

# **My Journey In His Story**

**My Journey In His Story    Mary Rose Robinson**

**Mary Rose Robinson**



Every Bluegrass festival my family attended while I was growing up had gospel music on Sunday mornings. That's not the case any more. Mike and Mary's ministry is filling a great need. It has been inspiring to watch God use them and their music to open hearts over these last several years. Mary's account of their adventures is beautifully written and I know you'll enjoy it as much as I did.

**Becky Buller**

**Bluegrass fiddler, Songwriter, Manchester, TN**

Mary Robinson doesn't have to say a word to let someone know that Jesus' love is in her heart; the light shines on her face. In these pages, this compassionate Christian lady describes what led her and her husband Mike to embark on a leap-of-faith ministry along the Eastern United States' Bluegrass Trail. Reading this book will show you what we lucky 'bluegrassers' already know: Mary knows the Truth and it is her honor to share it.

**Eric Gibson**

**The Gibson Brothers**

Come on a journey that will make you laugh, cry, and wonder at the amazing grace of God in the lives of a couple who have given their lives to serving Him. While there are many hymns and gospel songs in the Bluegrass genre of music, there are few who really know what they are singing about. In her delightful book, Mary Robinson shares her story of faith and the challenge of ministering to a unique subculture in America. When she and her husband sing "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound" they really know what it means and they mean it.

**Rev. Arlen J. Payne**

**Pastor Big Cypress New Testament Baptist Church**



## Foreword

Mary loves Jesus, loves people and loves to tell the story of how that has shaped her life. This book is a kind of private journal, a glimpse at how her days have unfolded in the past years ministering with her husband Mike at Bluegrass festivals up and down the eastern seacoast. Here is a blow by blow account of the trials, obstacles and challenges of serving Christ, along with the victories, triumphs and joys of living by faith in God's grace.

I have enjoyed being a small part of this ministry as Mike and Mary's friend and pastor, seeing how God's hand from their earliest days together was preparing them for the work to which He would eventually call them. They have been an encouragement to me and to our church, especially at crucial points where we prayed and sought God's will for serving Him effectively.

There is much more that could be said, but it is time for me to get out of the way so you can read Mary's story. I trust you will enjoy reading this account of the Lord's work in their lives and that it will encourage you to serve Him in the sphere where He has placed you.

Emmanuel Haqq  
Senior Pastor  
Christ Community Church  
(formerly Dwight Chapel)

## Introduction

As I considered the momentous task of writing a book about our travels and ministry, I carefully contemplated my reasons for doing it. We are *so* busy with a full schedule of booked dates and places to get to.

A long time ago, four decades to be exact, my eighth grade English teacher, Mr. Devlin made a statement that I will never forget.

“If you want to be remembered, you need to do something worth writing about, or write something worth reading.”

The motivation for me in writing this book is my heart’s desire that my adult sons have a tangible legacy of who their mother is. I want them to know the authentic me, the way my closest friends know me.

What I think about, how I feel about things, what frustrates me, and what gives me complete happiness.

As I pondered that thought, it occurred to me that my Creator wants the same thing from me. He wants me to know who He is, what motivates Him and what brings Him happiness and joy.

I wish to thank my husband Michael, who is my greatest friend and ministry partner. He is a devoted husband to me and loving example to my sons and our four grandchildren. He is also a mighty man of God. The Lord uses him greatly to bring many souls into the Kingdom. It is inspiring to watch the Holy Spirit work through him and I am honored to be his wife.

# My Journey in His Story

Mary Rose Robinson  
My Journey in His Story

Copyright © 2012 Mary Rose Robinson

All rights reserved, including, the right to reproduce this book in any form, or portions thereof, in any form, without the consent of the writer.

Cover Design:

Rachael Moira Keyes, Swanville, ME

Original Logo Design:

Julie Caouette, New Salem, MA

Edited by:

Phee Paradise, Loris, SC

Dave Fritsch, Belchertown, MA

ISBN 978-0-9883160-0-3

Library of Congress

[www.bluegrassgospelsing.com](http://www.bluegrassgospelsing.com)

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quoted is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House, All rights reserved.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of the International Bible Society.

## Contents:

Introduction

Chapter One: The Birth of the Bluegrass Gospel Sing Ministry.

Chapter Two: Step of Faith or Was it a Leap?

Chapter Three: Our Moving Experience

Chapter Four: Adjusting to Life on the Road.

Chapter Five: What is this Yankee doing in South Carolina? Or how many trips can we make up north in the Clown Car?

Chapter Six: Life changes - Wedding, Birth and Death.

Chapter Seven: Back Home!

Chapter Eight: Our Job Year.

Chapter Nine: What could be coming next?

Chapter Ten: Wink! Wink!

## Chapter One

### The Birth of the Bluegrass Gospel Sing Ministry

Have you ever wondered how a person ends up living an extraordinary life? A different life from the normal, dull, predictable, ordinary life most people have? From Maine to Florida, thousands of people have seen me at Bluegrass festivals and outreach events, church services and countless other venues and have asked, “How did you end up doing this?” This book is my opportunity to share with you the story of Bluegrass Gospel Sing Ministry.

I come from very humble beginnings. I am the fourth of five children born to depression era parents in a small farming community in western Massachusetts. My father was the town barber, and in the 1960’s, all the boys wanted to look like the Beatles and grow their hair long. Needless to say, the Beatles weren’t listened to in our house while my father was around! I grew up playing kick the can, fishing at the river, riding my bicycle, and spending time dreaming of the day I would get out of the small town of Hatfield and see the world. After several decades passed, that daydreaming small town girl saw her dreams and reality collide in the form of a traveling music ministry. My adult sons refer to me as their “Gypsy Mother” because of my extensive travel.

