the young married students were very grateful for the gesture of love and support.

The new College faced many challenges. One visit, we arrived to discover that the live-in students had not eaten for well over a week. There had been no food or money, and so a fast had been declared! Coincidentally, about the time of our arrival, the answer to their prayers came suddenly and sovereignly. The relief was great, and we joined their thanksgiving for God's faithfulness in the dining room!

We enjoyed being friends with the College students, and participating in their daily program. Steve became a popular



teacher, and the Principal often took time out from her normal work to interpret for him, because his lectures helped build her faith so much. We led worship and prayer some evenings; they were vibrant times of learning how to welcome and host and listen to God in the gathering.

From the Bible College base, we were driven to villages and towns to minister in new Church groups. Everywhere we went, an interpreter accompanied us. Occasionally, in border towns where people only spoke Russian, Steve's preaching had to be interpreted twice! Some of the gatherings were tiny, but it didn't matter to us. The people needed personal encouragement as well as the preaching and prayer. They had endured decades of oppression and fear, and had lost numerous loved ones and leaders to the work camps in Siberia and Russia. They needed to experience God's embrace and see His power at work.

There were no jobs to be had in some towns, especially those bordering Russia, and Estonia had no social welfare system. In the cold winters, families occupying abandoned old apartment buildings lit open fires in them. Old people, unwanted, were sometimes thrown out onto the streets. There were so many needs, and we wished we had a limitless supply of resources!

A young Russian artist, Sergey, became our friend. He lived in one

of the towns we visited near the Russian border. Sergey had a desire to help drug addicts, and a vision to buy a house for men seeking rehabilitation. We prayed for him and encouraged him to believe God. He worked hard and faithfully raising funds for the vision, but it was obvious that help from the outside world was needed. (One fundraising event, a group from his church picked hundreds of apples and spent a whole day selling them by the roadside. At day's end, they had raised a mere four dollars!)

By a series of miracles, God provided us in Australia with the money to purchase a property just outside of Sillamae. It had a good house and vegetable gardens already planted. Then, work on the building was needed to make it suitable for men and for the freezing winters. We continued our support and others added theirs, until the work was finally completed. 'Capernaum' still provides a safe and supportive environment for men in need: ex-prisoners and others whose lives have been destroyed by extreme poverty, hopelessness and addictive habits.

(In the years just after the fall of Communism in Europe, the former Soviet Bloc countries' currencies were so different from ours. A few Australian dollars could achieve so much! With the help of friends who partnered with us, we were able to buy several houses in that part of the world, to assist God's work).

# CHAPTER SIX

## Mindoro

It is for FREEDOM  
That Christ has MADE US FREE!

Galatians 5:1



### VILLAGE EVANGELISM IN MINDORO

*Cora, the tiny widow with a twisted old body, is hugging us tight, tears falling down her face. She is trying to convey her thanks to us in her language, Tagalog. "I am so happy! It's because of you that my little house has a new roof, and I have a new sewing machine! Without you, it wouldn't have happened! God has been so good to me!"*

*We are in Mindoro Island in the Philippines again. We have come*

*many times with Australian teams to help this energetic work in San Narciso. The leader here is Letty, a remarkable young woman who is always everywhere at once, capable at most things needed. Her faith is contagious, and she will try almost anything to get the Gospel to people. She is a worshipper and a server, a friend to the unloved and a dynamic prayer warrior. It is a privilege for us, to be working alongside this champion daughter of God.*

**1997:**

Steve's first journey to Oriental Mindoro was in the late nineties with a small group of Filipinos. He had preached at a conference on the main island, Luzon, and afterwards had travelled south with this group by bus and ocean ferry to hold evangelistic meetings in villages near the town of Victoria.

The last day on the island, after an exciting meeting in a barangay called San Narciso, the group was offered a small plot of land to build a new church meeting house. It was a time of new beginnings for the area. Alfredo and Letty Javier moved down from Luzon Island and pioneered the work.

In the beginning, the new church was unpopular. Neighbours harassed, threw rocks and threatened to throw Alfredo and Letty out. Soon, though, God's presence and love in action overcame

the suspicions and resistance. The people's hearts softened, many in the community were saved, and the work spread quickly to other villages in the area.

We began taking teams from Australia, and soon God provided us with the funds to build, and to buy a rice field and extra land for the Church gatherings, new Bible School, and children's and youth events. Friends financed the purchase of a jeepney. It was an invaluable means of transport for the group's regular outreach work, and also a good source of income.

When we visited with teams, we were taken to outreach meetings on the edge of town, in farming areas, seaside fishing villages and soccer fields, under tarpaulin covers patched together, in churches, in the local Army Barracks, and anywhere else Letty could arrange a meeting! A team of enthusiastic young people always came with us, and a crowd always gathered to listen to their singing and watch their joy-filled performances with tambourines, guitars and bright ribbons.

During one of our visits we met Mila Mendaros, a vibrant little woman who was home on a break from working overseas in Hong Kong. I chatted with her one day, on the roadside. She was unsure about her future, whether to stay at home with her family or go overseas again to support them and continue leading a church she

had started. We didn't know then, that our paths would meet again in the future in another country! A few years later, after completing her work contract as a maid in Hong Kong, Mila would go to Cyprus for work. There, she would start another church for Filipino migrant workers, and invite Steve to come and speak at the second anniversary of its founding. At first, we would be dubious about becoming involved in yet another country, but soon it would become very clear that this was God's idea!

