

November 2024

MISSIONS



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THINKING IT THROUGH

BY THOMAS J. SCHELICH

“Behold, I Am with You”

Genesis 28 chronicles one of the most famous Old Testament stories. Jacob, on a journey far from home, dreams of a stairway set up on earth and reaching to heaven. Angels ascend and descend it, and the Lord God Himself stands above Jacob. The Lord’s words change Jacob’s life and the world: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.” (v. 15)

God had never said anything like that before. He had never promised to *always* be with someone—no matter where he or she went. When Jacob wakes up, he is astonished and afraid. He says, “The Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” (v. 16)

To us, this concept seems fundamental. We teach Sunday school children that God and Jesus are always with us. We commonly request prayer that God will be with us during a time of trouble. Even our word *goodbye*, which ends thousands of conversations every day, is a contraction concocted in the late 1500s meaning “God be with ye” (originally spelled *godbwye*).¹

But, before the night of Jacob’s dream, no one had heard of such a concept. People thought of their gods as the gods of places. The Lord had said to Jacob’s father, Isaac, “Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you.” (Genesis 26:3) That was the first time God ever told someone He would be with him and would have an ongoing personal presence in his life. Isaac was to stay in the land, and there, God would be with him. And Isaac, uniquely among the patriarchs, lived in the land his whole life.

People thought that their gods were territorial—that a god had a jurisdiction and was bound by the rules of geography. So, if you were Jonah, you could get on a ship and sail out of the jurisdiction. That is doubtless what Jacob thought as he set out on his journey. He was headed to parts unknown. He had no

concept or expectation that the God of his father would be with and protect him.

After he had gone two or three days, Jacob had the dream in which the Lord God gave him that unheard-of promise: Jacob, it does not matter where you go, I will be with you and keep you. Jacob, it does not matter where your journey of life takes you, I will always be there. Jacob, it does not matter what the world or fate brings to your life, for I have an interest in and a purpose for your life, and I will not leave you until I accomplish it. This dream, and the Lord’s words in it, was the turning point in Jacob’s life. From that time forward, he knew the Lord was with him. The promise became his mantra, his song, his firm and confident belief.

The promise became his mantra, his song, his firm and confident belief.

Twenty years later, the Lord said to Jacob: “Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.” (Genesis 31:3) When Jacob returned, he spoke of the God who “has been with me in the way which I have gone.” (Genesis 35:3) When Jacob, in his old age, learned that his son Joseph was alive in Egypt, the Lord spoke to him again: “I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt. . . . I will go down with you to Egypt.” (Genesis 46:3–4) Then, at the end of his life, Jacob blessed his grandchildren, saying, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day.” (Genesis 48:15 NASB)

All those years ago, Jacob named the place of his dream Bethel (“the house of God”), saying that God was in that place. From that day onward, every place he went to became a Bethel. Likewise, the Lord is with us all the time. ■

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¹ Oxford English Dictionary, “Goodbye (n., int., & adj.), Etymology,” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2112812627>.

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When the World Came to Paris

Evangelistic Efforts at the 2024 Olympics

BY MATT & SYLVIE GLOCK

Every four years, the Summer Olympics dazzle people everywhere. This past summer, the world came to Paris. Major sporting events like the Olympics present a unique opportunity to serve communities and proclaim the Gospel. So, as the City of Light prepared to host athletes, coaches, and spectators, Christians prepared to share their faith and Christ's love with the crowds. These efforts affected not only the Olympic participants but also the French church.

When Sylvie and I moved to Paris in the summer of 2016, we never imagined what the summer of 2024 would bring. It was a unique time, and we thank God for all He did through that period and for the fruit He will yet produce. Many evangelistic initiatives happened this summer, and to understand them, it is useful to first see what was done to prepare for the Paris Games.

Building the framework

In March 2023, I became aware of the burgeoning plans to encourage and support the many initiatives that would take place during the Paris Games. These would come from many associations, churches, clubs, and individuals in France and around the world. I also learned that the global Christian sports movement ReadySetGO¹ was ready to support these efforts with the knowledge and experience gained from previous events.

Above: This summer, millions traveled to Paris for the Olympics.

In May 2023, I joined a group of dedicated people working to put in place a framework for the many evangelistic projects. We knew there would be no shortage of them. We also believed that if we worked together, the projects would have a greater impact. We chose the name ENSEMBLE 2024 for this movement and were encouraged by the truth that God is always at work and our job is to discover what He is doing and join in. Throughout the experience, we saw God confirm this truth again and again.

As summer turned to fall, our activity accelerated as we formed work groups. We focused on creating spaces where individuals and groups with the same passion—whether sports, arts, or mercy ministries—could discuss what they were doing, encourage each other, and share resources. We also sought to develop collaboration within the cities of France. Weekly video calls allowed us to quickly establish these groups and begin collaborating. At the same time, we set up communication tools: a website (ENSEMBLE2024.com), a regular newsletter, and a WhatsApp community.