So, you ask, how did a small town girl end up traveling up and down the roads in a motor home playing Bluegrass music? My entrance into Bluegrass music came with my courtship with my husband Mike. Prior to that, I didn't have a clue about Bluegrass music or the existence of Bluegrass festivals.

The Bluegrass music scene is very social and it's normal at festivals for friends and strangers alike to gather at each others campsite to sing and play music together, or "jam" as it's called. Many people who attend festivals play instruments, some proficient and some as beginners. Bluegrass music is nearly always acoustic and generally played with simple chords and melody patterns, making the songs easy to play. Some folks call it hillbilly music as it came out of the hills of Appalachia.

Festivals are a mixture of stage performances by both national and regional bands as well as plenty of jam sessions both day and night. The instruments that make up Bluegrass are acoustic guitar, banjo, upright bass, mandolin, Dobro, fiddle, harmonica and unfortunately sometimes, spoons.

Mike and I attended a Bluegrass festival in Moodus, Connecticut in 1998. As we are both believers, we were excited to attend a scheduled Gospel Sing on the Sunday morning of the festival. The band that was scheduled to lead the sing, failed to show up under the big spectator tent. About 40 folks had gathered to take part in the sing. Mike had brought his guitar to play as had several other folks. There were also a number of



people who had come to participate in the singing. We began to sing familiar Gospel songs but all too quickly ran out of words. A man named Bob hurried into his camper and brought out one bulky notebook of songs. He placed it on a picnic table and everyone huddled around the table to get a glimpse of the words and take part in the singing.

After a few songs, Mike felt led to pray over the gathering. Even though we were at a Bluegrass festival, it reminded us of church. Afterwards, several people commended him for doing that. When we walked away from the tent, the Lord began to speak to us both about a unique ministry. We started to talk with each other about the possibility of doing Gospel Sings at the summer Bluegrass festivals that we already attended. We explored the idea of providing a songbook that included both the words and the chords to give to the folks who might attend. From there, our thoughts developed into the idea of including the plan of salvation on the inside back cover. In that way, the songbooks could also be gospel tracts. As we considered the Bluegrass festivals that we already attended, we thought about how we would approach the promoters we knew. Within a few minutes, we had discussed a plan of offering to do it without charge, under a tent or in front of the stage. It would be a completely acoustic jam, an hour before the first scheduled Sunday performance, so even the sound technicians wouldn't be bothered. For the promoter, it would be an additional set of music, without cost. For the rest of our summer season, we prayed over the idea

and continued to talk to each other about it. We did not engage anybody else in the conversation.

Several weeks later, we were at Thomas Point Beach, in Brunswick, Maine. This was the last summer festival for that year. While we were sitting in our seats waiting for a band change, an older lady who had been with us at the Gospel Sing in Moodus came over to us. She put her arm around Mike's shoulder and said, "If we all had had a songbook, we could have sung along with you at Moodus." We considered this as a sign from above and this was the birth of the Bluegrass Gospel Sing ministry.

As Mike and I didn't want to be known as the "Church of the Blue Chevy Nova", we thought it would be prudent to discuss the idea with our Pastor in Belchertown, Massachusetts. We arranged to meet Emmanuel for lunch and discussed the idea for the ministry with him. He brought it to the Elders and they were in agreement that it was a ministry that Dwight Chapel could spiritually support. At the time, Mike and I both worked and we didn't need financial support from our sending church. We worked on our song book and contacted promoters. We made our debut at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in May of the year 2000.

Mike and I were married in the fall of the year 1999. It was a second marriage for both of us. Our first marriages had ended in divorce. When we first started courting, neither of us wanted to repeat the mistakes and heartaches of our first marriages. We were very cautious as we considered marriage to each other. As

our first spouses were not believers, we prayed strongly that if the Lord wanted us to be united in marriage, our union would be for the purpose of edification of the saints and evangelism to the lost. We actually started working with the youth group at Dwight Chapel about a month before our wedding day.

Mike and I had first met at a small church in Ware. It was a church plant from the larger church in Chicopee where I had come to faith in Christ. In June of 1995, the small church had its inaugural service and that is the first time that I laid eyes on Michael Robinson. For a couple of years, we sat across the aisle from one another. I honestly thought he was fairly weird. He would wear cowboy boots with a suit, which I thought was really strange for a small church in Massachusetts. Massachusetts, after all, is not Texas. We were both still married to our first spouses. I often prayed for his first wife's salvation and tried to get her to attend ladies events. Mike prayed for my first husband as well. He told me later on he thought I was "Mary, way too holy, knows the Bible way to well." We often took opposite views on the direction of this little church. Mike admitted to me he would often drive home praying; "Lord help me get along with that woman". To that, my response is, "Be careful what you pray for!"

When I filed for divorce from my first husband, after many years of emotional abuse, I left the church for a season. During that time, Mike's wife left him for the second time and moved back to Washington, DC. After about a year of being in the far country, the Lord called me back into fellowship with Him, and I returned

briefly to that little church. Shortly thereafter, Mike and I mutually decided to meet for dinner at a local restaurant. It was not a date. We merely wanted an opportunity to catch up with each other. During dinner that evening I remember looking across the table at Mike and thinking, *Wow, he's really handsome, when did that happen?* For the first 3 years of knowing Mike, I never thought of him in that way. He was just my brother in Christ who sat across the aisle from me wearing cowboy boots with a suit! Interestingly enough, Mike looked at me differently that night too. It was as if the Lord said, "Now is the time to take the scales off your eyes, because I'm about to do something amazing with the two of you."