Our work on the island of Cyprus began because we had met Mila many years before, in the barangay of San Narciso, Oriental Mindoro in the Philippines.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Belarus

He has sent me to announce  
LIBERTY for the captives!

Isaiah 61:1&2



### MINISTERING IN THE FORMER USSR

*The women file silently into the little village church. Scarves cover their hair and frame their serious, natural faces. Most are mothers and grandmothers, with hands browned and weathered looking from the soil and cold. They seem older than their years. The men all in dark suits are seated separately, on the other side of the room. Their expressions are tired, but faithful and expectant.*

*We introduce ourselves and through an interpreter tell stories about our children and Australia, and some of our different ways.*

*It's clear they are glad to have us here with them. No-one from the outside world has ever come, until today! They have been isolated because of their Communist Government, and because they are so poor.*

*Some of their traditions seem quaint to us, but we know they love God, and He wants to show them signs of His love this evening.*

**1997:**

Steve's introduction to Belarus in northern Europe was about fifteen years after the collapse of the USSR. He went with a friend of Belarusian heritage, to transport a large supply of medicines and to meet Church leaders.

Nine years had passed since the catastrophic Chernobyl nuclear plant's explosion in neighbouring Ukraine. The wind had blown north over the border into Belarus, carrying its poison to the land, crops and water sources. These days, couples were afraid to have families, because so many babies had been born with deformities. Children were still dying from thyroid and other cancers caused by the fallout. Hospitals had no medicine at all, and people were suffering without any relief. Every year the country's population was decreasing by 60,000. It was a tragedy that had been forgotten already, by most of the world.



At the same time, God was very much at work! Hundreds of churches large and small were springing up. Some had emerged from hiding, others were brand new. The country made its way into Steve's heart. He met wonderful men of God who were leading the newly formed and flourishing Protestant and Evangelical movement. Wherever they invited him to preach, signs of God's love and power followed. Blind eyes were opened and many other healing miracles occurred.

In the years following that first visit, Steve returned to Belarus many times with small teams. In some isolated places, we were the first people to visit from the outside world! One city we went to in the central south is called "salt town". The name is appropriate and prophetic! The church we came to love there was large and healthy, and had far reaching influence. Government officials were being saved, the children's program held regular concerts for handicapped people, and there was an effective ministry to drug addicts seeking rehabilitation. New converts were being baptised regularly, and the congregation was supporting several smaller churches in the region. It was a privilege to visit and strengthen this work!

The pro-Russian Orthodox, post-Communist Government resisted the new Christian groups that were starting up everywhere. To be

Byelorussian, one must be Russian Orthodox! Slanderous, ridiculous reports were spread about daily in the newspapers. New, restrictive laws were created. It became illegal for believers to gather for worship without official registration, for which a minimum number of people and the ownership of a building were required. Groups of believers found a solution quickly. Those days, a house large enough where twenty or thirty people could meet was able to be purchased for just three to five thousand American dollars. Once purchased, the buildings could be made suitable for meetings. A call for help went out, and we joined the fund raising efforts in other countries, buying houses in Belarus.

We saw terrible poverty in most places we went to in Belarus. In one town, late one night after preaching and praying for the sick at a Lutheran church, we were taken to visit a young woman whose boyfriend had thrown petrol over her, then lit a match. The woman's mother invited us into her little cottage, and we tiptoed through the hushed and sombre atmosphere to a dimly-lit room. There in a cot, mostly covered by a light sheet, lay a shrunken, blackened little body suffering unimaginable agony. For three long months this young woman had lain there, scarcely surviving. The despairing mother had done her best to attend to her daughter's needs, but they had no money for pain killers; not even Aspirin! Faced with this tragic situation, all we could do to help was give them enough money for a good supply of painkillers, fill the room

with songs of praise, and pray with faith.

During our childhood and adolescent years, both Steve and I had learned about and attended prayer meetings for the “suffering Christians living behind the Iron Curtain”. Well before reaching my teens, I had found a book called ‘Tortured for His Faith’ in my maternal Grandmother’s library and read it. Now, here in this country, we were meeting people who had survived those dark and dreadful Communist years. At one Church gathering Steve preached at, he met a dear old man whose fingers had all been cut off. He was one of thousands who had refused to forsake Jesus when the Party was trying to eliminate Christianity. Countless men and women had been shot or died in prisons and work camps from the freezing temperatures, starvation and torture. It touched the dear old Belarusian Christians’ hearts to hear that they had not been forgotten in their suffering. In those dark and dreadful years, many Christians in The West had prayed for them.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## Aid Shipments

I was naked, and you clothed ME.