To illustrate what ENSEMBLE 2024 represented, we would speak of going to see Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Once we have seen it, it would be strange to speak of the frame and not the painting. It is the *Mona Lisa* that matters. The frame exists simply to give the painting greater value. ENSEMBLE 2024 existed to facilitate the hundreds of initiatives that occurred during the summer of sports.

At the beginning of 2024, we realized that while the many meetings online were useful, we needed to see each other in person, face to face. So we instituted a monthly in-person meeting held in the 12th arrondissement at Paris Epicentre (a building that houses a church and many other activities). It allowed partners in the movement to meet each other, learn of the projects being planned, and encourage each other. We also had times of training and prayer.

One of our goals in creating the work groups and getting the participants to talk to each other was to create an environment for spontaneous collaboration. We knew that centralizing everything would slow things down, but we experienced great joy whenever we learned of a collaborative project between groups. Each time it happened, we knew we were on the right track.

All this demonstrated a way of working together that could last beyond the summer of 2024. We pray that fruitful and ongoing gospel collaboration will be one of the legacies of this year's Olympic Games.

Executing the outreaches

Now that we've spoken about the preparation for the Games, let's turn to what happened. Some of the first questions people interested in the evangelistic efforts ask are "How many people were involved?" and "What did they do?" While we tried to be aware of the many outreaches happening across France this summer, it was impossible to have an accurate number. We are thankful God knows. We estimated that more than 2,500 disciples of Jesus Christ from France and around the world were connected to at least 76 different ministries. We also estimated that about 50 churches from Paris, including assemblies, were involved in these activities.

When it comes to what was accomplished, at least 500 events took place during the Games, spanning the 16 days of the Olympics and the 13 days of the Paralympics. Here's a sample of all that happened: Believers shared gospel literature throughout the Paris region and all over France. They organized multiple prayer initiatives; at least one million prayers were offered through one project. More believers passed out gospel pins. Teams contributed to the "fan zones" (sites where fans could gather for screenings free of charge) that town halls organized. Churches opened their doors for concerts, art shows, and other outreaches.



Above (L-R): The Glocks and their assembly reach this neighborhood of Paris; Sylvie's paintings hang in her assembly's window—art was one of the many outreaches planned for the Olympics; The Paris Hub offers Christian literature for distribution; Olympic events that draw a crowd, such as the torch relay, are evangelistic opportunities for the street teams.

Two such churches were the Paris Beaugrenelle assembly in the 15th arrondissement and the Jardin de Reuilly assembly in the 12th arrondissement. The former held bilingual services during the Olympics, while the latter hosted two teams that distributed literature, served in a fan zone, and organized a Bible exhibition.

Events weren't limited to just the time of the Games. The cities of Lille, Nantes, Saint-Étienne, and Grenoble all had events celebrating sports and making Christ known, including athletic tournaments, literature distribution, concerts, and cultural activities. These city teams, along with the team in Paris, represent the developing legacy of the 2024 Games.

We heard many reports that the teams in the streets had great freedom to proclaim the Gospel and pass out literature. They distributed hundreds of thousands of pieces of literature, ranging from a brochure with Eric Liddell's story and New Testaments featuring athletes' testimonies to gospel tracts and much more. This was a grace from God, and the proclamation of His Word bore fruit. We heard reports of hundreds of individuals who trusted in Jesus Christ. To God be the glory! May He preserve that which was received.

One initiative that embodied ENSEMBLE 2024 was what we called the Paris Hub. We rented a floor in Paris Epicentre, the building where we had held monthly meetings during the planning phase. It became a dynamic space where teams could hold meetings in preparation for their events and access literature. Believers took thousands of New Testaments and Gospels of Mark to give out in the streets. The Paris Hub also offered a prayer room, where more than 400 people came to pray over four weeks. We also shared many meals.

All this contributed to a sense of working together for the sake of the Gospel in Paris, pointing a way forward for future collaboration. Individuals, associations, and churches learned to work together in new ways, and relationships were deepened. Jesus Christ tells us that the world will know we are His disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35). During the weeks of and surrounding the Olympics, the many disciples from different church backgrounds worked together, and their love for each other was evident.

Praying for the future

As the Games came to a close and I considered all that had happened, it was clear that God did abundantly more than all that we asked or thought (Ephesians 3:20). Let us, together, thank Him for His goodness. Let us also pray that the Word that has been sown will bear much fruit. May we all have greater assurance to take the good news of Jesus Christ to the world that needs Him. ■



Matt and Sylvie Glock are commended from Plano Bible Chapel in Plano, Texas. They are involved in building up the assemblies throughout France, especially Paris.

¹ www.ReadySetGO.tools/en

Right (from top): Sylvie and Matt meet police officers who traveled all the way from Los Angeles, California; A multicultural choir performs at one outreach (Photo courtesy of PSALT/ Ayarosky); A team evangelizes during the Games (Photo courtesy of P. Dibling); In the Paris Hub's meeting room, a team plans an outreach.