Amazing, hardly describes how much the Lord has blessed us and used us for His glory and purpose. Not to say there weren't plenty of bumps in the road, but what life doesn't have its fill of trials? The first issue we encountered was the little church we were attending. It was what I would describe as fundamental and legalistic. It was a church that was all about perfecting the saints and in a church like that, being divorced is pretty much the unpardonable sin. When Mike told the pastor that he and I were cautiously considering courting each other, he pretty much had a melt down. He wanted Mike to repent immediately and never to see me again. He cast me as a Jezebel who was dragging Saint Mike down a wrong road. In this particular denomination, a second marriage after divorce is adultery and such sinners can never be used of the Lord. At this point, I gave Mike my complete permission to walk away from our blooming romance.

Thankfully, he decided that what was happening between us was of far more importance than the ranting of that young controlling pastor.

We decided to look for another church to attend. As we are both fairly “Type A” personalities, we tackled the project with administrative excellence. We contacted several churches via letter asking for a doctrinal statement and for a description of worship style. We met each Sunday morning and attended a few different churches to see if any of them would be a fit for us. Interestingly enough, a couple of the churches to which we wrote suggested we try Dwight Chapel.

After attending some really uninspiring churches, we did make our way to Dwight Chapel. The first Sunday we arrived we were an hour late for service. At that time, Dwight had a different summer schedule than what had been listed in the Shepherd’s Guide. We met a lady named Sheryl out in the foyer. She was very welcoming and encouraged us to come back the following week. We did go back the following Sunday morning. The first message we ever heard Emmanuel preach was, “How do we make people feel welcomed when they come into our church?” Mike and I looked at each other and the spirit affirmed in us Dwight Chapel was the place we belonged.

As we both were wounded by our previous church, we just wanted to sit in the back and hear the preaching. Mike and I both have a servant’s heart but we felt unworthy because of our circumstances. We couldn’t imagine that the Lord would want to use us. Emmanuel,

being led by the spirit, restored us to full fellowship. God uses broken vessels and imperfect people to do His perfect will.

Words cannot ever describe how grateful we are to have a Pastor who exhibits the love of God. As Mike and I continued to attend Dwight Chapel and were gently encouraged to use our talents to serve, the Lord grew and refined us. I often describe Emmanuel as the most Christ-like person I have ever met. He demonstrated the love of the Lord to me in such a way I knew I was God's child and deeply loved. When Mike and I stood before Emmanuel on our wedding day, it was one of the happiest moments of my life. God had taken all the broken pieces of my wounded heart and had redeemed me to be a godly wife in a Christian marriage. Our wedding day was just the beginning of an awesome and amazing adventure serving our King.

For the first four years of our marriage, Mike and I continued to grow in our faith as we served the Lord in various ways. We made the decision to downsize our big house in order to be closer to Dwight Chapel. We found a small ranch that was a couple of miles from the church and we completely remodeled the basement to serve as a youth group space. In addition to the youth group ministry and the summer gospel sing ministry, we served in other areas. Mike often did special music and he ushered on Sunday mornings. I served two terms on the board of deacons planning social and fellowship events at the church.

We found that the ministry at the Bluegrass festivals during the summer months was really beginning to bear

fruit. It became apparent to us that this ministry had potential to make a real difference to the Kingdom. Again, being “Type A,” we started to plan for the eventual day when could afford to go full time. With careful calculation of our resources we planned to go into the ministry full time when we were 55 years old. Notice all of the above words described *our* plans. Anyone who has ever been called by God into full time ministry knows God’s timing never matches our timing. Also, God isn’t so much interested in his kids having everything all figured out. So the adventure began.

## Chapter Two

### Step of Faith or Was it a Leap?

In September of 2003, our life changed dramatically. While attending a Bluegrass festival in New York, Mike received word from his company that he was going to have to take a fairly significant cut in pay. Mike had worked in the printing and prepress business since graduating from college 25 years earlier. With technology growing at a record pace, his business was quickly being replaced with desktop software programs. Many former clients were integrating their work in-house and what had been a fairly lucrative career had now become outdated.

Up until this point, we had been planning on changing the Gospel Sing Ministry into our full time mission starting when we were about 55 years old. Mike was just a few weeks shy of his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday and I am six months younger. With this pay cut, and the waning prepress business, we began planning how we would live on less salary and at the same time how could we save enough money to be able to go into full time ministry at 50 years old. We knew full time ministry would involve a move out of Massachusetts into a less expensive part of the country. We had already begun to speak to our northern promoters about the festival circuit in Florida in the winter months as that seemed the likely next step in the ministry. With legal pad in hand, we began to think about where we could make cuts in our living budget in order to accumulate enough funds to support the ministry in just five years instead of ten.

When we returned home from the New York festival, Mike decided it was time to purchase another Subaru



Outback. His job involved selling all over New England for Color Associates, a company from St. Louis, Missouri. He needed a car that would be dependable in New England winter weather. Within a few days, we found a program car with low miles and purchased it with cash from savings.

Less than a week after purchasing that car, Mike was involved in a collision. He had been traveling to Connecticut for a sales call during a terrible rain storm. While stopped at a red light in Ludlow, a state truck rammed into him and caused eighteen thousand dollars worth of damage to the car as well as destroying Mike's light booth that he used for work. The truck driver had lost his brakes several miles before the red light and was not able to stop. Thankfully, Mike only received minor injury and a slight whiplash. In spite of all the ambulance chasers who kept calling us, we declined to sue the state of Massachusetts.

