

Reconciliation and Healing Across the World

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The phone rang, the caller ID showing, “Tennessee.” I was in the church office on a Saturday afternoon, normally one of my days off. Who would be calling our little church from Tennessee? Was it a scam? Little did I realize where that phone call would lead.

When I answered, a woman’s voice with a bit of a southern accent said, “I know this sounds like a lot to ask of a church on the other side of the continent, but we’re wondering if there is someone there who could visit and pray with some dear friends of ours from Australia who are in the Vernon hospital. They don’t know anyone there.”

I took down the details, mother Karen, her daughter Gabi who is in the same room with her, their phone number and the room number, and assured her that someone would go to see them. Of course, that someone turned out to be me, as Randy was on vacation at the time.

I hadn’t visited anyone in the hospital since my wife passed away from two strokes last July. I was anxious, the memories still raw, compounded by older memories, four years before but no less raw, of our daughter’s body, cold and lifeless, after a traffic accident. I was so worried that, in my deep grief, I may not actually be of any help to these people from across the globe.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door to their room and was invited in. I had no idea how much opening the door to that room was going to change all our lives.

Karen was on the hospital bed while Gabi was on a



Karen and Gabi

fold-out bed by the window. I anxiously introduced myself but I needn’t have worried because Karen greeted me warmly and Gabi left her bed to join her Mom on hers.

I listened to their story and I will let Karen tell it in her own words, in excerpts from the story she wrote for the May/June 2023 edition of *The Pulse* magazine:

“We had only been in the country for 10 days at that point; we had done a little cross-country skiing as planned, but I was already not feeling well. I found a local doctor, but the oral antibiotics they gave me did not work: I did not know it, but had become septic.”

“It was at 8am on March 21, when I woke my daughter and gasped that I needed to go to hospital and somehow drove us in our rental car to the ED (Emergency Department).

“I was triaged as a serious case and admitted to the ward quickly. My daughter refused to leave my side and was provided with a sofa bed in my room. Three days later, she was very sick herself, with high fever and intense pain. Neither of us was going anywhere.”

Karen told me later that they had stopped going to church a year ago, due to “a series of events, hurts, misunderstandings and human failings at various levels in a few settings.” They had walked away, “quite broken hearted and feeling helpless.” Life since then had not been going very well for them.

But, she mused, “God was already working; I just hadn’t realised it.”

In the hospital, she relates, “I was on oxygen, struggling to breathe, hooked up to an IV full of antibiotics, fluids, steroids, blood thinners, wracked with fever, pain, nausea and coughing bouts, bedridden in the COVID ward of a Canadian hospital, being asked if I would agree to being placed on life support or resuscitated, if required. I didn’t have COVID, but bacterial pneumonia, sepsis and bacterial sinusitis.

“My 17-year-old daughter Gabi was lying in a foldout bed nearby, crying with the pain of strep throat. Not an in-patient, but living with me in the hospital because she’s a minor and we knew nobody in the small ski town we had chosen to holiday in overseas.”

The doctors told Karen that when she left the hospital, she would have to wait ten days before flying otherwise that experience could kill her.

"Fears overcame me. Apart from being afraid of dying and leaving my daughter alone, how was I going to pay for all of this treatment? How was I going to pay for 10 days of accommodation and food after our Air B&B accommodation expired. How was I going to get us around? . . . How was I going to cope with being trapped overseas for another 10 days, still very unwell and responsible for an also sick daughter, knowing nobody but the hospital doctors and nurses? . . . how was I going to pay for new flights home? Would I die on the flight home? . . . How could I heal (or even sleep) when I was so stressed and had to look after my daughter? Oh, God? Oh, God!

"Turns out God was there all along, even when I wasn't asking for Him. He is a God of miracles, after all.

"With no energy nor voice, I posted on my Facebook page to let family and friends know what was happening. All I could think, was that I was going to die and leave my precious daughter alone. And then, finally, I prayed. It was a very short prayer. 'God, please help.'

"On the second night of Gabi's illness, when the painkillers were not working and I wanted her to return to the ED but she refused to go without me, God sent me two nurses who don't normally work on that ward. But they were short of staff, so some Paediatric trained nurses were given the shift. Legally, they were allowed to check Gabi over, and they did. They promised to look after her and on the seventh night, I finally rested.

"God then sent in the hospital social worker, Kari, a beautiful soul. She soothed and spent time with my daughter, liaised with my travel insurance company, which promised to pay upfront for hotel accommodation, a hire car and flights home (and arranged them all), plus had its medical assist nurses call me every day to check in. They also reassured me that all my medical bills would be covered.

"God wasn't finished, though. A message came through from a friend I had gone to school with . . . now living in the United States with his American wife. He had seen my Facebook post and wanted to know what he could do to help.

