CHAPTER 1

RELIVING OUR PAST

Many years ago a lonely, itinerate evangelist trudged the dry, dusty roads of Palestine where He left footprints in the sands of time. He voiced a message that still rings down through the centuries. Jesus simply said, “Follow me.”

My wife, Ruth, and I heard Jesus’ call in 1952 while pastoring a small congregation in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Christ’s call challenged us to seek lost sheep in Papua New Guinea and guide them into Christ’s fold. We responded by raising support and sailing for PNG in 1955. For thirty-eight wonderful years we poured our lives into the people of PNG. We served twenty-eight of those years with the Church of the Nazarene. But they passed quickly, and we retired in 1993.

Our four children grew up in PNG, made a host of friends, and attended high school there. They returned to the United States for college, marriage, and their careers. Our daughter, Darlene, David’s twin sister, married Michael Brooks who has been an administrator at Southern Nazarene University. Dar-
lene is a nurse in Oklahoma City. Larry, our middle son, lives and works in New Zealand with his Canadian wife, Iris. James, our youngest son, pastors the Church of the Nazarene in Middleton, Idaho, and works in Wells Fargo Bank as a technology manager. All our offspring have Christian spouses and children who follow the Nazarene.

In 2005 the Church of the Nazarene in PNG sent an invitation to all former missionaries to attend the 50th anniversary celebrations to be held at Kudjip in July. Kudjip is the mission station where the Church of the Nazarene’s 120-bed hospital is located and where the nursing college is training nurses and other healthcare workers.

What an opportunity it was to trek back and experience what God has been doing in recent years. How had our daily prayers been answered? Were the converts remaining true? Were the pastors and district superintendents we had trained growing and maturing in their ministries?

My journey began at Bradenton Missionary Village in Bradenton, Florida, where Ruth and I are blessed to live in rent-free housing. This savings enabled me to buy airline tickets to New Guinea via New Zealand.

When my sons learned I was returning to PNG, to my amazement they wanted to come and join the celebration. I soon found myself across the continent
in a sprawling, crowded Los Angeles airport, wondering if all our flights would mesh or not. Soon I sighted David and his son, Brendan. David would be returning to PNG after more than 30 years, and Brendan was eager to see his father and grandfather’s old stomping grounds.

I noted the progression and changes in missionary life and labors. Ruth and I had gone to primitive stone-age people. David ministered in a developing church with missionaries in a supporting role. The current generation of missionaries uses transcontinental technologies via the Internet to train present and future leaders.

Shortly after linking up with Dave and Brendan, James popped out of the crowds. With him was his son, Michael, a sophomore at Northwest Nazarene University (NNU), and James’ son-in-law, Dan Myers, a recent graduate of NNU. Together we boarded the flight to New Zealand.

After enjoying a wonderful week together with my son, Larry, his wife, Iris, and their four “Kiwi” children, Larry joined us as we continued our journey. We arrived in the PNG Highlands where a van waited at the terminal to take us to Kudjip. PNG is located just south of the equator in the South Pacific Ocean. As a result, the weather is continually summer-like, with the only seasonal differences being wet or dry.
Our first week in PNG brought us back to the area we called home for many years. At Kudjip, we slept in the same house we lived in before retirement. We sought out old friends, reminisced, laughed, and praised God for His faithfulness. We hiked to a nearby village and upriver to “suicide rocks” in the Kanya River gorge. The river runs cold out of the 12,000-foot mountain ranges behind Kudjip. All of us thrilled at the exotic flora and fauna of this tropical island, which is referred to as “paradise” for good reason.

For the grandsons, following the footprints of their elders inevitably took them to Tun, the original site of the Nazarene Bible College. Later the buildings and homes were disassembled and moved from the isolated village to the Highlands Highway property called Tuman. I had been a teacher and principal at the Bible College while it was located at Tun. Since our friends at Tun had planned a feast, we purchased a carton of frozen beef brisket and took gifts of live chickens fifteen miles to where they were waiting to greet us.

As we arrived, people cried for joy, hugged our legs, and flopped hands on swinging wrists, all New Guinean signs of amazement. After a quarter of a century, we were together again, alive and well.

This was to be a long and happy ceremony. The pig is the ceremonial animal for New Guineans, so we had to kill a pig for the feast. Killing pigs is
not done in a discreet manner in PNG. Instead, the people gave James a heavy wooden club and backed off as he swung the club and smacked the swine on the forehead, stunning and ultimately terminating its terrible headache. Thankfully it didn’t break loose and dash around, crazed and squealing, scattering the hungry crowd as sometimes happens. Our village hosts were quite pleased with James’ unexpected success.