Four days later, to add insult to injury, Mike was fired from his job all together. His boss from St. Louis told him to pack up his computer and his prospect list and send it back to the company. He also said that our health insurance was no longer in affect. This happened within a couple of weeks of hearing about taking a cut in pay. Within a ten day period, we purchased a car, we wrecked a car and we lost our livelihood. Needless to say, the Lord had our undivided attention.

Missouri unemployment benefits are a fraction of what Massachusetts unemployment benefits are. Our world was turned upside down and we were on our faces

before God asking Him for direction and wondering why He was allowing this to happen to us.

Mike's Mom was due to visit us a couple of days after this all happened, along with two of her friends. She did not wish to cancel her plans, so we fed and entertained house guests until they went to bed and then we sat up late into the night with a legal pad trying to figure out what to do. As soon as the tail lights of Mom's van left the driveway, we called and canceled the cable television, the additional phone line and anything else we didn't need.

We both grew up in working class poor homes and certainly knew the difference between needs and wants. Truthfully, this period of our life together was really scary and very humbling. Even though we had both had meager childhoods, as adults we had been fairly successful and were good stewards of the money we had accumulated. We enjoyed being able to pick up the check at the restaurant for our friends and family. It is really a blessing to hear about someone's need and to fill it anonymously. We would look down at the financial statement at a Dwight Chapel congregational meeting and know how large a percentage we gave towards that number. It felt really wonderful to be able to cheerfully give, and the thought of not being able to do that was weighing heavily on us. Honestly, the Lord needed to deal with the pride we had embraced and acknowledge it was He who had blessed us and the work of our hands.

Mike called one of the elders at our church and offered to do menial labor for his real estate property business. I called my previous company and was hired back as a secretarial sub-contractor to bring in some funds. It was pennies on a dollar of what we had been making, and nowhere near enough to maintain a life in Belchertown. Plus, our previous work had allowed us the flexibility to do ministry. This was our dilemma, what about the ministry? How in the world would we be able to do the Gospel Sing ministry if Mike found a job in a different field?

For the next two weeks, Mike worked for Tim and I did secretarial work for Sohre Turbomachinery, Inc. Mike spent hours submitting resumes. He took a test for a financial planner's position which he failed miserably, and the whole experience was quite humbling for him. Nothing like being in a room full of twenty something's fresh out of college to put a spotlight on your testing skills.

During one of my many late nights of praying and reading the scriptures, the Lord showed me His will. I was reading Psalm 27 in my NIV® Bible, in which David writes:

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my light and my salvation—  
whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold of my life—  
of whom shall I be afraid?

<sup>2</sup> When evil men advance against me  
to devour my flesh,

when my enemies and my foes attack me,  
they will stumble and fall.

<sup>3</sup> Though an army besiege me,  
my heart will not fear;  
though war break out against me,  
even then will I be confident.

<sup>4</sup> One thing I ask of the LORD,  
this is what I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to seek him in his temple.

<sup>5</sup> For in the day of trouble  
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;  
he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle  
and set me high upon a rock.

<sup>6</sup> Then my head will be exalted  
above the enemies who surround me;  
at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy;  
***I will sing and make music to the LORD.***

<sup>7</sup> Hear my voice when I call, O LORD;  
be merciful to me and answer me.

<sup>8</sup> My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"  
Your face, LORD, I will seek.

<sup>9</sup> Do not hide your face from me,  
do not turn your servant away in anger;  
you have been my helper.

Do not reject me or forsake me,  
O God my Savior.

<sup>10</sup> Though my father and mother forsake me,  
the LORD will receive me.

<sup>11</sup> Teach me your way, O LORD;  
lead me in a straight path  
because of my oppressors.

<sup>12</sup> Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,  
for false witnesses rise up against me,  
breathing out violence.

<sup>13</sup> ***I am still confident of this:  
I will see the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living.***

<sup>14</sup> Wait for the LORD;  
be strong and take heart  
and wait for the LORD.

(I dated this 10/06/03 in my NIV® Bible)

*I will sing and make music to the Lord? Could it be that the Lord wants us to surrender completely to His service? But how would that work? How would we feed ourselves? What about our ministry at Dwight Chapel? The youth group meets at our house. We have a Wednesday night prayer meeting at our house. The youth group band practices here on Tuesday night. The young adults use our house for their Sunday school class. Again, that pride thing kept creeping back into*

my thoughts. *Could I really let go and allow the Lord to completely run my life?*

The next day, while Mike spent hours on his knees painting a porch in Warren, praying the whole time, I was sitting at my computer researching the cost of living in various places. Mike was praying, “Lord, I just need the next step, tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” Meanwhile, I was looking at how cheaply we could live in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Doing a comparison between the cost of living in near-by Amherst, Massachusetts and Spartanburg, South Carolina was quite eye opening. Forty percent cheaper in the south compared to the high prices of the northeast. When Mike got home that evening, I couldn’t wait to show him what I had found. For him, it was an answer to prayer, the next step. He couldn’t believe that his Massachusetts born and bred wife would even consider uprooting to a whole new place in order to do the ministry. I said to him, “Mike, I think the Lord wants us to do the Gospel Sing Ministry full time. For the next two weeks, I don’t want you going on a job interview or sending out resumes or even working for Tim. Let’s concentrate on doing the ministry full time and see where that leads us.”

We decided to take a road trip. By then we had sold the repaired Subaru Outback back to the dealer and had only lost about a thousand dollars, so we had some money to work with. We still had our very nice conversion van that we had bought to be cool youth group leaders, as well as to tow our 26 ½ foot camper to festivals. We loaded up and headed south.

