

Safe Harbor

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Pastor Gary Kusunoki flying high over the Sudan.



Pastor Tim Frasier listens as a group of pastors sing praise songs prior to the team's departure.

TREMBLING GROUND startled Senior Pastor Gary Kusunoki from his sleep on January 17, 1994. Turning on the television, he and the world learned that Southern California had suffered an earthquake. News reports flashed pictures of thousands of displaced, homeless, and injured people. Fires broke out,

cars were overturned, and freeways and bridges were demolished. With the images of devastation burdening his heart, Pastor Gary prayed, "Lord, help them." His church, CC Rancho Santa Margarita, was just 2 years old, had 50 members, and had no building or office of its own. It seemed that surely they were too small to make a difference. As Pastor Gary gathered his elders to pray, they felt a clear calling from the Lord to help. "We understood that if God is calling us, He is going to provide all we need to do His will," explained Pastor Gary. They felt God tell them to start with what they had. The church's two phone lines quickly became toll-free hotlines for 24-hour prayer and donations of goods and services. KWVE, a California-based Calvary Chapel radio station, broadcasted the hotline numbers, and secular

radio and television quickly did likewise. For three months, CC Rancho Santa Margarita aided over 25,000 earthquake victims with cooperation from 200 churches and 600 volunteers.

"After the relief effort was over, we ended up with goods spread out over three warehouses, so we knew that God wasn't done...He must have other work for us to do. So, we began to wait on the Lord," Pastor Gary said.

In June 1994, Pastor Gary and his wife, Carol, began to hear about the tensions and genocide in Rwanda. One night on the news, Carol Kusunoki saw a bulldozer inadvertently push a live baby into a mass grave with a pile of corpses. As she saw a woman jump into

the grave to save the child, Carol's heart was broken. "If those were our children...I would want someone to come from anywhere to care for them...just to hold them while they died. We need to go."

Knowing that an aid relief organization would gain greater acceptance in Rwanda than a church, CC Rancho Santa Margarita's outreach arm became Safe Harbor International Relief. A team of three was organized to bring infant goods to orphanages in Rwanda. By July, they were bringing aid to Rwandan orphans.

In 1995, victims of another earthquake burdened Safe Harbor's heart. This time Kobe, Japan, was devastated and in need of aid. Safe

Harbor responded by shipping 21 tons of supplies in a donated plane.

Soon, Safe Harbor was ministering in 20 countries, including Uganda, Nicaragua, Kosovo, Romania, Israel, Vietnam, Angola, the Dominican Republic, Asia, and the Sudan.

Safe Harbor's primary area of focus has become the war-torn, anti-Christian Sudan with as many as 50 teams having been sent there. This Muslim nation of 4.5 million is torn apart by a religiously fueled civil war. The primarily Islamic north has systematically induced famine, starvation, and death upon millions. Christians in the southern Sudan are threatened with torture, mutilation, and death if they do not

reject Christ and convert to Islam. Villages are burned, women and children are forced into slave labor, and pastors have been crucified. Yet, little is known in the United States about the persecution of Sudanese Christians.

While passing through Uganda on a mission trip in 1995, Safe Harbor missionaries were approached by a group of Sudanese refugees with some piercing questions. They wanted to know why American Christians were not coming to help them. "Surely our story is on the news everyday! Why don't American Christians care about us? Aren't we your Christian brothers and sisters?" This was the first time the Safe Harbor missionaries had heard of the atrocities in the Sudan. Since then, Safe Harbor has witnessed them firsthand.

"Our goal in the Sudan and other areas is not to bring about a political change. It's not to stop the war or even the persecution. It is to share the love of Christ—to let people know that they have not been forgotten and that we are willing to stand alongside them in the midst of their suffering," said Pastor Gary. "Jesus's ministry was always to the least, the last, and the lost. That is where we are called. We're not looking to change situations; we are looking to change hearts. The material relief we bring is a physical representation of God's love for them. We are always asked by the people we are ministering to, 'Why are you doing this?' We tell them it is because Jesus loves them and so do we."



