

Chapter 1

Taking Risks for God

by Bill Finnemore

In March 2022, I walked through cavernous halls inside a building designed for trade shows in Warsaw, Poland. But today, no companies filled the halls with their products. Russian forces had invaded Ukraine, the neighbouring country, just three weeks earlier. Thousands of women, children, and older men fleeing for days from the terror of war found themselves housed in this dark, dimly lit place, sleeping on cots, literally inches apart.

As I followed my guide, I was led to a large room set up as a refuge for the many children who found themselves there. Traumatized by the war and having said tearful goodbyes to fathers and older brothers left behind to fight, this was a place where healing could begin.

During that time, as I heard the stories from young mothers and the personal reports of seeing dead bodies at the side of the road while fleeing, tears filled my eyes. I wondered what we could do in this hellish reality. How did I ever end up here?



Massive trade show halls turned to sleeping quarters, March 2022

“Islands of Refuge” for children being housed in the cavernous halls of the trade show facility, March 2022



The Early Years

I was born in Toronto, Ontario. My earliest memories of my family include only my mother and younger brother since my father left us when I was young. I remember attending Sunday school at Avenue Road Church when A.W. Tozer was the pastor. Although he is recognized as a great theologian and prophetic preacher, my recollections are of this old guy talking loudly from the front. Then, as we left the sanctuary, he would slip me a candy from his pocket.

In Sunday school at the age of seven, my teacher, Miss Fern Sheepway, clearly explained the gospel message of the cross and God's gift of eternal life. At the end of the class, a little girl and I stayed behind, and, with the help of Miss Sheepway, I prayed, telling God I was a sinner and needed His forgiveness. I knew I was a Christian from then on and would go to Heaven when I died.

Around the same time, my mother re-married, and this man truly became my father. In a time when grace was in short supply for divorced people, my mom and new dad were able to create a home where I felt safe, secure, and loved.

Encounter With God

Two years after coming to Christ in my Sunday school class, my family moved to the suburbs of Toronto and began attending a church closer to home. By the time I was a teenager, while I knew I was a follower of Christ, I was not very impressed with other young people in the church we were attending. I remember thinking there were three types of young people who attended church: those who were boring, those who were hypocrites, and me.

At this point in my life, my grandmother wanted to pay my way to attend a summer teen camp at an Alliance Bible conference centre called Glen Rocks in Muskoka, Ontario. However, based on my assessment of church-attending young people, I was not too excited about the idea. But in the end, my mother convinced me to go.

My relationship with God deepened at camp, and my life direction was set. For the first time, I met other young people who truly loved God and were anything but boring. Each evening we would gather in the chapel. Then, about halfway through the week, at the close of the evening meeting, Dan Rinker, the speaker, invited us to go out from the chapel quietly and take some time alone to respond to God.

I remember walking across the grounds until I stood in the darkness among cedar trees. As I silently stood there, I had a longing in my heart for something more. I

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did not know what the “something” was, but I remember praying, “Lord, I know there must be something more to this Christian life, and so whatever it is, I want it.” At that moment, I physically felt the weight of God’s response fall on me. I immediately knew something had changed. I could not articulate it in theological terms, but now looking back, I realize it was an encounter with the Holy Spirit. I was changed.

After this encounter, two things changed in my life. The first was I returned to Avenue Road Church, where many of the youth I had gotten to know at the teen camp attended. The second change was a new purpose in attending my high school.

Returning to my school in the fall, I had a new passion for reaching the lost. My school of 1,600 students became my mission field. There was a small Inter-School Christian Fellowship group made up of ten girls and one lonely guy. They had previously tried to get me to join, but I had always resisted. Since they all came from a very conservative church where guys were told that if they were serious about following Jesus, they would never have long hair, and I had hair down past my shoulders, I think they saw me as a “project.” I remember thinking of them as the “secret society of the saints” as they would gather in a room at lunch for a Bible study. However, having had this encounter with God, I joined the group and challenged them to get out of the little room and have outreach events. By the end of that year, the group had grown to about 80. Seeing others come to Christ became my passion. As a result, I sensed a call in my life to pursue a vocation of Christian ministry. I was unsure in what capacity it would be, but I decided to go to Canadian Bible College (CBC) to prepare for whatever God had for me.