My sister Patti was living in Taylor, South Carolina at the time, while her husband was enrolled at Bob Jones University. We had a place to stay while we researched the area. A man named Marvin from their church was a real estate agent. We met with him and told him that we wanted an inexpensive house with enough land to park our camper. We also wanted to be close to the interstate so our Bluegrass friends would have a place to pull into, on their way south in the winter and north in the spring. We did a whirlwind real estate tour of about seven properties. Out of them, we liked a double-wide mobile home in Roebuck. It had over an acre of flat land just two tenths of a mile from Interstate 26. It was in Spartanburg County and it was CHEAP! The asking price for a 1600 square foot double-wide on over an acre of flat land was \$79,900.00. At that time, a building lot in Belchertown was selling for \$60,000.00 and you would have had to use dynamite to clear the rock before you could build. We also noticed the cost of gasoline was quite a bit cheaper, as was the cost of some grocery items.

We left a check and an Offer to Purchase for the Roebuck property with my sister Patti and told her we would call her if we decided to pursue it. We drove back to Massachusetts and continued to pray and think about the next step. Mike researched the Florida Bluegrass festivals and discovered that in a ten week period, starting in January, we would be able to attend eight festivals. We really didn't know how the Gospel Sing Ministry would be received in Florida. We had built it up in the northeast over a period of 4 years and had begun to see real fruit and changed lives, but we

didn't know if it was even needed in the Bible belt south. Of course, the only way to know is to actually GO!

During these few weeks, from the car accident and the job loss, we had been in constant communication with our Pastor Emmanuel. We couldn't communicate openly with our brethren as we were the youth group leaders and we didn't want the parents to be overly concerned and upset. Nor did we want the teenagers, who we loved dearly, to worry about their youth group and how our leaving was going to affect them. Truthfully, during this spell of time, the spiritual overtone of the youth group meetings was deeply rich. I believe the young people could sense the Lord was doing a work in us.

Sometime around the beginning of November, Mike put a "For Sale by Owner" sign in front of our Metacomet Street house. We had only lived in this house for about a year and a half. We honestly didn't think we would be able to sell it for what we paid for it, plus the extensive renovations we had done for the youth group space. A real estate agent stopped by within minutes of Mike posting the sign and asked him what we were asking for it. Mike told him we wanted \$159,900.00 for it and agreed to show him through it.

After the tour, the agent asked: "Why are you asking so little? If I can bring you a buyer for \$189,900.00, will you give me 3 percent?" Mike agreed to that. However, he was thinking that the agent just wanted a listing and didn't really have a buyer. The next day, the



agent brought his buyer and I showed her through the house. She gave us an offer of \$189,900.00 and we had 20 minutes to accept it. We couldn't believe it! That was \$30,000.00 more than we had thought it was worth. Enough for the double-wide in Roebuck and \$100,000.00 left over to help fund the ministry! We accepted the offer with joy and thanksgiving. That buyer had no sooner cleared the drive-way, when another lady drove in, looked through the house and gave us a back up offer of \$189,900.00 without the real estate commission fee. The following day, we took in another back up offer. From the time that Mike posted the "For Sale by Owner" sign, to the last back up offer was only 48 hours. We felt fairly confident that the Lord was giving us the light and direction for our path.

The next few weeks were a whirlwind of activity. We prepared a ministry proposal for the mission's committee at Dwight Chapel. We placed the \$70,000 cash offer for the house in Roebuck. The seller accepted it without countering. We began to prepare for a moving sale as we had a basement full of furniture and a furnished sun porch that we wouldn't have room for in South Carolina. Our brethren at Dwight and the youth group now knew things were going to be changing.

In addition to our church family, I had to tell my parents, my two grown sons and my three Massachusetts siblings that I was moving 950 miles away in order to serve God full time. My biological family did not share the vision I had for my life as God's child and servant. I think basically, they thought

I had pretty much lost my mind and was caught in some cult thing.

The leadership of Dwight Chapel interviewed us to determine our commitment to the Gospel Sing Ministry. They were able to financially support us with a \$100 a month that first year out. Emmanuel gave us autonomy to garner support from any other ministry or churches as we saw fit. We had six months of Missouri unemployment which amounted to \$5,500, and we had determined that we would give \$100,000.00 from the sale of our house to be put into a 15 year annuity that would give us just under \$769.00 a month for living expenses. It wasn't much, but we serve a God who can take 5 loaves and 2 fishes and feed 5000 and still collect twelve baskets full of leftovers.

I had some habits that I had to adjust before I could embark on this journey. I had been accustomed to going to the hairdresser every four weeks to have my hair colored. When I was young, my hair was dark brown, almost black. I had been plucking gray hair since I was a teenager and had started having it colored in my late twenties.

I knew I was going to be living in a 26 ½ foot camper with a 32 gallon fresh water tank. With my thick, long hair, I knew that it was going to be impossible to color it myself. I had tried to color it myself several years previously and had basically ruined a bathroom counter, which is why I had a standing appointment with my hairdresser, Cathy. I called Cathy and I made an appointment to have my hair cut short. I knew I had

to grow the color out and be naturally gray. She cut about eight inches of length and heavily highlighted it so that it wouldn't be such an obvious contrast as the gray grew out. This may seem like a little thing, but for me, letting go of this vanity in order to serve God, was huge.

## Chapter Three

### Our Moving Experience

Moving day was in the middle of December. We had rented a Penske moving truck and we had a small trailer that I would pull behind the van with our shed contents. We were closing on the Roebuck house in mid-

December and the sale of the Belchertown house was just after Christmas. We would drive back to Massachusetts to spend Christmas with our family, close on the house and pick up our travel trailer.