Matthew 25:36



### AID FOR OVERSEAS

*Someone is shouting for more boxes, and for sticky tape. Quickly, over here! In the huge warehouse, hands are moving quickly. Piles of clothing for all ages, blankets and linen, expensive hospital equipment, books and stackable furniture are all around us. Our backs and feet are sore from the long days. We are hurrying, because we all want to finish.*

*Every now and then, a song breaks out. In this place, Lord, be glorified today! It's good to sing while we work as servants*

*together, responding to Jesus and to the poverty countless others live in.*

*Our eyes constantly search, looking for the right shape or type. The sound of sticky taping and plastic wrapping has become so familiar (I can still hear it now, when I stop to remember! First, tape up the packed cartons, then label them, wrap them in the plastic, stack and begin again).*

*Our medical doctor friend has arrived. We need some of the electronic equipment bound for Papua New Guinea and Uganda explained to us, and he will help us record the essential details.*

**1999:**

About twelve of us were at work. The huge shed was filled with make-shift tables laden with clothes, uniforms, rolls of fabric, sets of Encyclopaedia and other books piled high. Medical equipment ranging from boxes of sterile water ampoules and bandages to heart monitors, a steriliser, x-ray machine and stainless steel birthing table, were stored in one corner of the building. Scores of hospital beds and theatre trolleys were lined up in their categories, stretching as far as we could see. This was one of our largest aid efforts, to date.

Aid shipments (shipping 20-foot and 40-foot containers overseas) had played a major role in our help for the needy since the mid-nineties. At the time, our children were all re-adjusting to another home, a new school and new friends. We had not long returned to the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, to re-establish our lives there. The large home we were renting had two double garages, a double carport, and a very spacious room downstairs for meetings. (Our daughter Cathy had nicknamed the weekly gatherings we were holding for prayer, fellowship and planning, *EMU Meetings* - for Elders and Missionaries Union!).

Our first aid shipment was small and simple, just six tea chests of clothing for Jewish immigrant families in Israel. A group in Queensland had asked for help, and I had packed the chests carefully and sent them by rail to Brisbane. About the same time, a friend's overseas aid work captured my attention! Lesley inspired me with her well organized packing of a container bound for Mozambique. She and her team were washing, ironing and packing tonnes of clothing. I learned quickly from her, how to lay every item flat and to the corners so that every pocket of space was filled.

Our rented home suddenly became a centre for collecting, storing, sorting and packaging multiple thousands of shirts, dresses, trousers, shorts, shoes, jumpers, babies' clothes, linen and

blankets! People helped us in so many ways. One lady regularly brought to our doorstep brightly coloured, beautiful new garments she had sewn for children in communities we were helping. Women's craft groups donated knitted toys and blankets. Local schools donated stationery and socks. A used clothing outlet brought us huge bales of good clothing. Later, businesses donated equipment and storage facilities. We learned quickly about shipping schedules, export and import systems and regulations, stevedoring, and managing transport, storage and distribution at the places of destination.

In the summer of 1999, we responded to requests for help from mission centres in Uganda and Papua New Guinea's highlands. The hospice for Aids victims being built in Uganda needed equipment and furniture. The medical centre in PNG had many needs. At the same time, a hospital in Newcastle was undergoing a major refurbishment. One of our friends who worked in the storage area arranged for all of the superseded, unwanted furniture and equipment to be given to us, for overseas. We worked hard with the help of friends in the huge unused warehouse, temporarily available to us, and finally sent off the supplies loaded into 40-foot containers.

Our work sending aid overseas, being Jesus' hands and feet, has opened amazing doors of opportunity, and provided help to many

thousands of people in critical need in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Bougainville and Africa. We are always amazed and surprised at the different ways God enables our efforts!



## CHAPTER NINE

### Bougainville

I have heard my people's cries and seen their distress  
And have come down to DELIVER them.

Exodus 3:7-9



#### HEALING AFTER THE CONFLICT

*The scurrying of rats above disturbs my already uncomfortable, hot and sticky sleep. The sound comes out of the darkness in random, rowdy bursts. There must be twenty of them! Now, they're scampering down the walls! My mind is shocked semi-awake: I hope they are outside!*

1997-2000:

Not many people go to Bougainville. It is quite difficult to get there, and costly. A jewel in the Pacific; its surrounding waters are every shade of jade and blue. Its coastal lowlands are mostly coconut plantations dotted with bare patches, the result of frequent lightning strikes. In its centre the dense mountain jungle climbs upwards to a beautiful crater lake, and a sleeping volcano.

Many of the island's 180,000 or so people have the blackest of skin colours, like some Africans. Its men and women are generally strong minded and resourceful; one might also say that theirs is an island of born leaders. Some of the societal values and traditions are unique in the region and much of the world: women are genuinely respected and honoured, and are the inheritors and custodians of the land.

During the years 1997 to 2000, we visited Bougainville several times with teams of friends from Australia. The people were reaping the consequences of their rejection of the lucrative Australian company-owned copper mine, which was gouged into the mountainous interior; and to their rebellion against governance by Papua New Guinea. The people in the north and south had been fighting each other, killing and being killed. So many men, women, youths and children who were still alive in the aftermath, had done and seen atrocious things.

For nine years, a military blockade had been imposed on the island. Help and supplies from the outside world had been barred until those who made decisions on the people's behalf bowed to the pressure and negotiations. Now, the warring was over and it was time for the painful past to be put to rest. This was a significant time in the people's lives and their island's history, and we knew God wanted us to play a part.

Planning trips wasn't easy. We had good contacts there, but communication was very limited and visas could only be arranged at the last minute with Port Moresby, just before entering the country. Basic services were only just beginning to return to normal.