Canadian Bible College

In September 1975, I flew from Toronto to Regina, Saskatchewan, to begin my studies in preparation for future ministry. If Ray Matheson, the dean of men at that time, is reading this now, I am sure he is smiling at the previous sentence containing the word “studies.” During that first year at CBC, I, along with a few friends, pulled off so many practical jokes and stunts that I am sure many of the staff wondered what would ever become of us.

It was during these years that two significant things happened in my life. The first was that God began to guide me to overseas ministry. We were required to attend a missionary meeting each Friday evening. During these meetings, I saw the need for full-time workers in places far away. I did not know where but I knew it would be somewhere beyond North America.

The second thing to happen while at CBC was finding my life partner. I still remember seeing this girl, Diane Jabs, walking down the stairs at the front of the administration building. Upon seeing her, my first thought was, “Wow, wouldn’t she be nice to be with!” My second thought was, “She’s way too nice-looking to

be with a guy like me.” I was like a guy wanting to buy a car. It would be great to have a Mercedes, but he knows he can only afford a Chevy.

So, it was not until the end of the school year that I gained enough courage to ask Diane out for coffee (just coffee, no pie, since I didn’t have the money). It happened through our philosophy class. I really enjoyed this class, but Diane seemed to be struggling with the course. So, one evening in the library, I helped her prepare for the exam. (Funny thing was she got a much higher mark on the exam than I did!) Developing our relationship took a while, and I had to get another guy out of the competition, but eventually, I convinced Diane we should get married. And so, we did.

By the time we finished at CBC, we were convinced we were meant to serve somewhere overseas. The Alliance approved us for missionary service with our status as to where we might go marked as “open.”

Beaverlodge, Alberta

The next chapter in our story took us to Beaverlodge, Alberta. It was there that our first child, Paul, was born. While serving in Beaverlodge, I learned a lot about ministry and working with people from Pastor Ken Schamuhn, who had earlier in my life been my youth pastor. Others, such as the evangelist Neill Foster and Cecil Nichol, a godly farmer, were used by God to speak into my life.

One specific example standing out in my memory is a meeting I was called to one day by Neill Foster. As a young pastor, I was sometimes given the opportunity to preach. When I would stand in the pulpit and speak, I felt nervous and often prefaced my verbal statements with “I know I’m young but ...” and then made the proclamation from the Bible passage.

One day I received a call from Neill Foster asking me to drop by his office. When I arrived, I had no idea what he wanted to talk about. I expected it to be some light, pleasant conversation. However, as I entered his office and he asked me to sit down, I quickly saw from the expression on his face that this was something different. Looking me straight in the eye, addressing me as Pastor Billy, he told me that when I stand in the pulpit and open God’s Word, I was speaking as the Lord’s servant and must do so with authority. He then told me that if he ever heard me preface my statements with “I know I am young but ...” again, he would stand to his feet and publicly rebuke me. Needless to say, I listened because I knew he meant what he said. Having input like this equipped me further for ministry.

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While we were in Beaverlodge, our direction overseas became more specific. During this time, Jim Sawatsky was touring Canada with two young men from Zaire. Together they formed a music group called the Kinshasa Trio. Having heard about his tour, I invited them to Beaverlodge Alliance Church. As we listened to their music and visited with them, Diane and I decided to request that we be sent to Zaire. Once this request was approved, having served in Beaverlodge for two years, it was back to Regina to attend Canadian Theological Seminary (CTS) for one year studying missiology at the Master's level.

Canadian Theological Seminary (CTS)

My first year of studies at CTS was quite different from my first year at CBC. I was now married with one small child. Our focus for future ministry was specific, Zaire. With the love offering we received when we left Beaverlodge, I was able to pay the full tuition for the year. Diane cared for our son Paul while I studied. Our monthly income consisted of eight \$100 postdated cheques, for which \$62.00 went to our low-income rent.

Academically this was the most successful year of my student life. I knew that to get to Zaire, I needed to complete this Master's program. With this in mind, one of my greatest motivators regarding how I spent my time was fear that I wouldn't get it all done. I received a syllabus for each course during the first week of my studies. As I perused the reading and writing requirements, I realized this would require planning and discipline. With this in mind, I created a chart mapping out each day of the week in fifteen-minute increments. The result was that my days were full. Free time including meals, Monday to Saturday, was forty-five minutes in total. However, on Sundays, I took a sabbath rest and did not crack a book. Diane was a fantastic support for me during the year. The result of all of this was that I completed the program with almost straight A's.

