## Mission Work in Papua New Guinea

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Three years ago Pat and I left New Zealand to begin work in the Balimo Health Centre in Papua New Guinea. We went as Dental Therapist and Surgeon to work primarily in the hospital but also to be available elsewhere as the need arose. We were members of the missionary team with the Asia Pacific Christian Mission, though in Papua New Guinea we are seconded to the Evangelical Church of Papua.

The district of Balimo has a population of about 22,000 most of whom are subsistence farmers. The administrative township of Balimo is built in the swampy lowlands near the south coast. Because of its geographic isolation, it is one of the least developed regions of Papua New Guinea.

For the past twenty five years, the Asia Pacific Christian Mission (originally the Unevangelized Fields Mission) has managed a small hospital in the Balimo township. This has developed over the years to a bed state of 120, still relatively small by urban PNG standards. From 1965 to 1983 Dr. Kathleen Donovan and a team of missionary and national nurses staffed the hospital. A School of Nursing was associated with the hospital from a fairly early stage and has developed significantly in recent years. This teaching and training component of the work we believe is the most relevant part of the medical work at Balimo.

Pat and I had been brought up in Christian homes and had both developed an interest in missionary work in our lives. At an early stage in our careers we wanted to be available but the demanding years of training, plus four young children to feed and educate, effectively blocked our progress at that time. After our children had left home to make their own way, we slowly came to realize that missionary service was an option still open to us. Jesus always advised His followers not to

start until they had counted the cost and we were to find that our obedience was going to be costly in human terms. Loss of income at the most affluent time of life with its associated superannuation benefits involves quite a leap of faith. Missing out on the joys of seeing children and watching grandchildren growing up is a loss which daily seems to increase whereas money and material possessions seem to fade to relative insignificance especially against a background of village life in PNG.

Recreation activities and leisure time have assumed a high priority in affluent western culture and we were both firmly embedded in the New Zealand life style. To give up the joy of our weekend sailing and holidays was indeed a wrench. I mention these things, not because we want to give the impression that we have always coped victoriously in this area but because when God calls He also gives the strength to make the necessary separations. To be human is to want security, success, pleasure and affection. To be quite honest, some of the things which we thought of as precious we have in part lost for the time being and some perhaps forever, but we have also come to see that God really is no man's debtor. The joy of obedience is greater still.

My primary goal after arriving in Balimo was to develop a specialist surgical unit. To do this in a New Zealand hospital, even with the assistance of all the skilled help available would be a daunting task. But to start from scratch in Balimo where I needed at times to be architect, design engineer, purchasing officer and clerk of works all rolled into one, was a role for which I was ill prepared. As well as the buildings, there is the task of teaching and training nursing staff to work in a surgical theatre and to manage a busy surgical ward with seriously ill patients. This was a task which I hadn't anticipated would be mine but often has to be. The

hospital had previously carried out only occasional surgery in rather inadequate conditions. I had been used to a well trained theatre staff of which I was but a part. At Balimo we had no one with the necessary training or expertise to fill the many different roles associated with running a theatre and sterilization department. Our sterile supplies have been suspect at the best of times and post operative recovery also leaves much to be desired. To change from being just the surgeon to being porter, occasionally anaesthetist, recovery room nurse and maintenance engineer requires a good deal of adjustment and involves considerable stress.

During the first three years we have built a modern spacious operating theatre with its ancillary departments. A new surgical ward has been added but we still lack a trained theatre supervisor to develop the nursing side of the work. Surgical training we hope will eventually be two tiered; involving firstly nursing students in the Registered general course and secondly, trained staff. We hope that the post graduate tier might eventually lead to a post graduate diploma. Those of us involved in the training of nurses have a dual goal. One is to train nurses of the highest professional quality and integrity and secondly bring these nurses to a place of deep Christian commitment in the process. We aim that both goals will merge into one. To be involved only in the professional aspects of nurse training is I believe, somewhat irrelevant for a Christian. We would not be accomplishing anything more than is already available through the Health Services of PNG. Our aim is to make our students disciples of Jesus Christ so that they will go out committed to live for Him in their professional lives in the community. This is the call that brought us to serve in PNG.

My aim in writing this is to link personal faith with being a cross cultural missionary. If faith really is the "substance of things hoped for" then I think my call to work at Balimo really was an act of faith. I can honestly say that God has given me a great vision of what can be accomplished here and how I can be a part of it. I pray that my faith will grow along with the vision. We have so far only taken a few tentative steps towards the attainment of that goal but the possibility of total success is my aim as faith is exercised.

The challenge of showing the marks of submission to the Lordship of Christ in our daily lives is perhaps one of the most important and yet difficult things asked of those who would be involved as disciple makers. To live constantly under the watchful eyes of staff students and patients is the lot of a cross-cultural missionary. On our better days we probably only just pass the test, and pressured by the extremes of heat, humidity, mud, dust, smoke and mosquitos we often fail abysmally. This is where faith becomes essential to believe that in spite of our failings, God is working His purposes out and any good work He has begun He will complete. What an encouragement for us to keep on trying and learning.

Relating cross-culturally on a personal level to Melanesians is a very difficult area. It sometimes seems that we have come here at the wrong end of our lives to be successful integrators. Learning a new language like Gogodala is to me as daunting a proposition as climbing Mt. Everest. There never are enough hours in one day and tiredness adds to the burdens. I am reminded that Saints of old like Moses and Abraham were all active achievers in their later years so there is hope for us!

Our faith is also strengthened by personal promises and assurances from the One who called us to serve. Seeking personal guidance for an important decision like offering for full time missionary service is highly necessary. There are many stock answers but in the end an individual must walk his private path of guidance alone. For us there was the assurance of guidance received separately, complementing and helping to build up a stronger picture. Many promises we received at that time have been wonderfully fulfilled. But even after three years we are still waiting to see some of the answers. It seems to me that the Lord is confirming His promises to us according to our need at the time. What are we to think about those promises that have not yet been answered?-that our guidance was wrong or perhaps just an emotional experience? Patient waiting for complete fulfilment of all the Lord has promised is in itself a faith building exercise. We need daily to remind ourselves that "The one who calls you is faithful and *He will do it," (1 Thes. 5:24)* 

"Do you think that cross cultural medical missionary work is still relevant in PNG today?" This was a

question I asked Kath Donovan back in 1983. Her answer then was an unhesitating "yes". You will probably ask: "And have you found it so?" There can be no glib answer to such a question. It is true that PNG still needs a continuing supply of expert assistance from overseas. From a secular viewpoint, meeting this need could be thought of as being relevant. But for myself, the assurance is in knowing that however incompetent I may be in this cross-cultural role I am where the Lord wants me to be. Could anything be more relevant than that?

Jesus said, "Lift up your eyes and see the ripened harvest". Sometimes it is much more comfortable to keep our eyes looking down and not get the vision. But we did look and don't regret responding to the vision as we learn daily to prove His love and faithfulness.