### Late 1997, First Visit:

Steve's initial trip to Bougainville was late in 1997. Our desire that trip was to understand the needs, and identify and establish trust with people and groups we could work with in the future. God had led us there with the words of Exodus 3:7-9: *"I have seen the affliction of my people; I have heard their cries. I KNOW their sorrows and sufferings, and have come down to deliver them."* We had been told that large numbers of people, including key leaders, were calling out to God for His answers.

Steve preached in Church meetings that attracted large numbers of people who were thirsting for change. He met with people involved in every aspect of resolving 'The Bougainville Conflict', sharing quality time with senior Church leaders, the Police Commissioner for the Papua New Guinea outer islands, PNG's Minister for Bougainville Affairs, NGO workers and many others. Each person shared his or her own story or insights into the crisis. Among the stories were many accounts of an amazing spiritual revival happening in the mountain villages! Some who had led the fighting were coming to Jesus for forgiveness and healing.

A highlight of the visit was being personally invited by Papua New Guinea's Minister for Bougainville Affairs, to address his meeting with local Church leaders representing all the Christian denominations on the island. God's Word came through clearly, challenging and comforting. Another highlight was being taken by a small group of local men to pray on the rim of the abandoned copper mine; normally a no-go zone for outsiders.

The following February we shipped a container loaded with valuable medicines, pre-used clothing and other supplies regional leaders had requested. The medicines had been sorted, packaged and labelled specifically for areas that had been without any medical help for years.

Bougainville was serious in its efforts towards a genuine resolution and peace. We worked with the Government's Minister for Peace and Reconciliation, as well as community leaders. Hence, our shipment was delivered without delay or complications, unlike some aid sent by organizations that didn't have the benefit of trust and good contacts God had given to us.

### **December 1998, Second Visit:**

At the beginning of December the same year, Steve returned with a team that included a dynamic Australian evangelist, to hold a week of outdoors meetings in the north, centre and south. The fact that public meetings were to be held in the areas where fighting had been the most intense, was miraculous! We prayed fervently that many people who were still hiding in the mountains would come down and attend. Thousands did attend those meetings. Tim's powerful messages and anointing were perfect for this place and time, and led to dramatic encounters with God.

At home in Australia, we held nightly prayer for Bougainville. We knew from a distance, that God was at work! Some evenings, it was as if we were really there in Bougainville with the team. I can still recall "seeing" God's big footprints stamped into the island, one prayer meeting!

## June 1999, Third Visit:

The following year in June, Steve was back in Bougainville preaching in churches and gatherings with community leaders. At the same time, we were preparing for a Praise Festival to be held in a few locations later that year.

When Steve visited the east coast near Kekesu, he met with a group of hundreds of people who had just returned from days of fasting, prayer and worship on a distant mountain. They were still totally immersed in another world. Surely, the new songs they were singing came straight from Heaven! Heaven was touching earth in this place, almost tangibly!

Four years had passed since the *Island Mercy* had sailed from Newcastle to Tanna in Vanuatu for us. Now, later in 1999, we were blessed again with assistance from a missionary ship, this time the *Doulos*, travelling through Australia en-route to the Solomon Islands, via Bougainville. We had been told there was space on board for more aid supplies and for our co-workers Les and Georgie, who were preparing to play a key role in our plans to bring healing to Bougainville.

The *Doulos* was docked briefly at Sydney's Circular Quay, not too far from us. We worked there with the ship's crew, and loaded into its hold over 7,000 'PEACE MAKER' New Testaments, pallets of boxed bandages, school books, clothing, Bible teaching texts,

pecially written leaflets, and hundreds of workshop manuals. The manuals, called FORGIVENESS, HEALING AND RECONCILIATION, were a guide through a tried and proven program originally written for people in another place who had suffered a similar crisis. We had gained permission to adapt the material for Bougainville, and planned to introduce the program in strategic areas to help the people through this important post-war period.

### Late 1999, Fourth Visit:

*Jet black faces beam, their thousands of bodies dancing and spinning in jubilation. They are singing and celebrating their liberty, and binding themselves again to the One who bought it for them! Colourful cloth and branches waving high, they worship and honour Jesus! Yes, it is good to praise your Freedom Fighter, your Warrior Deliverer! Love has come again, Love has won!*

After the ship arrived in Bougainville and offloaded our aid and teaching supplies, Steve and I flew from Australia and met up with Les and Georgie, who had already seen to the temporary storage of all the boxes. Our plan this trip was threefold: transport the aid supplies to the island's east coast from where they would be distributed to villages in the mountains; hold the Praise Festival

meetings in the north; and introduce church leaders to the Forgiveness, Healing and Reconciliation program in the north, east coast, centre and south.

It was more than twenty years since I had last seen Bougainville. My family had lived there for ten years when I was young, when my parents ran a Christian aviation service for the people. Remembering my father and his work among them, the people were now opening doors wide for us throughout Bougainville. It was overwhelming to be back. Steve and I searched unsuccessfully for signs of my family's home by the sea, among the vines and tropical bush. Every building in the vicinity had been abandoned then destroyed, years ago. Hardly anything remained of how life once was here, for foreigners.