SOUTH AFRICA

New Gospel Opportunities Emerge as the Nation Changes

BY BRUCE & BONNIE NEWSHAM

Disintegration is a word that probably describes many countries today. South Africa is no exception, even though it emerged from a complex history of colonial rule, wars, and apartheid and is Africa's most technologically advanced country and biggest economy. All who live in South Africa see the decline. Yet many new opportunities to spread the Gospel come with the changes.

Shining as lights

We have lived and served together in South Africa since 1996 and are now witnessing these changes, which affect everything from public to domestic life. Due to a high unemployment rate and poor wages, many South Africans struggle to make ends meet. Millions of people live in shacks and informal settlements. In the last decade, the rail infrastructure has collapsed, and roads are becoming severely potholed throughout the country.



Since 2006, South Africa has had multiple periods of load shedding (planned power outages). Those younger than 18 years old have not known life without power outages. As most people in the country, we have needed to invest in other energy sources. They allow us to continue with Bible studies, discipleship, hospitality, online teaching, and other meetings.

The high crime rate is a much greater concern for those living in South Africa. Most people know someone who has been robbed, hijacked, seriously injured, or even murdered. The nation has one of the highest murder rates in the world, ranking among the top 20 countries. As a result, many people struggle with fear. An important aspect of our ministry is helping believers learn to filter their experiences through the lens of Scripture and cast their cares upon the Lord (without neglecting common-sense precautions). This context is also a good opportunity to tell people about the greatest danger that lies ahead for those who do not know Christ (Revelation 20:15).

The unprecedented worldwide moral decline is also evident in South Africa, which faces government corruption, little regard for human life, and the worldly philosophies, including evolution, secular psychology, and humanism, taught in schools. We live in a society like the one Paul described as "a crooked and perverse generation." (Philippians 2:15) Please pray that we will live here without complaining, be blameless, shine as lights in this dark backdrop, and be a testimony to all whom the Lord brings across our path.

Attention to teaching

In South Africa, we are privileged to share the Gospel and carry out the work of building the body of Christ with little government interference. With this freedom, however, come many groups that teach a false gospel. The fastest-growing churches are connected to traditional African religions embracing syncretism, such as the Zionist Christian Church. Churches that teach the prosperity gospel, or the Word of Faith movement, also flourish.

People who were subject to false teachings but have come to biblical faith in Christ invariably have a great deal to reject, and sound Bible teaching is needed. The apostle Paul urged Timothy to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." (1 Timothy 4:13 NASB1995) Please pray that we, with the Lord's help, will be diligent and faithful in teaching His Word through the platforms He has entrusted us with.



Far left: In South Africa, more than four million people live in shacks.

Above and left: Bible studies are great opportunities to strengthen local believers.

We praise Him for Bruce's opportunities to teach in urban and rural Bible schools, in men's Bible studies, at conferences, and at ministry training days. Similarly, Bonnie assists in women's Bible classes and periodically speaks at conferences. Creation Ministries International is another exciting outreach we're involved in: the team hosts book tables at public events and teaches biblical creation in public schools.



Above: While teaching in Bible schools, such as this one in Cape Town, Bruce builds relationships with the students. **Left:** The Newshams run a Creation Ministries International book table at an event.

Caring for the needy

Although South Africa's economy, job market, and infrastructure are struggling, there are many African countries where life is much harder and jobs are scarce. As a result, many Africans, especially Zimbabweans, Somalians, Ethiopians, Congolese, Burundians, and Malawians, immigrate to South Africa. Out of South Africa's population of about 60 million, at least 3 million are international immigrants.¹ We make trips to Zimbabwe to encourage the believers and those who run the Emmaus Bible correspondence work there; however, hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans now live in South Africa. Hatred of and violence toward foreigners (xenophobia) is prevalent in South Africa.² Our Lord commanded His people to have a different attitude: to love them and care for them (Leviticus 19:33–34).

Matthew 28:19 tells us to go and make disciples of all nations. It is interesting how the Lord has brought many nations and people groups into our country. In some parts of the world, many people don't want to talk about Christ, but the African



Above (L–R): Bonnie's ministry includes encouraging women; Bruce witnesses to an African refugee. **Far right:** The local church distributes gift boxes to older adults in need.

immigrants to South Africa are usually quite friendly and open to talking about Christ and the Gospel. Many have been in churches tainted with error. The challenge is getting them to embrace the truth. We try to assist refugees in practical ways while sharing the Gospel with them. The fields are white, ready for spiritual harvest (John 4:35). Please pray that the Lord will raise up South African believers to help care for the many foreigners, materially and spiritually.

Although our country receives many immigrants, many South Africans leave for greener pastures. The crime and poor job market drive them to developed countries with better economies. Often, these emigrants are young families, and their elderly parents and grandparents end up remaining in South Africa. The believers here can

care for them as they have no family nearby. Christians from our fellowship put together gift boxes for the destitute older people around us. The boxes include blankets, food, hygiene products, and clothing. We also give them tracts so they will know the way of salvation. Please pray that the Lord will open their eyes to the Gospel. Pray, too, that we will redeem the time, making the most of every chance to show Christ's love to the older people whose families have emigrated.