Preparing to preach. Safe Harbor teams make the most of every opportunity.

The teams sent by Safe Harbor consist of those who feel directly called by the Lord to go. Often doctors, nurses, and pastors, as well as lay people from all over the country, team up on 2-week trips. Once in a country, teams meet with local leaders to discern where help is most needed. The teams begin by building relationships through meeting physical needs. Although the purposes for the trips vary from bringing supplies and relief to infrastructure support or pastoral training, the primary mission remains to bring the Gospel. After the team has begun to bring relief, they begin to share the message of salvation and show the Jesus film. Countless have come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Safe Harbor teams often leave the United States uncertain of how the mission trip will unfold. Due to danger in some areas, Safe Harbor frequently cannot announce their plans or itinerary in advance. Some trips, particularly those to the Sudan, are taken with the understanding that team members may not return alive.

“When we go into southern Sudan, we are basically violating the Sudanese government’s air space. If they catch you in their air space, they’re more than happy to shoot you down,” said Pastor Gary.

Speaking of the Lord’s guidance, provision, and protection in such dangerous areas, Pastor Gary says, “The only way I can describe the way God has moved is to use the term ‘Old Testament miracles.’ He has held back rain, diverted enemies, healed the sick, protected the weak, preserved His servants, and brought us safely home. And He has done so time after time.”

Supported by donations, Safe Harbor publishes a magazine, “Fellowship of Suffering,” to educate the church body of the needs of the persecuted church and encourage them to pray. The magazine details Safe Harbor’s activities and shares



Bill Agius teaches pastors in the Nuba Mountains. These men listened for three days, eight hours per day, in 100-degree heat.

personal testimonies of those touched through the ministry.

Overwhelmed by how God has worked, Safe Harbor has begun a book, *Fellowship of Suffering*, detailing their trips. Pastor Gary and co-author Lela Gilbert explain Safe Harbor International’s history and share personal stories of Safe Harbor missionaries and their experiences, including how the Kusonukis have adopted two children, Faith and Rebecca, as a result of their involvement with Safe Harbor.

The following stories are taken from Safe Harbor’s book, *Fellowship of Suffering*.

Lord, Please Bring the Plane

The minute we hit the ground the aircraft began to fishtail. If you’ve ever been in an out-of-control car, you can imagine the feeling you get when a turbo-prop plane starts to spin out. I grabbed the seat and hung on, while the pilot frantically feathered the left and right engines to keep us going in the right direction. We finally came to a stop and quickly exited the plane. The pilot came out to talk to us, and I noticed that his face was pale and beaded with sweat. “I have good news and bad news,” he announced. “The good news is we are still

alive. The bad news is I don’t know if we can get out of here. And if we do, I’m not coming back for awhile.”

“If you’re planning on leaving anytime soon, you’ll need to head out with me now. You can’t stay.” Ed and I looked at each other, not entirely surprised by this turn of events. It hadn’t taken us long to learn that nothing about flying into the no-fly zone in southern Sudan is predictable.

“Well, then we’d better go,” I said to Ed, as calmly as possible. Ed shook his head. “No. We can’t go. We have to do what we came to do. We just need to trust the Lord.”

Ed was right. “We’re staying,” I told the pilot. “Okay, fine,” he shrugged, “but it’s very important for you to know that if it rains anytime between now and tomorrow, I won’t be able to land, and if I don’t come back for you tomorrow, I won’t be back for 15 days. You’ll be on your own.” It gave me a strange feeling, watching the plane grow smaller, eventually disappearing into the scorching African sky. What if it never came back?

The air was so incredibly hot that it was difficult to breathe, and it was still late morning. I had never been in heat like that in my life, and the temperature continued to rise relentlessly throughout the afternoon. We made our way to a village about half a mile from the airport, where we talked to the village leaders, who wanted us to walk “two or three miles” further to another village to deliver some of our supplies there. We soon learned that their idea of measurement was a little different from ours. We managed to deliver the food, Bibles, and various supplies we’d brought, and then headed back to our camp.

