



GTFBM

Gather The Fragments Bible Mission

Stephen & Laura Holt
Sierra Leone, West Africa

SPECIAL UPDATE: MAY 2018

To our Faithful Prayer Partners and Financial Supporters:

We rejoice bring you the final report regarding Laura's health as well as the outcome this has for the GTF Mission.

On Tuesday, March 27, Dr. vanLoveren, chair of the school of neurology at University South Florida, Tampa, gave us the startling, though not entirely unexpected news that he was recommending a complete decompression surgery of Laura's hind brain and upper spinal cord. This was to also include the opening of the dura — the cushioning membrane between the brain and the skull — to put in a new "expansion" patch. This would be Laura's second such surgery, the first of which was 21 years ago and came with a very protracted and difficult recovery. Needless to say she was not eager to consent to this course of treatment. Seeking God's wisdom in this weighty matter, we counseled with our pastor and it was decided that Laura would be anointed and prayed for by the elders of the church in accordance with James 5:14-15. This was administered before the church on April 1, Resurrection Sunday, with prayer for wisdom for us and the doctor along with the request that our risen Lord would, through faith, raise Laura above the circumstances in the manner which He deemed best and most glorifying to Himself.

The week following the anointing, we received a call from the doctor's office fully expecting that we were going to be scheduling surgery. However, we were informed that Dr. vanLoveren needed another consultation with us which was set for May 15. During the intervening weeks we sought the Lord for wisdom and were never settled that surgery was the route to take; Laura praying specifically that she simply be allowed to manage her symptoms as she has been. We went into our May 15 appointment prepared to tell the doctor we would only choose surgery if he felt any neurological damage would be incurred by not having it done.

Dr. vanLoveren explained that after his review of the final set of images he was completely changing his recommendation. He explained that there are a minority of Chiari Malformation patients whose *symptoms* present as requiring further surgery and yet their *images* all indicate the contrary; Laura is in that minority. The doctor plainly stated that there is no way to explain this dichotomy of facts, freely admitting that there's much about the human body that medical science cannot explain. He also said that Chiari Malformation is little understood and its scope of symptoms is not fully known. As an instructor, Dr. vanLoveren said he would use Laura's images as an example of a proper and successful surgery yet he would point to the patient as an example of a failed, poorly done surgery! He told us that there is a more radical school of thought which suggests an unorthodox surgery involving the cauterizing of the cerebellar tonsils to shrink them thereby creating more room at the narrowing of the skull base. He does not subscribe to that thinking but would do this radical surgery if we wanted to go that route fully disclosing that it would truly be experimental. We gave him an emphatic No! The doctor also feels that the repeated tropical fevers Laura has experienced over the last nine years, and especially the cerebral malaria in January 2017, have contributed to the trauma of her brain, exacerbating her pre-existing symptoms.

His solution? Dr. vanLoveren wants Laura to continue managing her symptoms just as she has been, which is exactly what she prayed for! This management includes a lot of rest, a minimizing of her activities, coupled with continuing under the supervision of her current pain management doctor and general practitioner; we will not need to see him again unless she takes another serious downturn. He said to expect that she may continue to slowly improve or she may plateau at any point; only time will tell. Lastly, he plainly told us that *no damage will be done* to her hind brain and upper spinal cord — the final confirmation that we will not be pursuing the risky route of surgery.

THE OUTCOME FOR GTF MISSION: As we drove the three hour ride home from Tampa we had much rejoicing and a lot of information to digest. The immediate impact on the future of the mission became obvious to us: we could begin to plan my return to Sierra Leone. As of the writing of this letter we are prayerfully considering an October departure. In the mean time I will be arranging for the shipment of a few crates of teaching and evangelism materials. During my absence our men, both local and circuit churches, have continued with evangelism and we're nearly out of materials. We've received several special requests for the very popular "Essence of Christianity" booklet written by our pastor and our inventory of that title is completely exhausted. Also, I will immediately be starting a semester of training at our Bible Institute in Baomahun, our home village, and am in need of textbooks for that effort. The next several months will be spent in gathering these materials and making all of the necessary arrangements, both here and in Sierra Leone, for their shipment.

On the State-side home front I'm implementing several changes to Laura's studio which will enable her to more comfortably continue producing artwork for our evangelism; both large-scale works as well as wordless booklets will be her area of focus. In the last several weeks Laura and I had begun to explore the possibility of printing her large-scale work on fabric. The Lord has given clear guidance in this area as I was recently introduced to a brother at a Bible Conference in Georgia, who, upon learning of our large-scale work, has marvelously offered to work with us in producing these open-air preaching aids making them much more durable and portable. Our current format of pastel on paper renders Laura's efforts unusable after only one dry season evangelism circuit. We're very excited about this contact, *no chance meetings*, and will be sending some proof work to this brother soon so we can get the ball rolling and include some of these in our shipping crates. The added benefit is that as subsequent work is completed, these are easily shipped to Sierra Leone through the mail system.

I know many of you are wondering so I'll answer the obvious question: Laura will not be returning to Sierra Leone with me at this time and perhaps not ever. The physical strains of living in a bush village are too much for her right now and would be extremely counterproductive to her improvement. Other considerations include the inability to obtain her medications as well as the very high risk of further infection of malaria or dengue fever. We take all proper precautions but none of that is a 100% guarantee that one will not be infected. We have carefully sought the Lord's guidance and believe that He has asked us to make this commitment to Him. And we both believe that if He asks that is enough. It's significant to note that each of us came to this on our own through prayer and fasting without the influencing emotions from the other. Yes, it's a difficult decision that comes with a cost but our Savior has asked and He is worthy. At this time we have set no specific time frame for my next return to the States but we're looking at 18-24 months. Nothing more than our armed forces are asked to serve during time of war.

We do very humbly and gratefully thank each one of you for your prayers; that alone is a significant gift to us. Thank you also for your faithful financial support and your confidence to entrust us with that gift as well. We remain your servants and voice to the people of Sierra Leone.

Because He is Worthy

Stephen & Laura Holt

For questions or other concerns please contact me at the following:

Temporary State-side phone contact: 386-624-8370

GatherTheFragments@outlook.com