There is no other sound quite like islanders singing in harmony, the way they do! We held the first night of the Praise Festival in Buka, a small island north of Bougainville, separated from the mainland by just a narrow ocean channel. A large crowd was gathered outdoors for extravagant celebration and a baptism in relief and joy! Some had brought their children in wheelbarrows because they knew the night would be long! Men, women, youths and children danced and waved hibiscus branches as they sang; some linked arms and ran like a long ribbon weaving in and out of the crowd. The ceasefire and end of the blockade were still very



recent, and they were unrestrained in their jubilant praise to God for it. He had freed them from the warring and from the personal and social turmoil it had brought.

Another memorable evening was in the far north of Buka. That particular night, it seemed God's presence descended with the dew, bringing a gentle, deeply healing sense of peace over the people.

Daytimes, Les and Georgie ran workshops and taught from the manuals we had shipped. It was a solemn privilege for us, seeing men and women waiting in line to nail their accusations, bitterness, un-forgiveness, hatred and desire for retribution to the roughly made wooden cross at the front of the church. The ceremony was deeply effective and liberating. Tears flowed down people's cheeks as God brought healing into their souls.

From Buka, we travelled down the east coast of the mainland and stopped in Arawa to deliver the boxes of clothing and other supplies we had sent and to prepare them finally for distribution. Then, we headed for the island's centre and south, where the fighting had been especially vicious. Entering this area was strictly forbidden for those outside the boundaries, but the people received us warmly. We understood that we were fortunate to be allowed to come.

The meetings here were quite different from the others we had experienced. Les and Georgie's introductions to the teaching and workshops were respectfully received, but hesitantly. It was clear to us that important questions were still burdening the people; there had been no real solution to the main reasons for the fighting. We knew they would need help as they sought restoration and considered reunification. We promised the four of us would return the following year; Les and Georgie would stay longer to share a few weeks of life with them and run the program.

### **February 2000, Fifth Visit:**

Arriving in Bougainville on our final post-crisis visit early in 2000, we heard news that thousands of people were being transformed by the teaching and workshops we had brought to them! Church leaders had begun to teach the material and run workshops themselves. A United Church pastor we stayed with in Wakunai on the east coast told us he had taken the manuals to former enemies across the mountain range to the other side of the island, and thousands had responded positively with forgiveness and reconciliation.

Steve and I returned to Australia grateful for all God had done in this island of the South Pacific that had captured our attention

and hearts so completely for a season. We left Les and Georgie behind, and they saw God do amazing things (but that is their own story)!

# CHAPTER TEN

## Refugees

There is PLENTY of grain ready to be harvested  
But NOT MANY labourers!

Luke 10:1&2



### THE KOSOVARS IN AUSTRALIA

*“Helen, have you heard the news?! Some of the refugee families from Kosovo are being sent to Singleton’s Army Barracks. We have to do something for them!”*

*Jan had no way of knowing the impact of her phone call that day. Australia had responded to international requests to provide safe haven for thousands of victims of war from Kosovo. A large group was coming to stay close to us. My heart said yes! How could we*

*not help? But none of us had any idea of the degree of commitment the decision would demand in the months ahead!*

**1999:**

It was autumn of 1999. Eight hundred asylum seekers from Kosovo were to arrive in three weeks' time, and would be sheltered in the Australian Defence Forces camp only a 25-minute drive from our home.

We had first become aware of God's heart for Muslim people years before, in Turkish villages in Bulgaria's South East. Now, we had an amazing opportunity to show God's love to these families from the Balkans! My mind scanned through the needs they would come with: basic things like soap, shampoo and toothpaste, umbrellas and warm slippers, all-weather clothes. They would need lessons in English, interpreters, in-camp activities for all ages, outings, familiar foods, and vegetable gardens for those from the rural areas. We would need funds. Could we bring some of them out to our homes, or to church meetings?

I started to prepare. Days and evenings of back to back phone calls and faxes followed: calling, receiving and sending all at the same time, matching the needs with possible answers. I contacted Government and other offices involved: immigration, migrant and

adult education services, and charities. Women from our church came and brought meals for the family. There was no time to think of cooking or eating! Our desire was to love and serve the people as Jesus would. A list of contacts and volunteers developed quickly. Christian friends in our area were eager to help. They committed to running events for the children, joining the English teaching classes, working as interpreters, distributing the weekly toiletry rations for families, and taking groups on outings. A young man in the church we were leading offered to provide and oversee collection bins in shopping centres and other public places. The bins began filling with colour-in books and pencils, new clothes, hair products, board games for adults and so many other things. Our large family room needed a narrow pathway made through the centre, so that we could keep moving from one end of the house to the other!

Soon, the busloads arrived at Singleton: families torn apart by the war, traumatised and desperate for some normalcy. We became devoted to them immediately, these homeless people loved by their Creator. Our children and other families became their friends; our days and evenings were spent for them. Working together with all the NGO, community and Government groups onsite, coordinating all of our involvements with them, and the people working with us, and also filling in the many gaps was all-consuming.

The work was close to my heart: Jesus' mercy and compassion being expressed by His people to these needy families who had come to our doorstep. God loves us first, before we can love Him. His love is already proven to be unreserved, unqualified and complete. I longed for these people to know it. Those days, it was difficult for me being with my Christian sisters and brothers at worship on Sundays and other days. I so wanted to take this powerful presence of God we had together, to the people!

