

Our Story

by Conrad & Anna Van Dijk

Looking back, we can see clearly how the Lord has directed our paths...Even before we got married in 1969, we felt that we were not the type of people who wanted to settle into a nice, suburban, competitive, keep-up-with-the-Jones' lifestyle. We wanted adventure, but above all, we wanted to do something meaningful! After many applications and inquiries to different agencies, we answered a request for a veterinarian at the Njala University College in Sierra Leone, West Africa!

It was obvious that Conrad was the man for the job and Anna, a primary school teacher, was given the opportunity to teach in the Experimental School, part of the Education Department of the University. After our wedding and an invaluable 5-week orientation with Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), we were off to Africa for the next two years.

In Sierra Leone, Conrad's job involved general veterinary work and he was specifically in charge of the poultry. He also taught Animal Science courses. The job was not without challenges as he soon had to deal with a rabies outbreak in the dog population, and then the cattle herd started dying from a mysterious cause that turned out to be a poisonous plant that thrived in the dry season. Conrad also furthered the expansion of the poultry department.

A 2-year honeymoon, an education beyond what any university could provide, and an incredible, challenging, and totally out-of-the-ordinary career and lifestyle, all added up to much more than we could have hoped for and gave us the desire to continue to do what we could in developing countries for the rest of our lives. Conrad felt that his interest in poultry as a career specialty would allow him to work in most any developing country, including poverty-stricken Sierra Leone. He could help develop healthy poultry farms in the hopes that even very poor people would be able to afford an egg a day to combat severe protein deficiency. With this in mind, we left Sierra Leone for more education in Canada, wondering if the Lord would ever bring us back.

Two births, six months in Bangladesh, two adoptions, another birth, the arrival of two foster children, and starting a private poultry veterinary practice... Joys and challenges of all kinds marked those 21 years. It was exciting, busy and difficult. Looking back we wonder how we did it all! In spite of frustrations, we know the Lord was with us, teaching us and preparing us for more of life's joys and challenges to come...

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It was interesting, trying to determine where God was leading us. After many applications and inquiries to different agencies, the Dean of the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) invited Conrad to the University of Guelph for an interview. When Conrad arrived, he was excitedly greeted by a committee of four who had each just received a telegram requesting a veterinarian at the Njala University College in Sierra Leone, West Africa!

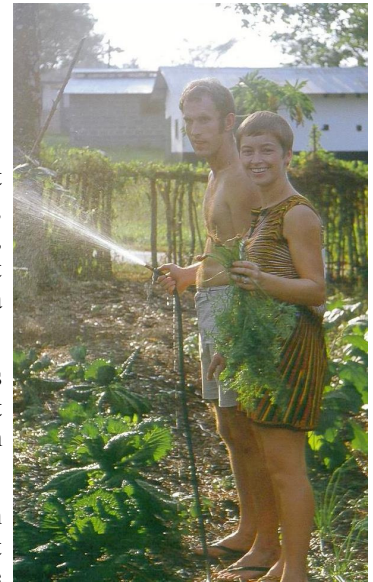
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With this in mind, Conrad applied to OVC in Guelph for a postgraduate course specializing in poultry and we left Sierra Leone wondering if the Lord would ever bring us back...

Our first child (Tracy) was born soon after we arrived back in Canada, in November 1971. Conrad had begun a one-year poultry specialization course at the University of Guelph and we wondered where the Lord would send us when it was completed. It



ended up being Truro, Nova Scotia, which wasn't quite what I had imagined but Conrad wanted more experience in poultry practice before returning overseas. Our second child (Tim) was born there in January 1973.

During that year, we saw an ad asking for a poultry specialist to work through CRWRC with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Bangladesh, a newly independent country, formerly East Pakistan. After many discussions, it was agreed that we would go. We sold most of our belongings, shipped the rest to Ontario, and headed off with our two young children and 14 pieces of luggage in tow, not knowing whether we would be gone for six months or six years.

We arrived in New Delhi, India to find out that due to an airline strike, our connecting flight had left without us. Thankfully, we remembered that our friends Bill and Grace were there as well, and we eventually tracked them down. They received us with open arms and helped us secure another flight to Bangladesh three days later. The MCC staff also welcomed us warmly but the director had bad news: part of Conrad's job did not exist anymore since the government had shuffled the poultry farms he was supposed to help re-establish and the new department didn't think they needed him.

A Southern Baptist Mission compound in Comilla became our home. From there Conrad was able to travel around to assess the poultry situation. We became very much at home and involved with the guest house for MCC workers who stopped on their way to and from their mission posts, with the country and the people, and we were starting to learn the Bengali language. But after six months, Conrad concluded that raising poultry was not feasible, due to the extreme poverty. The food shortage was so severe that any grain fed to chickens would be like stealing it from the mouths of the hungry.

So by April 1974, we were reluctantly on our way back home. But now what...?

From April 1974, to June 1995, we lived in 4 different homes in the Shakespeare/Stratford/Tavistock area of Southwestern Ontario. Conrad had a Plan B— if our dream of working the rest of our lives in 3rd world countries was not possible, he wanted to be a pioneer in Ontario by starting a private poultry veterinary practice, a totally new concept in veterinary medicine. Meanwhile, our family of 2 children expanded to 7, with the adoption of Supriya (1975) from Bangladesh, Sashi (1979) from India, the birth of Shanti (1981), and we received 2 children (1986) to foster for over 9 years!

Joys and challenges of all kinds marked those 21 years. We were heavily involved in the local CRC, setting up Stratford Christian School and fundraising, speaking to groups while selling Bangladesh handicrafts for MCC, supporting SAWA (Stratford and Area World Aid), the Right to Life Association, and others! We both spent a lot of time on the road, Conrad to visit chicken farmers and Anna to drive kids to school, run errands as the office "gopher," and other volunteer activities. It was exciting, busy and difficult. Looking back we wonder how we did it all! In spite of frustrations, we know the Lord was with us, teaching us and preparing us for more of life's joys and challenges to come...