Quebec City

Having completed my required studies at CTS and with Diane expecting our second child, we packed up the Volkswagen Rabbit with our one-and-a-half-year-old son and headed east to Quebec City for language study. When we arrived, Jesse and Anne Jespersen, who were serving there, welcomed us and helped us find an apartment and get set up. Our daughter Danielle was born five days before our language courses began at Université Laval. Diane started our language class with this little newborn baby sleeping in a snugly on her chest.

French was the first foreign language we would learn. Having failed French throughout high school, I knew it would be challenging. But now, the big difference was our motivation. We wanted to communicate. Jesse and Anne had previously

served for many years in Africa, so they were a great encouragement to us. They modelled for us what it meant to be passionate but at the same time not take yourself too seriously and always be willing to laugh at your mistakes. I still remember Jesse's parting words as we left Quebec City for Zaire. He came over to the car window and, with a big smile, said, "Try to have fun!" Oh, how I thought back on those words during the next couple of years when fun would be in very short supply.

Zaire, Central Africa



Our first home at Kinkonzi located in the rain forest of Lower Zaire, 1984

In 1983, having spent six weeks at the Toronto Institute of Linguistics (TIL) learning to learn a language without a language school, Diane and I finally arrived on Zairian soil. After landing in Kinshasa, we were flown to the city of Boma, where we were welcomed by the elderly president of the National Church, Rev. Konde Kuvuna.

After landing on a dirt landing strip, we were taken to the mission guest house with our two small children, where the

president spoke to us in Kikongo through a translator. He told us how thankful he was for us and then said that Zaire was now our country, the people of Zaire were our people, and the work was our work.

The final part of our journey would take us to the Kinkonzi mission station, where we used the techniques we had learned back at TIL to learn Kikongo.

Our third child, Rachael, was born during this time of language study. Unfortunately, these were challenging years due to sickness and lack of support from certain older missionaries who disagreed with our language-learning methods.

I had never been one to get depressed until this time, but I was ready to quit and go home. However, according to mission policy, if we did leave, we would be obligated to repay all the money spent on us, and we needed the funds. So, as time passed, I prayed every day to get sick enough that I would be required to return to Canada but not sick enough to die.

Finally, at the end of two years in Kinkonzi, we moved to the city of Matadi and served with Chris and Marcia Braun. At this point in our missionary experience, we needed something positive to happen in ministry; otherwise, we would not return after our first term. God used Chris and Marcia to give us this positivity.

An example of this was the day Chris and I were driving together to a meeting with pastors. As we drove along, Chris told me he thought I had a lot of *kimfusi*, which is the Kikongo word for enthusiasm. He then said that many older missionaries

don't like younger missionaries with too much *kimfusi*, but he did. He then asked what I wanted to do. I told him I would like to travel to several towns and villages to teach Christian workers Theological Education by Extension (TEE). To this, he responded by saying, "That's great! That's what you should do!" And so, he let me loose to begin teaching every week in five locations. This was one of the positive ministry experiences I needed. However, the story doesn't end there. A few years later, I discovered that when Chris had initially asked me what I would like to do, he himself had been preparing to set up the TEE classes. It was his desire, but he never even mentioned it to me since he wanted me to succeed.

After two years of ministry in Matadi, it was time to return to Canada for home assignment. During the year, I travelled to many churches for missionary conferences. While I was in Ottawa speaking, I received an invitation to have lunch with a Zairian gentleman who was posted to the Zairian embassy. This gentleman also happened to be the younger brother of the current vice president of Zaire. When I met with him over lunch, we had a great visit, and he invited me to come to his home, meet his family, and enjoy some good Zairian food. At the end of our visit, he gave me a sealed envelope along with contact information for his brother. He told me that if I ever needed help, to contact his brother and present this letter to him.

At the end of our home assignment, we returned to Zaire and were assigned to church planting in the capital city, Kinshasa. After we were settled, I thought about the letter to the vice president. I thought, "Wouldn't it sound great in our next prayer letter telling how I met with the vice president and prayed with him!" But God said NO! So, I put the letter away in my study and forgot about it.

One day while driving on the edge of Kinshasa, I discovered a whole new community being developed on the edge of the city. It was called Cité Mama Mobutu. This housing development was being built with three parties involved: The Mama Mobutu Ladies Foundation, a development company, and the construction company. This community was to be for the French-speaking middle class.

