

Our Story



By: Conrad and Anna Van Dijk

Until Conrad revisited Sierra Leone briefly in 2002, we felt like our destiny of helping developing countries had been unfulfilled. On the first day, Conrad was taken to visit Wellington Orphanage in Freetown. The 60 children sang, “We welcome you in the name of the Lord, Uncle Conrad,” as he entered. It touched his heart, especially when he heard that they often didn’t have enough to eat and would run away to find food in the streets. He struggled to find a way to help.

During the next two days of his trip, Conrad traveled around rural Sierra Leone and saw what massive destruction war had left in its wake. During subsequent trips he received what we believe was a God-given answer: assisting farmers and the orphanage with poultry flocks, so that they could earn a living for themselves.

Looking back we can see how the Lord has directed our paths—giving us the desire, when we got married in 1969, to step out of the ordinary. Even before we were married, we felt that we were not the type of people who wanted to settle into a nice, suburban, keep-up-with-the-Jones’ lifestyle. We wanted adventure, but above all, we wanted to do something meaningful!

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 just received a telegram requesting 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 at the Experimental School, part of the education department of the University. After our wedding, and an invaluable 5-week orientation with the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), we were off to Africa, each with 66lbs of luggage to last us 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 Sciences 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 two-year honeymoon, and 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 do in developing countries for the rest of our lives. Conrad felt his interest in poultry as a career specialty would allow him to work in almost any developing country, including poverty-stricken Sierra Leone. He could 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, Conrad applied over to OVC in Guelph for a postgraduate course specializing in poultry; we left Sierra Leone wondering if God 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 Truvo, Nova Scotia, which wasn't quite what we 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 a 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 poultry farms he was supposed to help re-establish and the new department didn't think they needed him.

A Southern Baptist Mission in Comilla became our home. From there Conrad was able to travel around and assess the poultry situation. We became very

much at home and involved with the guest house for the MCC workers who stopped by 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.

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 developing countries was not possible. He wanted to be a pioneer in Ontario by starting a private veterinary poultry practice, a totally new concept for veterinary medicine. Meanwhile our family of two children expanded to seven, with the adoption of Supriya (1975) from Bangladesh, Sashi (1979) from India, the birth of Shanti (1981), and we received two 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 and 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 knew that the Lord was with us, teaching us and preparing us for more of life's joys and challenges to come.