

How God's Extraordinary Intervention Helped This Surgeon Achieve the Impossible

My story begins at the age of 14 in Cambodia, where I witnessed a man die after being injured in a car accident. Moments before he passed, my father, a missionary, sat next to him and attempted to share the gospel with him, but the dying man only wanted medical help.

From that moment on, I set my sights on becoming a missionary doctor. I would find a way to help the sick and dying in health and spirit, just like my father attempted on that fateful day.

A few short years later, at the age of 19, a single moment would again sharpen the person I was destined to become. I received news that both of my parents had been killed in Vietnam by communist soldiers. I was at first enraged that God had not protected my parents, but in that moment, God challenged me to trust Him. What emerged amid the deep pain of loss was the promise that I would never do anything significant for God unless I was willing to trust Him in both good times and bad. I felt his words, 'Do you trust me?' and I surrendered. My answer was a clear and unwavering "yes."

God had outlined my vision and purpose, but it would take years for my mission – a greater mission—to come to light.

I would go on to complete my medical education at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and two years of general surgery residency at Mercy Hospital and Medical Center in San Diego, California.

Other serendipitous life events would guide me to a woman named Becki Michell, who in 1971, after earning her R.N. degree, would become my wife and would join me four years later in accepting an invitation from the Christian Missionary Alliance to serve as medical missionaries in Gabon, Central Africa. We had hoped to go to either Cambodia or Vietnam to serve, but by the time we were ready, both countries were deemed unsafe.

We arrived in Gabon in May 1977, quickly opened a nursing school and launched the Bongolo Hospital. Our small dispensary would go on to become a 158-bed hospital with full medical, obstetrical, pediatric and surgical services.

Our feeling of purpose never faltered. As our responsibilities grew, it became clear that we needed to do more for those we were serving. We returned to the U.S. and I completed three more years of residency in general surgery, eventually qualifying for the American Board of Surgery. New credentials in hand, Becki and I returned to Gabon to resume our work.

It wasn't long before pivotal developments began to reshape our mission. I was the only surgeon for 200,000 people, and no matter how optimistic and hardworking we were we could not keep up with the needs. I tried to recruit other surgeons to come and help me, but none responded. Desperate, I prayed and placed my faith in God's sustaining hand.

One day as I prayed, God said to me, "You train them!" I was shocked, but from that moment on I realized that if I wanted help, I would have to begin training surgeons myself. Not long afterwards, I attended a Christian Medical and Dental Education conference in Kenya, where I met nine other missionary and African surgeons. I was surprised to learn that they were experiencing the same problem at the hospitals where they served!

The year was 1996—and together, we agreed to establish the

Pan-African Academy of Christian Surgeons (PAACS). Our mission was to train and disciple African physicians to be surgeons who would glorify God and provide excellent and compassionate care to their own people.

We would have to set up five-year formal residency programs in general surgery at our hospitals. We set a goal of fully training 100 African surgeons by 2020, with the vision that they would remain in Africa and would work in the under-resourced areas of the continent, serving the poor and those needing help the most. We made this decision without government approval or even a clear set of rules, trusting the abilities and experience God had given us. The first PAACS training program opened at Bongolo Hospital in 1997, with just one resident. In the two decades that followed, PAACS grew at an astonishing rate.

Mike Chupp, MD, FACS, FCS (ECSA), and executive vice president of CMDA weighed in, "The PAACS program became the recruitment 'darling' for ex-pat general and specialty surgeons to commit long term to serve at Tenwek Hospital in Kenya, where I served." Today, PAACS has expanded to 15 training programs in 8 countries, 9 mission hospitals, with 92 residents in our training programs. In addition, we have proudly graduated 88 surgeons who are serving in the under-resourced areas of 20 countries in Africa.

With God's extraordinary help, we achieved something that seemed impossible, one surgeon at a time.

The call of God continues to lead the PAACS organization forward. The directorship of this ministry is now in the capable hands of Susan Koshy who continues to expand the vision and mission God gave to us.

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David Thompson was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on June 21, 1948, to missionary parents serving in Cambodia with the

Christian & Missionary Alliance. In 1996, David established the Pan-African Academy of Christian Surgeons, with a goal to train and disciple 100 African surgeons by 2020 at existing Christian hospitals staffed by qualified surgeons. In July 2014, David was appointed by PAACS to be the Regional Director for North, East and Southern Africa, an area which includes PAACS programs in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi. David and his wife, Rebecca, have three grown children and six grandchildren. David has written and published four books: On Call, Beyond the Mist, The Hand on My Scalpel and Christian Mercy.