Some men laid the pig over a fire and singed off its bristles. Then a church leader deftly carved up the carcass with a bamboo knife. We added the thawed beef brisket, chickens, sweet potatoes, cabbages, and other leafy vegetables to the feast. Layers of hot
stones placed among the vegetables produced clouds of steam. Then the nationals covered the food and hot rocks with banana leaves to hold in the steam, thus cooking the food. We were all given generous portions to eat, including cooked ferns. The younger Blowers generations seemed a bit leery of the “fixin’s.”

On Sunday morning, we worshiped together at the Kurumul village church. This experience brought back sweet memories of weekends when we camped there to connect with village and tribal life. Tribes continue to be a vital cohesive force in PNG society, and though many years had passed, we still “belonged” to these people and their tribes. Our village friends enveloped us with hugs and shed tears of thanksgiving. Their missionary family was back.

Behind the church, a dirt path led to the house where we lived while I completed the translation of the Wahgi New Testament. This translation was later printed by the Bible Society and dedicated in 1989. The Blowers men each brought greetings in the service, though Dave had a difficult time speaking Melanesian Pidgin with Haitian Creole so fresh in his mind.

Back at Kudjip that evening, the service convened of all places on the tennis court. Knox Memorial Church, where services were usually held, was under repair. Even in the light rain, people sat on pieces of cardboard or towels since no chairs
were available. Everyone sang, praised, testified, and “amen-ed” the long-winded preacher. The men and women worshiped in the Spirit, comfortably and lithely getting up and down to sing and pray while us old-timers creaked and groaned with considerable effort.

On Monday we hired a public motor vehicle to take us to Tambul, another mission station where our family lived beginning in 1955. The road took us over the 9000-foot Murmur Pass to the mission station where we lived the first ten years of our missionary labors. I remembered standing on a foot trail on Murmur Pass fifty-one years earlier, looking down for the first time into the 7000-foot-deep valley and the Tambul mission station. Natives carried our twins, David and Darlene, in a baby buggy strapped to poles with jungle vine. The final twelve miles from the end of the vehicle road to the mission station took a day and a half walking.

Now the gravel road extends all the way to the mission station with only one section of muddy bog and stone that nearly stopped us. Alongside the road stood electric poles and power lines that brought electricity far into this rural area. A stenciled sign greeted us as we rolled onto the mission station: “Welcome Blowers—to your Pioneer Mission Field.”

Rambai Poponawa is the station manager and principal of the self-supporting Tambul Bible Col-
lege. He is also the former head teacher of Kudjip Nazarene Community School. Rambai now lives in the mission house where we had lived. It is wood-framed with a corrugated iron roof. This is also the house where Ruth pressed a foot of each child onto an inkpad and then “printed” the foot on the back of the bathroom door. My sons were delighted that the footprints were still visible.

From a bedroom we climbed the steep stairs to the attic where Ruth homeschooled our children. James, while in kindergarten, once fell down those stairs. While he didn’t break any bones, his pride was certainly fractured. His siblings remember Jimmy was “madder than a wet hen.”
We also recalled our first humble home on this site: a thatched-roofed house with woven bamboo walls, floors, and ceilings. The house was comfortable and warm when the small wood heater was blazing, though the fire often filled the rooms with acrid smoke. We had four rooms and a bathroom. The children took baths in a round galvanized washtub. Unfortunately, the roof leaked during monsoon rains so it was necessary to upgrade to the wood-framed, iron-roofed modern house that still stands.

Rambai and our Tambul friends provided an evening meal cooked in an earthen pit. This meal contained a new variety of sweet potato, which we found to be delicious. We chewed tough chicken—they had chased the free-ranging fowl far before catching and cooking them—and vegetables. Then we attended an evening church service where 200 to 300 Christians gathered. It was a precious time together with many “I-am-so-glad-you-came” messages, trembling lips, leaking eyes, and loving hugs. During this service, I retold the story of four early Tambul Christians who had acted on the biblical story of Gideon and burned down “spirit houses” all around the Tambul valley. It was wonderful to realize the Tambul people were still walking with God, following in the footsteps of Jesus and members of his Church and kingdom.

When we arrived in Tambul in 1955, the language was unwritten. I had the task of creating an
alphabet, preparing their first reading books, called primers, and simple storybooks, and teaching the eager students to read. The nationals are still singing songs from a songbook we produced during that time. I translated the Gospel of Mark before leaving this language area for Kudjip and the Wahgi language. Later a Wycliffe Bible translator came to the Tambul valley and translated the entire New Testament.

Leaving Tambul the next day, we headed back to Kudjip and the anniversary celebrations where I would tell the large crowd the story of the four “Tambul Gideons.”