"Just pray, please,' I really couldn't think of anything else.

"The next day he messaged again, saying, 'Ok we are doing some things and we know you will object because you are

so independent but just promise me you will just go with them, ok?'. Ok. I was too weak to protest."

The "things" their friend was doing was to call a small Baptist church some 3400km away to see if someone could help. How did they pick our church? How did they know that there would be someone in the church to answer their call? Only God knows.

I took the call and went to the hospital.

I didn't think I could do much. I held their hands and prayed with them. I asked them if they needed money. Our church could help, and their American friends said they could send money too. "No," Karen said.

We exchanged contact info and I took a picture (above) so that we could pray for them. I assured them that I would keep in contact with them and that they were no longer alone in a strange country.

Karen: "Oh, God. How was so much kindness coming our way? Suddenly, we both felt warm...and so very loved. Not just by Laurie, but by God who had sent him. We also had a message from the church's youth pastor, Jenny."

I went home wondering what this was all about. I was exhausted from work and grief, I had too much to do, I didn't have the energy to take on something else with Randy away.

But over the next few days I texted Karen to see how they were doing. They were slowly recovering, but were worried about leaving the hospital. . . . were they really healed?

They were finally released and moved to the hotel the insurance company was paying for.

Grace Wulff and I met them at the hotel and took them to lunch. We prayed with them and gave them a gift card.



Gabi, Karen, Laurie and Grace

They took some short trips to see our part of the country, then on Sunday joined us in our worship service.

Karen relates, "As we walked in, the band played our two favourite songs. Oh, God. After our time in the desert, we

were home. Home in God's international church. After the service, we found ourselves surrounded by ladies offering us dinners, lunches and even nursing services. For the first time during our ordeal, we didn't feel alone. We felt loved. By God and His people."

I told them about the "Jesus Revolution" movie that was playing at a local theatre that afternoon. Karen wrote, "We attended, and cried and laughed and cried and were educated about the hippie movement and the Christian churches that came out of it, in America in the 1970s. After watching it, Gabi told me she wanted to go back to our church when we got home."

"We drove to the cross-country ski club to buy a souvenir and there we finally met Jenny, the youth minister, who happened to work there in the store and had been steadfastly encouraging us via messages each day. We spoke a lot about God while buying that souvenir! And Jenny said she had been praying for us. A new friendship was made."



Gabi, Jenny, Karen

Jenny, my son, Dan, and I met with Karen and Gabi for brunch the day they flew home. I related to them how the past two weeks had changed my life. My grief no longer weighed as heavy on me, though there were still times when I felt the pain of loss. I told them that meeting them,



Dan, Laurie, Jenny, Gabi, Karen

helping them and getting to know them made me feel like there was hope to make it through. I felt new life in my soul.

We have kept in touch through texting and Facebook. We have shared our struggles, my grief and Karen's ongoing health issues. They are amazing musicians and as I have expressed my pain they have sung to me, sending me videos of their beautiful voices in song, which have helped me so much with my healing.

As I write this, spring is on hand, warm and sunny, while Karen and Gabi are revelling in the first snowfalls of their upcoming winter season. Both are avid outdoors people and they love winter sports, hence their trip to Canada to enjoy our much deeper snow and longer season. They want to come back in January for a month. And I, who hates traveling, want to go to Australia. Go figure?!

Karen has become my Aussie coach, encouraging me long distance in so many ways, especially that I had to get out of my recliner, in which I seemed to have become stuck, and do some walking at least, and how Gail would want me to and would be out there walking with me. Suddenly I felt empowered by Karen's "bossy coach" ways, and have begun to feel better than I have for at least four years, physically and emotionally. Her inspiration led me to tackle and conquer the 282 step staircase known locally as the "Stairway to Heaven." She's a great coach! I realized that I'd better do as she says because when I go visit them they want to take me on long term winter camping trips.

So did Gabi's wish come true, did they return to their church? I'll let Karen tell us, "We decided to go back to church on Sunday. Having been away so long, it was scary – would we be judged for having left and stayed away? I was excited to share the news with Laurie, as it seemed we were now his adopted Australian Christian family and he said he would pray for us.

"We went back to church. Still not 100 per cent well, but at peace. God's people welcomed us lovingly. No questions, no judgement. We were restored, forgiving, forgiven."

So – being in the office on a Saturday, a random call from Tennessee, Randy away so I had to make a visit to the hospital, Paediatric trained nurses, Kari, the social worker, Grace and Jenny, our church ladies, Jesus Revolution, restoration to their church – what does it all mean? Was it just chance? What do you think?

Karen, Gabi and I truly believe this was orchestrated by our loving God, bringing us together from across the world in both our times of need. And we continue to praise him for the restoration and healing that has happened. We have gained dear friends from another continent and our lives have been utterly changed.