There was an abundance of help from Dwight Chapel on moving day. Unfortunately, we ran out of truck space and still had lots of treasured stuff to take. One of our brethren offered us a small wooden trailer to tow behind the Penske truck. A good deal of the tools and shed contents went into the borrowed trailer. Several men took pieces of plywood and built sides on the trailer I would be towing and loaded it to the brim. I had them take some of my most precious antiques back into the house as I didn't want them in an open trailer. I thought, *we'll have an opportunity to load this stuff up when we come back. We'll take the seats out of the van in South Carolina and have it and the travel trailer to put the things that didn't fit into the moving truck.* I had called U-Haul to see about renting a box trailer that Mike could haul behind the Penske truck, but it was so expensive that Mike didn't want to incur that cost.

Things were pretty much packed up and ready to go by mid afternoon. I can't tell you how emotional this day was for me. The reality of leaving my home and my church family as well as my children was beginning to bear down on my heart. I watched my life in worldly possessions get packed into a moving truck, knowing we were moving several states away, not just from one Massachusetts town to another.

That evening, Mike's Bluegrass band, The Cowtippers, was scheduled to play a Christmas concert at Dwight Chapel's Coffee house. We planned to travel right after the show was over as there was a snow storm in the forecast that we needed to outrun. I sat in the back of the church with The Cowtippers' CD recordings to sell and watched the show. I was numb with emotion as I looked at my dear friends that I loved so much. Several of the teens that Mike and I worked with were at the concert, as was my older sister Barbara. Too soon, the music was over and the saying goodbye part of the evening was upon us. I barely held it together as we loaded up and left the parking lot.

This part of the story is where the evil one decided to sift us to see if we were really serious about serving God and the Bluegrass community with the Gospel. As we approached Springfield, Massachusetts around 11:00 p.m., the traffic was horrible. We were trying to merge from Interstate 291 onto Interstate 91 south but couldn't get into the travel lane because of heavy traffic. Within seconds of getting on Interstate 91 south, I saw sparks from the trailer that Mike was towing. I got on the CB radio and said, "Mike, you're losing the trailer, pull over." I watched the trailer teeter back and forth and then come off the truck with a thud. It is nothing short of a miracle that it didn't hit me or anyone else in that heavy traffic. I put on my emergency lights and Mike hopped out of the truck to see the damage. A couple of young guys pulled over right after it happened and helped Mike lift the trailer over to the side. His metal tool box opened from the jolt and the bolts scattered all over the road. Our gas grill

was in pieces. The police were soon there and told me to get off the road. It was a hazard to other drivers to have a truck with a broken trailer and a van with another overloaded trailer stopped on the merging lane. I drove off at the next exit and parked in the lot of the Basketball Hall of Fame.

I was frantic as I sat there in the parking lot. I kept keying the CB trying to tell Mike where I had ended up parking as I didn't have a cell phone to call him. He wasn't responding and with each passing moment my anxiety escalated. Finally, after what seemed like hours, I saw him turn the corner of the Hall of Fame in the Penske truck. He had called a wrecker to tow the trailer back to 78 Metacomet Street. He had also called Emmanuel to tell him what had happened. We talked back and forth on the CB radio during that journey back to Belchertown. I told Mike how uncomfortable I felt driving with that overloaded trailer on the back of the van. It felt dangerous and after watching what happened in Springfield, I wasn't interested in a repeat performance.

Once we arrived home, Mike and the tow truck driver maneuvered the broken trailer into the garage. The temperature outside was bone chilling and the air smelled of the approaching snow storm. I managed to find our sleeping bags and some pillows to put on our now empty bedroom floor. I got our cat, Cassie Lynn's litter box and food back in the house. Mike was outside in the cold, still dressed in his Cowtipper stage outfit. He was using whatever he could find to remove the plywood sides off of the trailer. Of course, his power

tools were packed out of reach. His battery powered drill had run out of juice, so he ended up using a jigsaw to cut the plywood off the sides of our trailer. He removed the majority of the items and placed them back inside of our garage. We decided to only take our riding lawnmower and a few outdoor tools so the trailer would tow safely. We'd figure out later how to get the rest of our stuff south.

We collapsed on the floor of our bedroom sometime after 1:30 in the morning. We slept for about 4 hours and then we awoke our tired and aching bodies to try our trip again. Emmanuel came over to see us and pray for us just as we were getting ready to get on the road again around 5:45 Sunday morning. Mike gave him a key to the house and asked him to have some of the men from the church come and take the gardening tools, weed whackers and snow shovels to the church. We had already given Emmanuel our snow blower as we didn't think we'd need one in South Carolina.

The predicted storm was due to hit by 2:00 in the afternoon, so we were feeling the pressure to get as far south as possible. We had a deadline to get to the house in South Carolina on Tuesday morning. My brother-in-law, Russ, could help us unload the truck at that time but wasn't available any other time. Unlike the abundance of help we had in Belchertown, we only had Russ on the other end to help us unload.

The snow and mixed precipitation began within an hour or so of leaving Belchertown. Although the trailer that I was carrying was not as unstable as it had been, my rear wheel drive van was slipping and sliding as we

approached Port Jervis, New Jersey. I keyed up the CB and told Mike that I had to get off the road. His truck was so much heavier than the van I was driving that he hadn't felt how dangerously icy the roads were becoming. We had been traveling for over five hours and had only made it as far as Port Jervis. In normal conditions this is about a three hour trip from Belchertown. For the last couple of hours I had had a death grip on the steering wheel as the van was reacting to the built up slush on the road. I breathed a sigh of relief as we came to a stop in the parking lot of the Comfort Inn just off the highway.