A growing trend in South Africa is the single-parent family. The causes are numerous: separation, divorce, or abandonment; an imprisoned spouse or partner; or the death of one parent due to AIDS or another disease. We connect with single parents near us, seeking to assist them practically and encourage them. Please pray that the Lord will use us to strengthen them and help them persevere amid the challenges of raising their children on their own (Psalm 82:3).

We are so grateful for the freedom we have to share the Gospel. We ask you to pray that the Lord will continue to open doors for His Word to go forth and that we will speak of Christ where He has placed us. ■

Bruce and Bonnie Newsham are commended from Avenue 54 Bible Chapel in Los Angeles, California.



¹ Natalie Cowling, "International Migrants in South Africa 2020, by Country of Origin," 26 April 2023, [Statista.com/statistics/1238915/stock-of-international-migrants-in-south-africa-by-country-of-origin/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1238915/stock-of-international-migrants-in-south-africa-by-country-of-origin/). ² Central Intelligence Agency, "South Africa, People and Society," 23 August 2024, [CIA.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/south-africa/](https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/south-africa/).



Visiting the Land of Eternal Blue

KOREAN BELIEVERS SUPPORT THE MONGOLIAN

BY DOUG NEISWENDER

Mongolia is a country with much land and few people. Its area is more than twice the size of Texas, while its population is about 10 percent of Texas's: about 3.5 million people (and about 50 million head of livestock). More than half the people live in or near the capital, Ulaanbaatar, which is filled with high-rises, Soviet-era buildings, Buddhist monasteries, and *ger* districts (round, portable dwellings sometimes called *yurts*).

Twenty-two of Mongolia's 28 people groups are unreached with the Gospel, which translates to 3.4 million people. The Soviet-backed communist government that formed in the 1920s ended early missionary efforts to reach Mongolians. After the nation's freedom in 1990, South Korean believers arrived with the Gospel, and today, the Korean and Mongolian assemblies have a strong relationship. This year, Ho Sook and I, who have served in South Korea since 1966, visited Mongolia and experienced that relationship firsthand.

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OF BRETHERN HISTORY

In 1997, a 31-year-old named Jung became the first South Korean Brethren missionary to go to Mongolia. He obeyed the Lord's call to go "and make disciples of all the nations." (Matthew 28:19) After language study, Jung went to Öndörkhaan, a city of 28,000 people about 300 miles east of the capital. He saw an assembly start there in 2002.

In 2009, Jung and his family moved to Ulaanbaatar. That same year, his home assembly commended another Korean believer, S. Park, to Mongolia, and an assembly started in the capital. Jung remained there for four years before leaving for mission work in another country. S. Park continues discipling and training believers today. The Ulaanbaatar assembly has grown, with 100 believers meeting together.

Other assemblies have been started across Mongolia. In 2004, one was formed not by a missionary but through the witness of a Mongolian named Puji. While in Korea for a study program, she attended a gospel camp for foreigners. Many other

Mongolians attended and needed an interpreter. Puji, being fluent in English, interpreted for a preacher presenting the Gospel in English, and God saved her through the messages.

When she returned to Mongolia, she shared the Gospel with her parents. They believed and witnessed to others in their hometown, and an assembly formed. Puji's mother, who worked in a hospital, witnessed to the doctors. Some believed and joined the assembly.

At one time, 300 Korean missionary families served in Mongolia, some of them Brethren. Now, most have left. However, Korean believers visit to help Mongolians teach children in the Sunday school ministry; others go to teach and encourage the believers.

One ministry is the Emmaus Bible Correspondence School. This work started in 2003 through Dong-Hwan Kim, a missionary from Germany (married to our niece). Since then, workers have translated 15 books, and five are in production. The goal is to have 24 books translated. About 34 churches, including assemblies, use the books; there are about 400 active students. Checking the completed courses and sending out books keep Dong-Hwan and his coworker, an elder in the Ulaanbaatar assembly, busy.

Northern Ireland's Bible Education Services (BES) has been in Mongolia since 2019. Each month, 6,000 courses for children aged 2 to 16 are printed and distributed free of cost to 160 churches.

HOURS ON THE ROAD, ENDLESS ENCOURAGEMENT

Toward the end of this past summer, four of us from Seoul Northside Assembly—an elder named Hwang, a young man named Kim, Ho Sook, and I—left South Korea to attend the yearly conference of the six Mongolian assemblies. The weekend conference was held at a large church campground about an hour from Ulaanbaatar. More than 150 believers came for teaching and fellowship. Hwang and Doug each spoke twice. After the messages, we partook in discussion groups and fellowship.



Sky ASSEMBLIES



On Saturday, four believers shared their testimonies. They were a young, married man; two medical students; and a young woman. Later that day, everyone went down to the nearby river for the baptism of the four.