Working with the families from Kosovo in the Safe Haven was an experience our family will always remember. We were all involved, and made life time friends. When the Barracks were closed, our older son Jon was given paid employment working with the children of the few remaining families who were transferred to Bandiana in Victoria. I visited them all there and stayed until the Australian Government converted the Safe Haven overnight into a Corrective Centre. Those who hadn't left our country were not welcome to stay any longer. We knew many of the families' stories and understood some of the complexities that were at play. It was an emotional, difficult time. We still keep contact with some of the Kosovars, and have visited them in their homeland. I am not a hoarder (definitely not), but I have kept all of their names and their Singleton Safe Haven room numbers!

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## NorthGate

How great is Your faithfulness, oh Lord!  
It extends to every generation!

Psalm 119:90



### THE GOSPEL AT WORK IN NORTH TANNA

*The midnight sky seems so close, this moonlit night. The familiar landscape is bathed in a soft white reflection, beautiful and at peace, while people slumber. Beyond, out on the calm and silent sea, silver shimmers dance and flicker.*

*Around me where I stand, a freshly mown field slopes gently away until the cliff's edge. Crossing the field are wide, white paths that connect houses we have built, separated by a*



*comfortable distance. Close in front of me is a garden of freshly planted flowers, bordered by a wall of roughly laid coral to about knees' height; some remnants of a small home that was here long ago. The wall was discovered when we cleared this land's trees and stubborn, resistant vine roots. Part of a home built for a European missionary family more than one hundred years ago, it had been hidden away in the jungle's density. The family had lived and worked for years among these people until sickness and the impossible challenges overcame them. Now, we are continuing the interrupted work.*

*The full moon lights up the little bay below, revealing its white coral beach and the loose line of tiny waves folding close to the shore. The lapping of the waves as they come in is the only sound to be heard, this peaceful night.*

**2004:**

**NorthGate, the name we gave many years ago to our work in Tanna Island's remote north, is two areas of land on either side of Loanpakel Bay. One has buildings for accommodation, meetings, medical work and storage and distribution. The other, a twenty minute walk uphill, has a school with classrooms, dormitories and staff housing we have built.**

Most people who come from Australia to North Tanna return again because of its uniqueness, the people, and the opportunities at hand. They are able to experience a taste of Pacific Island missionary life in a beautiful location, only a few hours' journey from home.

The ways to NorthGate are by sea around the west and north coast, or overland. By sea, the journey is sometimes smooth and glorious, but other times it is rough, not for the faint-hearted! Scores of teams from Australia have come to work with us in their areas of interest, skills and professions. Visiting nurses, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, mechanics, agriculturalists, educators, preachers, musicians, scientists, youth and children's workers, singers and other artists all have plenty to do. Over the years, several Australians have lived at Northgate; some for months and some for years. In the earliest days, an agriculturalist friend and his family stayed for a year to introduce different varieties of foods and teach good farming practices. A builder friend's young family stayed for almost three years to build and minister to the communities in the area. A married couple stayed for two years to co-lead a Christian leaders' training program, work in the school and mentor young potential leaders. Another young family stayed a few months to do medical and maintenance work.

Our eldest son lived there for several years with his Tanna-born wife whose family had established the work with us in the early nineties. Their first years, communication was difficult. Then, a Christian radio ministry in Queensland came alongside to help. The equipment the men installed enabled us to call back and forth by phone in Australia and radio at NorthGate. We learned to schedule conversations according to the time of year's solar activity. Years later, we were able to email to and from NorthGate, using the radio-phone system. These days, mobile phones have found their way to most of the island, and in the north if you stand on the right hill, you will have a signal!

Some interesting events have been hosted at the facilities our teams built. One morning while we were visiting, some excited chatter erupted from down at the beach. A boat had come in. "White man, white skin!" We weren't expecting anyone, and so I wondered who had arrived, unannounced. Soon, a group of seven Japanese young men and women making their way up the path became visible. They introduced themselves. They had been sent to us from the Health Department in the south of the island. Two doctors, a professor and four trainee doctors had come from Tokyo to study malaria. Our facilities would provide a perfect one day clinic for the community. I enjoyed the next day immensely. In no time, the multipurpose building was transformed into a centre for malaria checks, treatment and records. The word had gone

out, and people from the villages nearby filed through the building for most of the day. Some of our school students experienced the excitement of seeing blood cells and parasites through a microscope for the first time!

Some evenings we set up an outdoors movie theatre to show Christian music DVDs or nature shows. Mums and Dads and their children were fascinated by the new knowledge they were gaining: *This is a giraffe, this is a helicopter. This is how America looks, this is how Africa looks.* Music concerts on screen with anointed worship were a favourite.

