

## Baffling Detours / Astonishing Breakthroughs

Ever since the Book of Acts, God's ambassadors have confronted both. He's spurring them to stay flexible, and reminding them who's in charge.

How does God superintend the advance of his kingdom? Occasionally he spurs us on by creating an astonishing breakthrough. More often he disrupts his disciples' carefully laid plans by setting up baffling detours, prodding them to move in more fruitful directions.

**Breakthroughs?** Take an Asian nation whose secretive government has sealed its people off from the rest of the world, including from any gospel witness. Until this year, the only semi-viable approach has been to place workers near its borders, interacting with those exiting and re-entering the country. That is an approach that College Church has taken, sponsoring James and Meghan\*, now located in a bordering Asian country, where James is helping prepare a public health curriculum for possible eventual use in this closed neighboring country.

But also hovering near the border has been an educational program for teaching English. It developed such a good reputation that officials of the country invited it to conduct university classes right in its capitol.

**John\***, whose family moved to Wheaton and College Church while he was a student at Wheaton College, heard about the opening for teachers while pursuing the college's graduate course in teaching English as a second language (TESOL). He applied to teach a summer course in academic English, and was able to make a visit to the capitol last October. John was not only accepted, but invited to teach for a full year!

John taught a summer class to 25 freshman students. He is a young teacher—one to whom the students, although shy, are eager to relate. Now he is launching into the fall semester. It hasn't been easy living in a society where he has found the social life to be non-existent, and where there's been so little meat in his diet that he's experienced serious weight loss. But what a unique opening!

**How about detours?** After retiring from a career in missions in Africa and then with World Relief here, **Cecil and Joan C.** decided to devote their senior years to service in Indonesia. They served as teachers and house parents for an MK school for five years. But Indonesian teachers, who are required to retire at age 62, complained about the ability of expatriates to teach longer. The government responded by denying visas to teachers 62 or older, and that disqualified them.

But an Indonesian Christian foundation sponsors a "conversation station," conducting private one-on-one sessions in which people who have a basic understanding of textbook English can develop practical conversational skills—and income from the station is used for compassionate community ministries. Cecil's journalistic background and laid-back manner suited him perfectly for this role, in which age presented no obstacle. The conversation sessions have presented him with opportunities, when asked, to discuss his faith with his

mostly Muslim students. What is more, workshops that Cecil and Joan have conducted for local teachers of English have so helped them that the local Muslim university has offered—should that service ever be required—to sponsor their visas.

**Lance and Julie Clemens** served for five years with Greater Europe Mission (GEM) in Bulgaria. During their first three years they served primarily in the Christian community—Lance teaching theological English at the United Theology Faculty, and Julie doing various kinds of disability ministry.

But as their relationships with non-Christians expanded, the Clemenses began seeing more results from creating discipleship groups among them. These began to multiply; a few started functioning as churches. So they shifted their efforts to creating a non-profit organization with a for-profit company to ease their entry into sectors of Bulgaria with no evangelical presence. What happened, though, was that their attempt to register this organization was rejected and rendered their visas invalid, leading to their expulsion last December.

The unexpected return proved to be a wonderful provision for the College Church STARS ministry, allowing Julie to step in as interim director while Dawn Clark takes the six-month sabbatical to which she is entitled.

The path forward was less clear for Lance. But when their colleague Michelle Asbill (also ejected from Bulgaria) went to explore study possibilities at the University of Illinois, Lance tagged along. He discovered that students selected for a master's degree program on the European Union could qualify for a study expenses stipend. In addition, the European Union program could be combined with an MBA program, with both completed in two years. Lance had three days to get his application in for the European Union program. He did—and was accepted! And GEM endorsed his new study plans.

Since then, Lance has spent a couple of months boning up for taking his GRE, and began auditing Bruce Howard's Wheaton College economics class.

The year ahead will be tricky. Their older daughter, Taylor, has just entered Wheaton College as a freshman. Their younger daughter, Lauren, enrolled at Franklin Middle School, needs to remain here with Julie for this school year, while Lance relocates to Champaign/Urbana. Next year Julie will rejoin Lance downstate, while Lauren may be the first to return to Europe, beginning her high school studies at Black Forest Academy.