After the conference, meetings and visits were held in each assembly. On Monday, a 40-seat bus was hired to transport us. Thirty believers joined us on the trip, including several students since it was vacation time in Mongolia. They came for fellowship and teaching, so Hwang and I needed different messages for each assembly.

The bus went to the newest and farthest assembly first. At more than 420 miles east of Ulaanbaatar, it took us more than 12 hours to reach on a road with broken asphalt and potholes. A young, commended Mongolian believer started the assembly when, in 2023, he went to this city of 72,000 people to pioneer a work.

Each assembly we visited was very hospitable and generous in feeding us. After our final visit, Hwang and our other travel companion, Kim, returned to South Korea. Ho Sook and I stayed another week to spend time with our niece Hanna Kim; her husband, Dong-Hwan; and baby, David. Like Dong-Hwan, Hanna is commended from Germany.

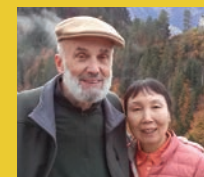
On Monday morning, the five of us and four others drove two cars to a remote village of 2,000 souls in the Gobi Desert. Much of our trip happened on dirt roads. Rain had left potholes, and in one place, one car got stuck in muddy water. By nighttime, we arrived at the village and home where we would stay for three nights. We held two days of meetings: the mornings were devoted to a few women and the



afternoons to 20 children. We shared the Gospel at each meeting. The children also enjoyed activities and BES lessons.

After returning to the Kims' apartment, we visited the nearby pregnancy center where Hanna volunteers on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The center's purpose is to discourage abortion and share the Gospel, and Hanna provides ultrasounds using a machine she and Dong-Hwan brought from Germany. Hanna had been the head gynecologist in a German hospital but left that to join Dong-Hwan in missionary work in Mongolia. For doing this prenatal work, she receives a visa, which allows her and Dong-Hwan to stay in the country.

After a total of two-and-a-half weeks, we returned safely to a hot, humid Korea, leaving behind a much cooler, drier Mongolia. To God be the glory for any good done! Please pray for the six assemblies to stand firm in the Lord while proclaiming the Gospel. Pray that souls will be saved and that young workers will rise up to become leaders. In mid-September, believers gathered for a one-month discipleship program in the area where the first assembly was started (240 miles outside Ulaanbaatar). Leaders were trained in the Gospel, shepherding, and devotional life. Pray, too, that God will use Emmaus and BES courses to reach and teach many for His glory. ■



Doug and Ho Sook Neiswender are commended from Southside Bible Chapel in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

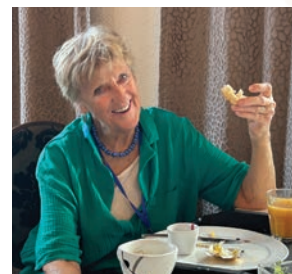
Top row (L-R): Mongolia averages 257 days of sunny skies per year; The six Mongolian assemblies gather for their annual conference; Doug speaks at the conference while Puji's husband interprets; Attendees sing before a meeting; The Neiswenders and their travel group visit the newest and farthest assembly first; During a BES class, two kids play a game while others cheer them on; Hanna, with her son, shows Doug and Ho Sook the maternity clinic and ultrasound machine.

Left column (from top): A young man prepares for his baptism at the conference; In the Gobi Desert, the Neiswenders' car gets stuck in mud.

An Oasis for Workers

Missionaries Share Their Perspective on an Annual Conference

BY PHILIP C. PARSONS



For many years, CMMI's directors have strategically supported the annual Christian Workers' Conference in Europe. The continent's once radiant gospel light has greatly diminished. Centuries of spiritual awakenings yielded decades of spiritual blessings, but contemporary realities have rendered Europe a needy continent. Evangelical Christians make up fewer than 3 percent of Europeans.¹ Ministry throughout Europe is challenging and often discouraging. So, in 1977, Joe Black (home with the Lord) and Richard Haverkamp (*Missionary Prayer Handbook* Day 9) suggested that missionaries come apart for a time of refreshment, and the weeklong conference has been an oasis ever since.

This year, the European Christian Workers' Conference was held within walking distance of pristine Lake Annecy, and about 100 men, women, and children attended. Each day began with men's and women's prayer meetings followed by breakfast. The mornings were dedicated to ministry, while the unstructured afternoons allowed attendees to sight-see, hike, rest, and fellowship.



In nine morning sessions, Stephen Shaw, a lawyer and a

board member of Echoes International (the UK Brethren missionary service organization), presented on Jonah and Titus, two of God's servants called to work in hostile cultures. Kathy M. (MPH Day 11) organized the afternoon sightseeing trips, and Matt Glock (MPH Day 10) and Tom Marinello (MPH Day 12) led the annual hike to a panoramic view of Lake Annecy.



Before dinner, the missionaries could choose to attend seminars. Paul Rabideau (New Jersey) gave three on the Lord Jesus's compassion, anger, and joy. Stephen Shaw presented on the theology of work and the call of God from

a vocational perspective. Evening activities included the missionaries' ministry reports, a family game night, and a closing presentation by the children.