It is amazing what a difference a day makes. Here it was Sunday afternoon and I couldn't have cared less about my antiques and my material possessions that I had hovered over the day before as they were being carried into the truck. I just wanted to live to see tomorrow. For me, this was the beginning of a deep spiritual reality. Before I would be able to be truly effective in ministry, I had to figure out how the Lord wanted me to view the worldly things that He had blessed me with.

We checked into the Comfort Inn, paying an extra fee for our cat. The only restaurant in the hotel was closed. We were both very hungry, so after getting Cassie settled in the room, we left in the Penske truck to find a grocery store. When we found one along a narrow street, I hopped out and went inside to purchase some sandwich meat and a few other provisions. Mike circled the block in the moving truck until I came out and could hop back in. We returned to the hotel and filled



our trash can with ice from the hotel lobby and used it as a cooler. We were both so exhausted that we slept for a couple of hours that afternoon. The storm continued throughout the rest of the day and into the night.

Before dawn the next morning, we were up, anxious to get back on the road. We had a lot of miles to cover before the following morning when we were due at the house in Roebuck. Everything was covered in a thick coat of ice. Mike began to clear some of the ice from around the vehicles and moved them into the middle of the parking lot. Before I got out to the parking lot, he had already taken the Penske truck down the hill to get fuel. While he was gone with the van and trailer, I scraped the side mirrors of the truck that were caked with ice. As Mike was driving back up with the van, I noticed one of the wheels of the trailer didn't look right. Upon inspection, Mike discovered when he yanked the trailer out of the snow bank he had broken the leaf spring.

I didn't know whether to scream or cry, but I didn't do either. Instead, I went to the front desk of the Comfort Inn and asked to see a local phone book. We called the U-Haul dealer in Port Jervis who would rent us a metal open trailer to carry our lawnmower down south. Of course, because of the storm, they wouldn't be able to get it dug out for several hours. We also had to find a local wrecker who would pick up our broken trailer from the parking lot of the Comfort Inn after we had unloaded it. They weren't going to be able to get to us

until much later in the day as the storm had them quite busy.

We finally left the Comfort Inn at 11:30 Monday morning, after loading the contents of the broken trailer onto the metal U-Haul trailer. The U-Haul trailer didn't come equipped with lights even though it cost us \$500.00 to rent. They told us to stop by an AutoZone store one exit south of the Comfort Inn to purchase a light kit. I cautiously followed Mike to that store with the illegal trailer attached to the van only to find a sign on the door that read, "Closed because of bad weather!"

We decided that I would take the lead on the highway with Mike following until we found a Wal-Mart where we purchased a light kit. We witnessed several large trucks in various positions off the road and in the medium showing evidence of just how treacherous the roads had been. We stopped at Wal-Mart just long enough to put windshield wash into both vehicles and to connect the trailer lights to the U-Haul.

We drove for twelve solid hours that day before pulling off at a Comfort Inn in Statesville, North Carolina. When we stopped for gas, I'd run in and purchase food and throw a bag at Mike before getting back on the road. It was so stressful. Then, as I approached the desk at the Comfort Inn to check in, I was horrified to hear that this Comfort Inn didn't allow pets! I just broke down and cried as I began to tell this poor girl about going into ministry and how exhausted we both were. She took pity on me and told me to sneak Cassie in. We would be out early in the morning to try to get to

Roebuck in time to have some help unloading. I promised her nobody would know a cat had been in that room, I'd leave it spotless.

Early the next morning, before the sun was even up, the alarm roused us to get back on the road. Our poor cat must have thought we were in the witness protection service with all the strange hours and places we were staying. We called Marvin, the realtor who was going to meet us at the house in Roebuck with the keys, to tell him when we thought we'd be arriving.

We pulled into the house in Roebuck around 10:00 in the morning. My brother-in-law, Russ, and Marvin were both there waiting for us. Marvin had brought us some coffee and a breakfast sandwich so that we'd have some nourishment before unloading the truck. The four of us carried in the contents of the truck for a couple of hours. Marvin had to leave for another appointment, so Russ and Mike finished the unloading before Russ had to get back to Taylor.

Over the next five days, we unpacked every box and put up all our pictures on the walls. The double-wide was a lot more beat up than we had remembered and I used my decorating skills to cover up holes in the walls. We called this hillbilly decorating. We discovered a huge bleach stain in the bathroom carpet which was tactfully covered with a throw rug with a huge American Indian head on it. Unlike the meticulous way we remodeled the Metacomet Street house, we were going to make do with what we had. We purchased a less tacky throw rug to cover up the bleach stain. We

also decided that buying a twenty dollar antenna was better use of our limited resources than having a monthly cable bill. This change in attitude about our possessions and appearances was the Lord transforming our wants into what He wants.

After those very busy five days of getting unpacked and returning the rented truck and trailer, we loaded into our van again to head back to Massachusetts. We had to take care of the broken trailer contents and the rest of our belongings left at Metacomet Street before the closing, which was scheduled right after Christmas. We were going to be staying at my parent's house in Hatfield for the Christmas holiday and then with Bernie and Julie Caouette in Petersham for New Years. Our 26 ½ foot travel trailer was parked at Bernie and Julie's house. We would be leaving from there, following a Cowtipper band gig at the Linden Tree, in early January.

During this spell of time, Mike and I were going to be recognized at Dwight Chapel as missionaries. Mike preached his first message at Dwight Chapel on December 28, 2003. He was so intimidated by this task. Emmanuel is a very gifted preacher and at this time, Mike had only preached during the Gospel Sings. A Gospel Sing message at this time in the ministry was between five and ten minutes. Emmanuel typically preaches about 40 minutes. Mike was feeling quite a bit of pressure to do well. It was awkward at best, but he survived it and learned from it. At the end of the service, Emmanuel and the church Elders laid hands on us and sent us out as missionaries to the Bluegrass community.