Lance and Julie are convinced that the way is opening for them to gain access to non-Christians in Bulgaria and beyond, working with existing businesses while concentrating on evangelism and discipleship. This is largely uncharted territory, but GEM plans to deploy Lance as a leader for a cluster of countries in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

**Dale\*** was a member of the first China Study Team sent out by College Church in 2009. The study teams' focus has been on taking Chinese language classes in schools to which the Chinese government brings Turkic people from Western China to acquire fluency in Chinese. These are Muslims, and the study teams have focused on befriending and initially exposing them to the gospel.

**Lydia\*** is a sister of a roommate of Dale's while he was at Wheaton College. Her brother urged Lydia to get acquainted with Dale, and facilitated her initial correspondence with him. By then Dale had returned to China in a career capacity. Lydia's linguistic skills and missions interest were centered on Russia, but an exceptional situation in her family rendered it inadvisable for her to locate there. That helped her to contemplate focusing elsewhere. She visited Dale in China and they were engaged.

But for the next couple of years, the security situation involving Lydia's family ruled out the China option, as well. But the Turkic people on which Dale was focusing spill over into the Central Asian country of "Namestan." So instead of returning to China, after their marriage in early 2012, they flew in June to Thailand, to spend a year with a team that is working with Scripture translation, evangelistic resources, and discipleship materials in the language of their target group, and is headed by an experienced "Namestan" missionary.

After a year there, Dale and Lydia have been invited to join a church planting team in "Namestan," with its Muslim population of over 24 million. After a couple of years there, entry into China should pose no problem for Lydia. But this divinely engineered detour—whether temporary or permanent—has already proven beneficial.

**Joel and Violet\*** had an unusually productive first term in Vietnam, not only rapidly grasping the language, but winning acceptance as a facilitator for pastoral education by both the government and the country's major evangelical denomination (launched more than a century ago by the Christian and Missionary Alliance). Joel also managed to publish a theological wordbook in Vietnamese, and became a trusted intermediary between the church's senior but less educated leadership and its better educated but under-utilized younger pastors.

Joel and Violet returned for an extended furlough in 2009 to equip Joel to help develop theological education in Vietnam by earning a PhD in Old Testament studies. He graduated this summer and was also ordained at College Church before a planned August return with their two boys, 7 and 5, to Vietnam—if their visas materialized. Remarkably, Joel received an invitation from a university in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) to do research on Christianity in Vietnam and, through its Religious Studies Center, to teach the material pertaining to Christianity and the Bible.

Their plans were abruptly interrupted when the renal failure of Violet's younger married brother triggered an urgent need for a replacement kidney—with Violet the only identified potential donor. The transplant was performed on September 7 at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor.

The outlines of a beneficial detour are emerging. The university in Vietnam will assure their visas. Meanwhile, Joel has accepted Singapore Bible College's invitation to teach Old Testament there for one or two years, while its O.T. profs are on sabbatical or home assignment. This arrangement will allow Violet to recover fully in a place with world-class hospitals. Joel can still travel to Vietnam regularly to maintain projects already begun. And when they do arrive back in Vietnam, Joel, a seasoned professor, will be accorded even more respect by the church hierarchy.

Of course, we may not be able to promptly discern the reasons behind detours God allows—sometimes never. **Melissa\*** provides a current example. During her first term overseas, this worker, sponsored by one of our daughter churches, got a solid grasp of Arabic and began a ministry to women in Damascus, Syria. Although some of her team left as conflict commenced, she stuck it out until her visa was about to expire in April. When she recently sent her passport in to the Syrian embassy for a new visa, however, it was returned with no visa—and no explanation.

Will the situation settle down enough for Melissa's team to reform and work in a neighboring country with displaced Syrians? Or will she need to look for a new team in a new country that is also working to plant churches among unreached Muslim communities?

In each of these situations—and others like them—the challenge is for ongoing, earnest prayer to the God who sovereignly directs both detours and breakthroughs.

\*Not their actual name(s).