My wife, Mary, and I asked several of our fellow attendees why they value the conference. "Our Christian Workers' Conference is about the long history we share with other Christian workers across Europe," said Jean-Luc and Jeannie Tabailoux (MPH Day 10), regulars at the conference. "It is a multicultural, multilingual family reunion. As our speaker opened the books of Jonah and Titus, we felt like those walking with Jesus to Emmaus: 'Our heart [burned] within us while He talked . . . and while He opened the Scriptures to us.'" (Luke 24:32)

Similarly, Bernd and Karin Flock (MPH Day 9) reflected, "The conference is where we meet 'family' who care and truth is spoken into our lives. Excellent Bible teaching is what we come for to be freshly motivated and challenged so we grow in our faith. We feed others most of the year; here, we are fed."

Kathy M. said, "The conference for workers has been a yearly source of encouragement to my family and me—as a young widow, then as a single mother, and then as a wife raising foster children—for over 30 years! I wouldn't ever miss it now."

Colin and Maureen Crow (MPH Day 9) appreciate the conference because of the "fellowship, magnificent surroundings, the praise and worship moments with excellent teaching, and of course, the fine cuisine!"



As all the attendees would agree, the fellowship reminded them that they serve a sovereign God, and the teaching motivated them to expand their vision in Europe. ■

Philip C. Parsons, CMMI missionary care and security

¹ Joshua Project, "Europe," 2024, JoshuaProject.net/continents/EUR.

Top row (L-R): Stephen Shaw speaks one morning; About 100 workers attend the conference; Herma Bode (MPH Day 2) enjoys breakfast. **Left column (from top):** Marti and Lylia Pasquale (MPH Day 12) take an afternoon bike ride; Attendees embark on a hike. **Right column:** Worship is an important part of each day.

“Through Fire and through Water”

OUR EXPERIENCE IN THE *M. MONTEIRO* TRAGEDY

BY EZRA & JOANNA BRAINARD

On July 27, missionaries in Brazil Ezra and Joanna Brainard and their four children embarked on a six-day trip up the Amazon River. A few months prior, they had left their home in remote Benjamin Constant to stay in Manaus, a large interior city, for their son's birth. Returning home, they traveled on the *M. Monteiro*, a ferry carrying 180 people and cargo—including fireworks, though unknown to the passengers. On July 29, a fire destroyed the boat, five people died, and eight went missing. Below, Ezra and Joanna recount the disaster, both sharing their perspectives.



Joanna

It was a beautiful, cloudless day. We had been traveling non-stop since Saturday at noon, enjoying some rest and family time while trying to entertain the kids. Our quarters on the top (third) deck were “cozy,” but we were making the most of them.

I had just gotten up from a nap and was thinking about a shower when Andrew, my five-year-old and oldest, looked out on the veranda and asked, “What’s that smoke back there?” I thought it might be from a barbecue for cooking meat, but I noticed it was black. And quickly increasing. I called Ezra over.

By now, there was a commotion below, and people were running and yelling “fire” in Portuguese: “Fogo! Fogo!” Ezra told us

to stay calm. Our boat was steel, and the fire was in the back, while our cabin was near the front. Surely, there would be time to put out the fire. Ezra went into the hallway to check exit points and evaluate the situation. We followed him.

I began to sing about God’s power.

Just then the loud boat motor stopped; the lights flickered and went out. All we heard was fireworks popping and booming. Lots of them. Worried, Andrew started asking, “Are we going to get out in time?” I answered that, yes, the Lord would help us. To calm my babies and my heart, I began to sing about God’s power.

I felt confident we could escape the burning boat, but the only way would be to jump. Ezra grabbed the two life jackets in our room, put one on, and gave me one. I slipped it over my neck and tried to tie it, but the cord was falling off. It couldn’t be secured. And I didn’t know how to swim. Nor did the kids. On top of everything, we were a few hundred yards from the riverbank.

A feeling that this was how our family story would end grew inside me. Everyone has a day to die; this was ours. I knew we had the hope of eternal life, but neither burning up nor drowning sounded like a fun way to go. And my babies—it was scary for me to think of them suffering through these options. At least we were together.

With a life jacket on and the hallway door closed to keep out the smoke, Ezra instructed us to stay inside while he went to



Joanna snaps a selfie of her family in their cabin, unaware that a fire will soon break out.



the roof to throw down life rafts. Only seconds after he left, the smoke came across our veranda and filled our room. People were climbing over the railings between each cabin's veranda to get to the front of the boat. I realized we needed to too.

Andrew calmly took the lead and made it to the front in no time. Ordinarily, four-year-old Philip can keep up, but the smoke disoriented him and burned our eyes and lungs. With newborn Erik under one arm, I lifted Philip and Henrietta, my two-year-old, over a few railings, but the strong smoke made me feel weak. I wondered if I would pass out. I saw men behind me hauling suitcases over the railings, and I begged for help with my babies, to which they replied, "Where's your husband?"