As I looked at this community, I observed there were no plans for a church; I became convinced we should plant a French-speaking church there. But we needed a team. With this in mind, I approached my fellow missionary Jim Sawatsky who was older and more experienced than I. I knew Jim well enough to know he tended to take his marching orders directly from God. So, I wasn't sure what his response would be. But God had already been preparing Jim for this.

Just before returning to the field while praying with some family members about future ministry, someone shared with Jim and his wife Dawn a mental picture which had come to mind while they were praying. They said it was the picture of a low-lying white building on top of a hill surrounded by pine trees. At the time, Jim thought, "Pine trees in Zaire? Strange."

When I approached Jim about forming a team to plant a church, I told him I had found a social club with a large meeting room we could rent. Jim agreed to let

me take him to see the place. As we drove up the hill and approached the club, he laughed out loud and said he couldn't believe it! I did not understand why he reacted this way since we had not yet entered the building. But as we approached the club, Jim saw a low-lying white building on top of the hill surrounded by tall pine trees. This was God's confirmation, and so Jim had his marching orders.

Within a very short time, we had a new congregation of 200 meeting every week. The Alliance Canada, due to generous giving that year, was able to make \$80,000 available to purchase land and build a church building. With these funds available to us, I approached the developer of this new community. At our first meeting, he introduced himself by saying his name and telling me he was Polish and an atheist. I responded by telling him my name, that I am Canadian, and a follower of Jesus Christ. This was how our negotiations began. I told him we wanted to buy land and build a 2000-seat church. However, the Polish atheist developer informed me we had to use their construction company, and with the funds we had, they could only construct a building to seat 400 people. This was not going to work for us.

Having hit this roadblock, we looked for any possible pieces of land near the community, allowing us to handle the construction ourselves. But everywhere we looked, there was nothing suitable. We had a growing congregation and money to build but no land. We were at a dead end.

But then I had an idea. I had approached the developer and tried to get through to him with no success. Unfortunately, the construction company had no authority. Therefore, I made an appointment to see the president of the Mama Mobutu Ladies Foundation to see if there was something she could do. After making the appointment, I learned something very significant. She was the wife of the vice president of Zaire! And I remembered the letter I had put away in my study.

On the day of the appointment, I sat in the outer office with about five other people waiting to be called in. As I waited, who should come barging into the office but the assistant of the Polish atheist developer. When I saw him, I tried not to be noticed, knowing he was against us. So, there I was, a white guy in a small office full of Zairians, "hiding" behind a small missions magazine I was pretending to read. As I silently sat there, he forcefully told the secretary he had to be admitted to see Mama President immediately. However, the secretary refused, saying, "You can't go in now because that white guy sitting over there has an appointment before you." As he looked at me, we politely greeted one another, and the room became silent until I was ushered in to meet with Mama President.

As I went in, I thanked her for taking the time to see me. I told her that as a leader, I believed she needed God's wisdom and presented her with a gift of the *JESUS* film on video cassette, for which she was grateful. Then I told her I had visited

and eaten good Zairian food in the home of her brother-in-law, at which point she smiled and seemed quite pleased. Finally, I gave her the letter addressed to her husband. She opened the letter and, after reading it carefully, asked me what she could do for me. I explained how the new Cite Mama Mobutu community had many houses and shops but no church building. I reminded her of the words of Jesus when he asked, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet lose their soul?” I told her of the new congregation and our desire to purchase land and build a church, but the developers refused to sell us land.

Having heard my story, she summoned the developer’s assistant and verbally ordered him to sell us the land we wanted and allow us to build. When he sheepishly replied to her, saying he would need more than just her verbal order, she summoned in her secretary and there, on the spot, dictated a written order. From then on, we were able to go on and begin the construction of a 2000-seat church.

Unfortunately, I never got to see the actual completion since, in September 1991, we were evacuated due to civil unrest. But God, in His providence, brought together others who completed the building, and the church grew.



Warsaw North Christian Fellowship
worship centre, March 2022



Worship at the Warsaw North Christian
Fellowship where services are in Polish,
Ukrainian and Russian, March 2022

From Zaire to Poland

When we were evacuated from Zaire in 1991, we fully expected to return to Africa. But God had another plan which could be described by the phrase, “And now for something completely different!”

The Alliance was opening a new field, so starting in 1994, we spent three years in Lublin, Poland, learning the language, developing relationships and researching to develop a plan for us as an Alliance team in this brand-new field.