Early one year, on a weekend, a ferocious cyclone tore through the sky towards NorthGate and other parts of Tanna. We learned about it in Australia while it was still out to sea, on its way. We radioed to shutter the windows and prepare. Very early in the morning before daylight, the wind howled through and the wild rain stripped the coastline bare, altering the bay's beach so that the river became separated from the sea. People's homes, especially up on the hills, were totally or partly blown away. Gardens and the banana and citrus fruit trees were destroyed. In Australia, I contacted friends and Government departments in Port Vila until we had secured more than twenty tonnes of rice to be shipped immediately to Tanna. Our work with the Kosovar refugees in Australia had given us good experience in distributing

large quantities of aid to crowds of people. For the next three months, every family in the north received rice from NorthGate to help them survive the cyclone's aftermath. The work served as an effective census of the area as well, because everyone's name was written on their family's recycling rice bag!

Another time, wonderful news came to us: the young people at NorthGate were experiencing an amazing spiritual revival. They had been out walking of a night, singing and praying and declaring loudly that Jesus is Lord of the bush! This was our dream, that the ones we were serving would become spiritual preparers of the way, gatekeepers and Kingdom builders!

North Tanna will always hold a special place in my heart. So many stories could be written about our work and the people there. It is an unfinished tale, interrupted again for a season, waiting for God to open the door so that new chapters can be written.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Schools in Vanuatu

He lifts the poor from the dust,  
And sets them among princes!

Psalm 113:7&8



### THE FOUNDING OF CCSV

*Shade from the wide spreading tree heavy laden with ripe mangos, provides a cool shelter at the school this hot and humid afternoon.*

*We are in Vanuatu, where the air can be oppressively dense and still. I try to ignore the mosquitoes buzzing close, and continue reading with the small group of school students. These girls are so shy; they have no confidence. Experience has taught them that they don't matter, they are not valuable. It's for us to tell them a*

*different, true story: they are God's children, created after His likeness!*

*In this part of the island, many of the children would be without school education if it weren't for our presence. Some families have moved nearby and built huts on the land, so that their children can be near the school.*

**2005:**

Three years before we began 'Community Christian Schools Vanuatu', we had stepped out from leading a church that had been home base for our overseas mission work, into full time itinerant missionary work. For the next three years we worked partly out from Vanuatu, to give more time to the needs there.

One afternoon, Steve stopped to talk with a bright spirited young boy who was working in our neighbour's garden. Only twelve years of age, Kenneth had already left school. He was an example of the 85% of children in the nation who finished school at the primary level. The conversation stayed with Steve and grew into a vision to start a network of schools in Vanuatu. Then in 2005, we founded Community Christian Schools Vanuatu in Tanna Island and the main island Efate, for remote and poor communities. We believed God that had challenged us to provide school education in

areas where there were no schools or where children were not able to attend because of the costs. How could the country progress well into the future, when so few were being educated? Within a very short time, hundreds of students were enrolled. An easily accessible curriculum, facilities to learn in and good systems were the essential beginning.

An Australian Christian organization offered to partner with us financially. They gave us amazing assistance in the early years. Friends and some churches we related to, joined in the vision. They still contribute faithfully. Groups from Australia began to visit. Since 2006, a church in our area has organised teams of men every year to build new classrooms in the various village areas. Together we have built dozens of substantial school buildings in Vanuatu. Christian schools in Australia send teams of staff and students to visit regularly. The young people from both countries benefit so much from these times of exchange. The young Australians bring excitement along with their gifts: guitars, sports equipment, computer soft wear and other educational aids. Our school teachers benefit from these visits as well; they learn new skills and develop in their confidence and spiritual lives.

Our hope and vision is for our students to mature into Godly, skilled, confident adults who will influence their families,



communities and nation towards righteous living: loving God and their neighbour and holding His Word to their hearts.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## Miracle Haven

He defends the cause of  
The fatherless and the widow!

Deuteronomy 10:18



### A HOME FOR CHILDREN AND WIDOWS

*Excited chatter accompanies the procession of children making their way through the front doorway and into the wide open living room with its shiny new tiles and freshly painted walls. Onward they stream, their faces beaming as they enter the rooms they will share. Cheerful wall posters and newly carpentered beds with mattresses and colourful sheets greet them. From today, this will be their new home!*

*Later in the day, dinner is being served. The joyful dancing and*

*laughter stops for a while as we take our places and pray. Together, we give thanks to God for His faithfulness to all who are gathered here. The plated food being passed along to eager hands is typical for a Filipino celebration meal: rice and noodle dishes, with chicken and some tender pork added. Afterwards, there's to be a special treat for everyone. Just for this evening, there is a mobile ice-cream maker in the kitchen!*

*Today has been a big day for us Australians who have come to assist with the final weeks of the big house's construction. Frantic finishing touches were done just in time for the new building's opening!*

## **1993, Seventeen Years Earlier:**

The day had been hot and humid; this annual Church leaders' conference Steve was speaking at had once again been scheduled just after Easter. As usual, several hundred people from different parts of the Philippines had come to experience a time of refreshment and recharging.

At the close of the evening meeting, Steve prayed for a young pastor who was weeping profusely, kneeling over a pool of his tears on the floor. The young man, Ismael Ramos, was desperate for answers. He had travelled up to the conference from his home

in Samar Island. Ismael's father had died suddenly, leaving the family's elder son to oversee a church and children's home in his place. Ismael felt ill-equipped and unable to continue in his father's footsteps. About the same time, overseas support for the work had stopped coming. It was an impossible situation. Gandara was a poor community, on the poorest island in its region. How could the work survive?