Ezra

After securing Joanna and the kids in the cabin, I tried to climb onto the roof, but with my bulky life vest, I couldn't do it myself. A man already up there gave me a hand. He tossed a life raft over the side, and I saw one other go over. Since the boat was moving, the rafts didn't stay by its side. I tried untying a rope and holding it to keep the next raft nearby.

By the time I tossed the raft over, the fire had spread so it would be impossible to get my family or anyone on the life raft. I realized I would need to move one to the prow, which the fire hadn't reached yet. But the roof was covered with 55-gallon drums of who knows what. I tried carrying the raft, but it was too heavy and bulky. I tried dragging it across the barrels, but the ropes kept getting caught.

I looked over the edge and saw that the smoke had entered our room. Joanna was trying, by herself, to get all four kids over the six sets of railings and to the prow. I jumped down to help.

Joanna

Ezra and another brave young man helped me move the younger kids to the prow. It was full of people, as it was the last safe place from the fire. There was lots of crying and screaming from fright and lots of commotion. Amid the chaos, the Lord calmed our family as we stood in the loud crowd, ready to jump. But not yet.

The boat was aimed toward shore and getting closer. We held on to the hope that the boat might even hit the bank and we could jump onto dry land. As we waited, a man distributed extra life jackets. Ezra begged him for one for Andrew, and a woman standing closer to the man took it and

handed it to Ezra. Like my vest, the cord was broken, but Ezra wrapped the loose end around Andrew's hand. "Don't let go," he instructed.

Andrew came to my side. I held his hand. My unattached life jacket was tucked under one arm like an awkward floatie, and Erik was in my other arm. A girl standing beside me, Josilene, had a life jacket attached. "Give me the baby," she said, "and I'll bring him to the shore." Before handing him over, I told him, "Vai com Deus, meu filho" (Go with God, my son).

By now, the boat had stopped moving toward shore, and the current was carrying it the opposite way. The fire behind us was growing bigger and inching closer. It was go time. Ezra would jump first; then, I would throw Philip and Henrietta, one at a time, to him.

Almost as soon as Ezra jumped, there was a huge explosion. It was enough for me to finally take the leap along with my babies and about 50 others. Midair, I flailed my arms and let go of Philip's hand. Underwater, I saw him fall in front of me and pushed him upward. Thanks to God, Ezra was in front of us and grabbed Philip.

The life jackets were old and not very buoyant. As I bobbed up and down, I wondered if I should just accept my fate and drown, so sure was I that we would die. I told Ezra, "I never thought we'd go this way." He had me hold onto a loop on the boat's bow and rest. As we turned to locate our other kids, Ezra saw Andrew several feet away. "I'm going after him," he said. Just then, I saw Henrietta six feet away and without a life jacket or anyone helping her. "I'm going after Henrietta!" I cried.

Ezra

Andrew was only a matter of yards away, but it took me a minute to get to him because Philip was thrashing in my arms. By the time I reached Andrew, Philip was calm, but I could no longer see Joanna. We had entered different currents. "Are you OK?" I asked Andrew. "Yes, I can do it; I'm fine," he answered. "Where is Mommy?" I had to tell him I didn't know, but I'd find her after I got him and Philip to shore.

I saw the first canoe, manned by a fisherman. He picked up a woman, Andrew, and Philip. Then, I pointed him in Joanna's direction, or where she likely was. Without anyone to care for,

I had a spark of hope that God had heard these prayers and saved my family.

the reality of the situation sank in. *If I don't lose someone today, it's a miracle.* Then, I really got to praying. *God, save my family, but even if you don't, I know You are still good, and I will continue serving you just the same.* I knew Andrew and Philip had reached the shore, but it seemed impossible that we all would survive. *I certainly lost someone, but I don't know whom,* I thought over and over.

Amid this hopelessness, I remembered that a friend had messaged me hours before to say he was praying for our safety. The day prior, another friend had told us he was praying, and MSC Canada and CMML had published our travel plans in their prayer email. As these memories flashed through my mind, I had a spark of hope that God had heard these prayers and saved my family.

I climbed out on a log that was half buried in the river-bank and waited. I saw boats come and go but all far away. Finally, a military boat approached me, and the soldiers signaled their plan: they would go farther up the river first, then return for me.

Joanna

Between my inability to swim and lost eyeglasses, I struggled to reach Henrietta. I couldn't tell if she was dead or alive. Finally, I got to her. She coughed a bit, but she was alive! And she hardly seemed scared. Her chief concern was her dirty hands—she had landed near the boat and was covered in motor oil. With Henrietta on top of my arm that was holding the life jacket, we tried to head toward shore.

Suddenly, someone grabbed my jacket. My heart sank. I knew drowning people could bring others down with them, and I was barely staying up as it was. It turned out to be another woman with a child in her arm and the same life-jacket problem as I had. I begged her to let go, but she wouldn't. Eventually, I decided we needed to work together. Neither of us could swim, but I kicked my feet to propel myself in the water while she paddled with her free arm. We four were finally about to enter another current to take us farther from the boat.

