His Vets

January 2020

We make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

What a journey from here to there! After veterinarian Captain John Coatney finished his service in the Army, he returned to begin two Masters degrees at Wheaton University. Historical Theology and Biblical Exegesis. The man knows the Bible! And Greek. And Hebrew.

With one year to go, in January 2012 he and his wife Kristen visited friends in Haiti and met CVM veterinarian Dr. Kelly Crowdis. She encouraged them to consider long term missions and give me a call. That’s when it all started: the challenges and triumphs on the road to long term missions.

I invited them to come to our annual CVM conference to explore long term missions and calling. At the last minute, John came alone; Kristen was not feeling well. I remember the stricken look on his face as he received her call from home. She had miscarried. Why now?!! Right as they were committing to long term service. We prayed. He hurried home to be with her.

This would be the first of four heart-wrenching miscarriages, each only months apart before the Lord blessed them with their first son Charles. They suffered a fifth miscarriage before Judah was born. The journey was not proving to be easy.

John finished both Master’s degrees; then the Fall of 2013 he joined a CVM short term mission trip to Romania for a month, lecturing in several veterinary schools. It was a good trip—but afterward, he planned to begin work at a very promising veterinary job. “We make our plans...”

When he returned, “the Lord determined his steps.” In God’s timing, I had just sent an email about a competitive application for a post-doctoral (Masters) position with Dr. Paul Plummer at Iowa State University that involved camel research and multiple trips to Ethiopia. We thought this might be a great way for someone to garner international, cross-cultural experience and catch the vision for missions!

John applied. It was no small act of God that he was selected for the post and excited about it.

This meant the Coatneys had to give up Kristen’s thriving, accomplished, professional career in hairstyling in Chicago and move to Iowa. That was a huge step! Kristen was willing but cautioned, “This is it. If we move to Iowa, then we better be going on to Ethiopia! I’m not giving up my career and roots in Chicago just to move to Ames!” No backing down, no cold feet, rocket-launched, line drawn, no return. John agreed.
Through 2014, on each trip to Ethiopia for camel research, John built friendships and networks with people working there, and the Coatneys’ sense of calling strengthened.

In 2015, before the camel project ended I encouraged him to visit Mekelle University Faculty of Veterinary Medicine in the north of Ethiopia. I’d been there. The Dean said they desperately needed veterinary faculty. One of the believing vet students pleaded, “Dr. Fred, teach us how to reach our whole campus for Christ, or send someone in your place.” It was a potentially powerful opportunity.

So John checked it out. Over a steaming dinner of shekela tibs, the Dean shrugged, “Of course we’d like DVMs to come and help us, but what we really need to build our programs is people with Ph.D. degrees.” O well. At least they’ll accept John’s DVM and post-doctoral experience. Anyway, where could I find PhDs who were free to go to Ethiopia? You guessed it: God knew that answer too.

John was offered the opportunity to continue at ISU with grant funding for a Ph.D. starting that Fall in ruminant nutrition! We discussed and prayed about it. You know me-- I wanted to send the Coatneys right away. We prayed. How much education is enough?!

In the end, several factors highlighted the value of further delaying for a Ph.D.; even the Dean in Mekelle was delighted, despite the delay. To this day he loves to tell the slightly inaccurate story about how he sent John back for a Ph.D. But really, only God knew—and He wasn’t finished.

The Orthodox Seminary in Mekelle was also excited about John and Kristen coming. With John’s expertise in biblical studies, they want him to teach there, too! Who knew? God had already planned for this use of John’s vet degree and master’s degrees, camel experience and more—before anyone knew the unfolding plan.

Now it’s been seven years from here to there. What a journey! Research trips to Ethiopia, countless rich relationships, a Ph.D. (still needs to finish his thesis), five grief-filled miscarriages, four joyful sons added to the family—the last an adoption of epic proportions, enduring patience, bureaucratic confusion and God-sized challenges. The Lord directed their steps.

Kristen explained in matter-of-fact, faith-filled tones, “We prayed that God would open doors—or close them if it was not His will. He opened them all—even the ‘impossible’ ones.”

Before the New Year, this dear family is booked God-willing to land in Ethiopia. John expects to divide his ministry between the seminary and the vet school; Kristen will focus on home school and 4 active boys. But really? The journey has just begun.

It’s fun to see the Lord use us to help mobilize others to “Go into all the world…” Please pray the Lord of the Harvest to send more workers. His harvest is waiting. What about you? Do you have a special calling to stay home? It’s an awesome journey from here to there, and beyond.

Your fellow pilgrims, Fred and Vicki

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