Following those first three years in Poland, God had a slight detour for us. We were assigned to Black Forest Academy, where I became the pastor of the church attached to the school. While there, God blessed our ministry,

and the church grew from 200 students and 50 adults to 650, with people driving in from Switzerland, France, and the surrounding area in Germany. As much as we enjoyed our ministry, having been away from Canada for six years, it was time for a home assignment. As we returned to Canada, we had no idea God was planning something big to take our ministry to a whole new level of fruitfulness.

Marriage Encounter (ALMA)

During our home assignment, we were invited to attend a Marriage Encounter weekend in Chile. Diane and I had heard of Marriage Encounter but needed to learn more about it, and since some sponsors in the United States would fund the trip, we agreed to go. This was a weekend where we were helped and encouraged in our own marriage. While in Chile, we were introduced to a prayer group which, several years before, heard a former missionary to Poland share in their church. Since then, they had been praying for Poland. Meeting Diane and me was an answer to their prayers.

Following the weekend, both Diane and I were convinced we must, somehow, establish this ministry in Poland. Returning to Warsaw, Poland in August 2000, not knowing anyone other than one key pastor, we joined a group of Poles to help plant a new church that would become the Warsaw North Church. We were convinced



Some of the Marriage Encounter (ALMA) team in the early years, 2007

that the Marriage Encounter would be a good foundation for church planting and leadership development. During the first years, there were huge roadblocks. People in Canada and Poland told us it would never work. We were told it was too expensive and labour-intensive. But we were convinced God was leading us in the right direction. After ten years, we developed a team and trained leaders; some were not even believers when we started.

Looking back, we are thankful to God for what He has done. The Marriage Encounter some said would never work, has been going for twenty years and is now in three cities in Poland. Over 3,000 couples have experienced it. Out of the Marriage Encounter ministry, the Women's Encounter ministry was started and now functions in five locations in Poland and one in London, England.

As we worked with the Marriage Encounter, we were able to have an influence and be an encouragement to the Polish leaders in what would become the Warsaw North Christian Fellowship Church. Today the church has grown to over 1,400 people. They have also sent some of their people out to plant two other congregations, which are growing and reaching their communities.

In 2011, having worked ourselves out of a job, we returned to Canada, where we planted an Alliance church in Ottawa. Leaving Poland was difficult as so many people had become family to us. We felt like half our heart was left there, and our involvement on Polish soil was over.

“Retirement”

In 2020, we officially retired, and in April 2021, we moved to Cochrane, Alberta. Before we retired, I was told that when one retires, there is often a period of adjustment, and it is not always easy switching gears psychologically. So, I was still waiting for the “adjustment” to begin in December 2021. One afternoon as I drove down the hill into Cochrane, looking at the town below and the Rocky Mountains to the west, I was praying to the Lord. It went like this, “Thank you, Father, that we can live here. Thank you that I can go skiing in the winter and camping in the summer and attend a good church each weekend. Father, I am so thankful and really enjoying this retirement. But Father, if you have anything else for me to do, my answer is YES.” And then, I continued my drive home. WARNING! If you ever pray that prayer, be prepared for God to answer!

Just over two months later, Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Within a few days, we began getting messages from our people in Poland telling us of the thousands of women and children fleeing the war. Our partner churches in Poland were opening their churches and homes, taking in what they described as a tsunami of refugees.

In a very short time, The Alliance Canada had put together a project through which funding could be sent to help with this crisis. Having served in Poland and having the language and many contacts, I became the liaison between our churches in Canada and our Polish partner churches. This has meant travelling to Poland and Ukraine several times a year. Through our partnership



Bill (r) in Poland, explains The Alliance Canada response to the growing number of refugees fleeing Ukraine, 2022

between The Alliance Canada and the churches in Poland, we are reaching thousands of hurting people with both the physical and spiritual food they need.¹

As I write this story, the war in Ukraine has no end in sight, so we can only trust God for his direction and guidance going forward. One thing we do know is that He is faithful.

So, while this is the end of my written story, the story of our lives goes on for Diane and me. As I look back on the journey so far, there have been joyful times and some difficult and painful times. But through it all, God has remained faithful.

Over the desk in my study hangs a painting of a sailing ship. Above is a phrase expressing how I have chosen to follow Christ over the years. It says, “A ship in the harbor is safe... but that is not what ships were built for.” Hopefully, as you have read this story, it will encourage you to be willing to take risks for God and leave the safety of the harbour.



Bill and Diane Finnemore,
2023

¹ You can view Bill's video reports from Ukraine [here](#).