A few times, I fell off my jacket and turned around in the water. Looking back, I could see the entire boat in flames—the largest fire I'd ever seen, with flames reaching two or three times as high as the boat and a cloud of black smoke billowing to heaven.

We called for help when two fishing canoes passed us, but they motioned that they were heading toward the boat to rescue

people closer to the fire. The woman and I kept going, paddling, kicking, and gasping for air. With every pant, I tried to comfort Henrietta and the lady: "God is with us. God is our refuge. God is our strength." I still had no certainty of our survival, but now that I had my daughter with me, I would fight as long as I could.

At last, a third canoe came to us. Oh, what relief (and disbelief) I felt as they pulled us out of the water. In the interest of not dumping the rescued back into the river, the drivers carefully avoided overloading their small canoes. After we got in, they headed straight to the bank.

Meanwhile, I saw another canoe arriving. Seeing who was on board was difficult without my glasses, but I made out Andrew's bright orange-and-blue shirt. Then, I saw Philip's mop of blond hair. I had three of my babies!

I struggled through the bank's muck to get up to higher ground. I saw one dead body on the shore, so I guided the kids to a shady spot out of sight of the fatality. I said to Andrew, "We walked through the valley of the shadow of death." He nodded emphatically, now knowing what that was.

I didn't yet know if my husband or baby had survived. But I was so overwhelmed by God's faithfulness and goodness—He had spared me and three of our children—that I started to sing. As we sat on the bank, I heard people praying, making vows to God. I felt my duty was to tell others that the only hope of eternal life is in the Lord Jesus Christ. I started to tell those around me that we were alive because of God's mercy and that this was the day of salvation.

All the while, I scanned the water. I searched every boat that arrived, asking every person if they had seen a young woman with a blond baby and a gringo with a red beard.



Josilene holds Erik on dry land, after their rescue.

Always, the answer was no. Finally, in the middle of one canoe, I spotted a young woman holding a bundle the size of a newborn. *Can it be Erik? Is he alive?* The woman approached me, and I realized she was Josilene with my baby, sleeping happily. I cried for the first time. God had heard

my prayer. He had gone with my baby and brought him safely to shore.

Now, we waited to hear word of Ezra. I knew he could swim, but the river is huge. If another current had taken him, he could have ended up far from the wreck site and be lost in the jungle. All we could do was wait and pray.

Ezra

When the military boat returned for me, sitting on that half-buried log, one man asked if I was the husband of the “white girl with two kids.” I thought he had confirmed my fear. “Four kids,” I corrected, and the other men confirmed that, yes, they had seen all four. I cried. God had heard His people’s prayers.

Joanna

At last, a military boat arrived with another batch of survivors. People exclaimed, “It’s your husband! Your husband is here!” I could hardly dare to hope, but Andrew, who could see, said, yes, it was Daddy!

There aren’t any words for the joy, relief, and thankfulness we felt in that moment as we sat on the riverbank. We were soaked, covered in mud and motor oil, and without shoes and my glasses but in each other’s arms. Over and over, we said, “We lost everything—but we lost nothing!”

The military took us to their floating base nearby, where we accepted water and snacks and the severely burned received initial treatment. As we waited for more survivors to arrive, a soldier asked us for our names. “I never thought we’d be on a survivors’ list,” I whispered to Ezra. We nearly cried for joy as we wrote down all six names—our whole family.



Uarini’s townspeople care for the Brainards.

We couldn’t help but believe that many more lives had been spared because God’s people had prayed for our trip. The fire broke out in daylight on a clear day. A military barge happened to be close by. More canoes than normal happened to be out because people were returning from an event in Uarini. Oil, not fuel (which is more flammable), spilled on the water. And, for about 10 minutes, the wind blew all the smoke away from the prow, giving us fresh air that helped us think clearly before we leaped off. All these things were in God’s providence.

From the military barge, we had a 1-hour-and-45-minute ride to the nearest town, Uarini. Upon arrival, we were received with more kindness and love than I can express. From the crowds at the dock, there to greet and transport us, and the hospital and shelters swarming with volunteers who cared for and housed us to the mounds of donated clothing, toys, and food, every single basic need and many more were met with enthusiasm. The mayor declared a holiday for all government employees so they could care for the town’s more than 150 guests. After our first night at the shelter (a school), an Irish priest next door offered us a room in his home until we could get to Tefé, the neighboring city. In Tefé, the pastor of the evangelical church housed us until we could catch the next speedboat to Manaus.

When we look back at the week of the accident, we see God’s hand in every detail. The more we remember, the more we see how powerfully He worked on our behalf (Psalm 66:12). ■



The family tries swimming again—this time, in a safe environment.



The Brainards are commended from Emmaus Bible Chapel in Ferguson, Missouri.

Originally published on Ezra Brainard’s Facebook profile. Adapted with permission.