When Steve returned to Australia and told the sad story, some of our friends decided to go to Samar and investigate. That first visit, the decision was made to take on the work!

We began by sponsoring the children and raising funds for improvement projects. A team of men went over to build new bunk beds, buy mattresses and other supplies, and do some minor renovations. The morning the Australians were to leave Gandara, the children woke up on their new beds. "Are we rich now?!" one of the boys asked after he had slept on soft, thin foam for the first time!

We made other improvements gradually, and purchased a caribou for ploughing. Other people became involved, and soon water pumps for drinking and irrigation were installed and a long flight of steps for the steep hill was dug and concreted in.

A team of men built a house for widows. It was hot work, especially on the iron roof during the hottest time of year! A singer-musician friend came with us for evangelistic meetings. Large crowds gathered to listen in the open air, and many people from the community responded to the salvation message. A team of women visited, to minister to the women. One church group took it upon themselves to fund a pre-school already functioning on the property, and to help run youth conferences.

We established a regular sponsorship program, matching individual children and widows with caring, faithful friends in Australia. One sponsor regularly sent boxes of supplies to the sponsored children. Teams visited to preach and teach and share friendship. There were so many ways we were able to be involved in helping this needy community.

Then early in 2010, seventeen years after the first visit, we opened a new home for the 50 children and widows in the sponsor program. God had given us everything needed to build this lovely, big house with wide verandas, concrete arches and columns. Steve's building skills and experience had been put to work again. He had overseen the purchasing and construction from a distance by e-mail. His insistence that the design be kept simple had proved futile; over the months it had gradually become a grand and impressive creation, Spanish Filipino style!

The children's home in Gandara is now called 'Miracle Haven'. Since the opening of the home, God has enabled us to purchase extra rice fields, and build fish ponds and a large new building for early childhood education. At the time of publishing this book, the adults and children at Miracle Haven are hard at work with us, organizing and distributing relief and re-building houses for their fellow countrymen who lost family members, their homes and all their possessions in the November 2013 Super Typhoon. God's provision has been yet another reminder to us all that we are to be His hands and feet in the earth.

## AN ANCIENT STORY (1)

The Biblical account recorded in  
2 Chronicles 1:6-12

*"It is late, past evening. Today has been a significant day, one for the annals of our nation's history. It will always be remembered.*

*I have become aware God is with me. He is speaking, asking me to tell Him my heart's desires! I feel no hesitation, because I already know. I say to Him, 'Let your promise to my father David be fulfilled; I am here now, in his place. Grant to me your wisdom and understanding to lead this great nation, these people who are yours'.*

*I have spent the day up on the mountain with the people, meeting with God and re-affirming our reliance on Him. I have offered 1,000 offerings to acknowledge and honour Him as our true King. My worship has been extravagant, to express my devotion and determination that I and my people will stay dependant on Him.*

*The response to my answer that I hear from God reaches through into the depths of my being. He says to ME, SOLOMON! 'Because this was in your heart and you haven't asked for riches, possessions, honour and glory, or the lives of your enemies, or even for long life, I am granting you wisdom and understanding.*

*As well, I will give you riches, possessions, honour and glory like no-one who has come before you or will come after you.'*

*I am awe-struck, overwhelmed, and entirely humbled!"*



## AN ANCIENT STORY (2)

The Biblical account recorded in

Luke 11: 5-8

*A friend from out of town has just turned up at our house, hungry and needing somewhere to stay. Our cupboards are bare, so I don't have anything to feed him. I need to get some help for him!*

*It is very late at night. I hurry across the street to our neighbour's house. I rap on his door, but to my dismay he doesn't want to help! 'It's late and we're already in bed here', he says. 'The doors are locked and I can't be bothered getting up for you.'*

*I can't believe it! He doesn't want to be bothered! I really need to get help for my friend. What should I do now?*

*I decide to persist. So, I keep on knocking. Finally, all the neighbours wake up! That changes things! He gets up out of bed and gives me what I've come for!*

## AFTERWORD

In many places we travel to, people's needs both immediate and ongoing, are overwhelming. They cannot help themselves; they need someone to intervene. They need us to be like King Solomon, who from his place of greater privilege and power desired others' benefit, not his own. They need us to be like the persistent friend, who would not give up.

We who are to be Jesus' anointed hands and feet are very often distracted and negligent. We excuse and rationalise our self-focussed life styles. We forget His priorities and drift quickly and further along paths that lead us away from helping the helpless. The confronting reality is that other voices in our lives are louder than His. Many calls for aid go unanswered, and people we pass by are left to die, victims of their circumstances.

The world of the very poor is very small. The most destitute are unaware of anything other than the urgent necessities for life: water, food, shelter. The ways of the desperately poor are sometimes thankless; even selfish, untrustworthy, demanding and devious! God is not disillusioned or put off! He loves the lovely and unlovely, the deserving and undeserving, the rich and poor, the included and outcast. He expects us to pick up and heal the wounded, to live our lives as Good Samaritans sent from the heart

of our Father, to be His hands and feet. Then, He will do MUCH MORE than we could ever imagine!

YOU ARE the light in the dark. YOU ARE the salt for the dull and deteriorating. YOU ARE the one with beautiful feet, bearing good news. *You are the worker in the fields waiting to be harvested!*

THE END