It was the rainy season, so right about five o’clock that evening

the rains returned. It looked like a moving waterfall coming toward us—a virtual wall of water. Right in front of the wall of water was an incredible wind that was literally ripping the rooftops off the huts. The only good thing was that the temperature had dropped. “Is this a normal wind?” I asked one of the Africans who was with us. “I’ve never seen a wind like this,” he told me, his eyes wide with amazement. The wind howled eerily while the rain soaked everything. We began to walk back to camp, and as we walked, we noticed a very strange thing. Despite the torrential downpour pounding the earth all around us, there was always a blue patch of sky above us. It was raining everywhere except where we were walking. Even when we cut left or right, still it didn’t rain on us.

The first thing I said when I woke up the next morning was, “Lord, please bring the plane.” At about the time the plane was supposed to arrive, an incredible dust storm kicked up. I quickly changed my prayer to, “Please stop the dust storm—the plane is not going to be able to land!” My already dim hopes for departure were nearly gone. Just then we heard the plane coming, and with grateful hearts we watched it land. We rushed out to the airstrip, stunned to realize that the ground wasn’t the least bit muddy. The dirt on which the plane rested was rock hard and dry as a bone. Those strange winds had even dried out yesterday’s mud.

The airstrip was the only place in the whole area that was dry. It had rained everywhere but there. We knew it was a miracle, and even the pilots said it was unexplainable. As they’d flown in, they hadn’t thought they could land because there were puddles everywhere. “But when we got over the airstrip,” one of them explained to us, “we could see that it was dry and everything else was wet.” I remarked, “I wasn’t as worried about puddles as I was worried about the dust.” “Are you kidding?” the pilot laughed. “We love the dust! The government garrison is only about 13 miles away. When there’s dust blowing, they can hear the plane but they can’t see it. They don’t know where to shoot!” He explained that the intense rains had also kept the troops from moving because their vehicles couldn’t make it through the deep, sticky mud.

I’m glad God doesn’t always listen to me. I had been praying for the rain and the dust to stop, and He was using both to protect us.

Rwandan Orphans

Nobody knew where the orphanages were. We hurried from one agency to another to register, trying to locate just one facility that was sheltering babies. The relief agency locations were nothing more than tables set up here and

there. Someone suggested we go to a UNICEF location we hadn’t been to before. There we met an American woman named Carol, who was extremely flustered.

“We’re looking for an orphanage that needs some help. We have several boxes of relief supplies, and we want to deliver them, but we don’t know where to go.” Like all the other agency representatives we’d talked to, Carol’s thoughts were scattered, and she shook her head. “We really don’t know about any orphanages. If you find one, let me know.”

We were about to leave when she suddenly called out to us. “Wait a minute! I just remembered. A woman came in here about an hour ago, told us there is an orphanage in Kayonza, and gave us directions to it. She said it was about 60 miles out of town.” The woman found a note on which someone had scribbled the name of the man in charge of the orphanage. “I think the woman said they have about 120 children and a lot of small babies, and they need food and things for babies. If you go, let us know what you find.”

Feeling great excitement at doing what we’d come to do, we made our way to Kayonza. Hearts pounding, we approached the gate. A man appeared, and after we explained why we’d come, he invited us inside. “How did you find us?” he asked me. “The woman you sent to Kigali arrived an hour before we did. She told the UNICEF people about your orphanage and that you needed food. You’re Mr. Kaliste Kalimabwo, right?” He nodded, a puzzled look on his face. “Yes, I’m Kaliste, but I never sent anyone to Kigali,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s impossible. I didn’t have anyone to send. The last NGO (non-government agency) brought some supplies to us a month ago, but nobody has been here since. You know, Kigali could be the other side of the world for all the contact we have there. We have no way to get there.” Carol, Ron, and I looked at each other, awed by the miracle. We were all thinking the same thing. “Well, praise the Lord,” I finally said, “It must have been an angel.”



Pastor Gerardo Camarena puts his previous medical training to use on a malaria victim.

There were small infants as well as children up to 13 years old. One baby cried constantly, never stopping the entire day we were there. She had a little white spot on her head, and Kaliste explained that it was the result of malnutrition. She was fragile; her little arms were so skinny I felt that if I picked her up she would break. We unloaded the baby bottles and formula. We tried to show the workers at the home how to use the bottles, but the babies and toddlers weren’t interested in them. They had been taken away from their mothers very early and had been drinking out of cups since they were four or five months old. They didn’t know what a bottle was, and they wanted nothing to do with it.

It was quite muddy there and we took pictures of their water barrel, which was so dirty we didn’t even want to put our hands in it. It contained the filthy water they used for both drinking and washing. The orphanage had a little room that we used for a medical clinic. Children came with cuts or sores, so we dispensed Neosporin and Band-Aids like crazy.

Kaliste is a highly intelligent man. He was London-educated and spoke English very well. He had five surviving daughters; he'd lost two sons during the war as they ran through a field trying to escape from a mob. He was not a Christian, but his heart was full of compassion. He would leave his wife and home for a week or so at a time and come and take care of those kids.



Safe Harbor feeding center, Tonj. Some of these children walked for days to come here.



Pastor Tim Frasier, CC Costa Mesa, CA, helps distribute food.

There were other workers from the town too, paid women as well as a handful of volunteers. Time flew by, and we weren't able to spend as many hours with the kids as we wanted that first day. "We'll come back tomorrow and bring some more things," I promised Kaliste.

That night when we got back to our warehouse, we noticed that a big shipment of fruit and vegetables had come in. That was good news as far as we were concerned. The children in the orphanage desperately needed fresh produce.

The next morning bright and early we went to the warehouse supervisor and told him about the orphanage. "Can we take some food for the kids?" we asked. At first he said no. But

as we were leaving, he stopped us. "Can you use cabbage?" Then he pointed to a mound of the biggest watermelons I have ever seen. "Go ahead and take a couple of crates of watermelons.

Sorry," he said, "but I can't give you anything else."

We were walking away when he said, "Could you use some potatoes or carrots?" Minutes later, the same man walked up to us and said, "Listen, do you want some tomatoes?"



This girl uses a bent piece of metal to hold her food. The desperation in the Sudan is overwhelming.

Before we knew what was happening, he had a guy with a forklift drop one huge crate of tomatoes into the truck, which was beginning to sag beneath all the weight.

By the time we left, we had apples, raisins, and watermelons—things the kids had never even seen before. And we knew very well that God had done it all. With great joy, we drove the 60 miles from Kigali to the orphanage for the second time and began to unload the pile of provisions we'd been given for the children.

We couldn't speak the language of the children, but it was fun to try to talk to them. We showed them how to wash their hands with soap and brush their teeth with toothbrushes. We gave them filters so they could purify their water. The baby who had been crying the day before was not crying so much by then. The women had managed to get a little food into her empty stomach, and her cry was less persistent and hollow.



Jim Prunty teaches a group of pastors in the Nuba Mountains. Pastoral training is an invaluable source of encouragement to these men.

A small boy had been brought in that morning wearing a hooded coat. All we could see was his dark, sorrowful face. He'd been found in the nearby bush area by the guards, wide-eyed and sad. We told him about Jesus and sang some songs for him. After he'd been there a couple of hours, he began to smile. And by the time we left, he had a big smile on his face. It was amazing to see God's love at work in his life.

After a number of trips to the Rwandan orphanage, Safe Harbor witnessed all of the children accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as well as Kaliste Kalimabwo, the orphanage overseer. 🙏

Safe Harbor International Relief is a nonprofit organization and an extension of Calvary Chapel Rancho Santa Margarita. Safe Harbor International Relief can be reached at: (800) 797 HOPE or P.O. Box 80820 Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688