The thing that I remember most about this particular time is how tired we both were. Our muscles were strained and ached from all the lifting and bending, not to mention the hours of travel and the stress of the move. We both came to the same conclusion that it was a good thing we had done this at 45 years of age instead of 55 years of age. As we prepared to head back south with our travel trailer in tow and some of our possessions loaded into the back of the van, we were anxiously anticipating leaving for the Florida mission field and wondered, *how is this all going to work?*

## Chapter Four

### Adjusting to Life on the Road

There is quite a learning curve when you set out to live on the road full time in a camper. Unfortunately, we were completely clueless as to what we would need to survive this unusual lifestyle. Of course, ignorance is bliss, and as we drove south we were eager and joyful as this new adventure in the life of Mike and Mary began to unfold.

We arrived at the Yeehaw Junction Bluegrass festival the end of January in 2004. Yeehaw Junction, Florida is located in the middle of nowhere. It is 40 miles to civilization from this festival, and the grounds are literally a farmer's field. The donkeys and cattle had been moved into an adjacent field just prior to the festival, but their excrement was evident everywhere you stepped.

When we pulled in, we stopped to put water into our camper. It smelled like rotten eggs! We didn't know about having a water filter on our hose before loading water into the camper because the water in the northeast is very different than the water in the south. This was one of our first lessons.

I so clearly remember how weird it felt to be at a festival in the winter time. It wasn't balmy warm yet, but compared to what we had just come from, it was quite nice. We were wearing sweatshirts and jeans and not winter coats, hats, gloves and boots! It did get quite cold at night and our batteries ran down to nothing with the heat running. Mike would routinely go and start the van to charge the batteries in the camper. This was lesson number two. A generator is a necessity when you are camping without benefit of electricity.

We spent the next few days walking around and stopping in at jam sessions. Mike carried his guitar and would play and sing along as we began to get to know this new group of people. We met up with some folks that we knew from the northeast. Ronnie and Rita and

Jack and Judy had been coming to Florida to do Bluegrass for a while, so they introduced us around and we began to make some new friends. Thankfully, Mike is a good singer and understands the art of jamming, so he was often encouraged to play and sing with these new folks.

One of the biggest differences between the Florida mission field and the New England mission field is the Florida folks expected me to sing and play an instrument at the jam sessions. I owned a mandolin, but I only played two finger chords in the key of G and I didn't do that well. As far as singing, I could help lead the sing-a-long, but I had never sung a solo before. Mike was accustomed to being on stage from his years with bands, but I am a behind the scenes sort of girl and the very thought of performing was terrifying. In Florida, the jam sessions consist of a large circle and people take turns around the circle. It isn't as structured in the north. After many instances of me passing on my turn, it became evident, if I was going to fit in and be effective in ministry, I was going to have to learn to sing and play. Mike and I worked up one song that I could sing with him during this first season in Florida and I was scared to death every time I had to sing it.

Our first Florida Gospel Sing was well attended with about 150 people. Steve, the promoter had listed us on the schedule. Unfortunately, the part about it also being a Gospel Jam wasn't so clearly stated. So there stood Mike on guitar, me holding the mandolin and chucking two finger chords and a lady named Jan we begged to play the doghouse bass with us that morning. We

survived this first Gospel Sing and Mike made sure to announce that pickers were invited to play music with us on Sunday mornings at our subsequent festivals.

For the first four years of the ministry in New England, before going full time, we had handed out blue and green songbooks. When we left for Florida, we had a new printing of books on white paper. At Yeehaw Junction, we handed out about 150 white books but were amazed to see a large number of blue books carried into the tent from people who were snowbirds. Prior to this, we really had no idea how much crossover there would be between the mission fields of the north and south.

There were a couple of things that happened at this festival that were pivotal to us and set the stage for the rest of our first Florida season. Because we had Massachusetts license plates and were in our mid-forties, we commanded attention and curiosity from a lot of different folks who wondered what we were doing there. It gave us many opportunities for witness as we described our calling to the Bluegrass community.

The other thing that happened that weekend was the theft of two expensive instruments directly across the field from us. Prior to this, Mike and I never locked our camper while at a festival. As we considered what a theft of either the guitar or our computer would do to us and the ministry, we committed to always keep our camper and car locked up.



After the Gospel Sing on Sunday, a man we knew from Maine came up to us and discreetly handed us a rolled up \$100 bill. Wow! We have never charged a price to a promoter for the Gospel Sing. We also have never passed a hat for donations. We have strong conviction that to do so would be a stumbling block to the ministry and give the evil one a foothold. The last thing we would want is for someone who doesn't know the Lord to look at that and sarcastically say, "Oh, that's why they do it." After this man handed us that donation, we thought maybe this is how the Lord would keep us on the road. Remember, we had just set out with only a hundred dollars a month in promised support from Dwight.

Following the Yeehaw Junction festival we traveled to Sebring and stayed at the retirement park where Mike's Mom spends the winters. She had arranged for us to do a concert and Gospel Sing-a-long in the Recreation Hall for a free will donation. Mike insisted that I play the mandolin and asked the crowd of about 100, "How many of you have ever heard the mandolin played?" After about three people raised their hand, Mike quipped, "For the rest of you, this is going to be the best mandolin playing, you've ever heard."

Our next festival was at the Rodeo Grounds in Okeechobee. We arrived in the early evening and parked our camper, and then set out to see who else was there. This is where I was first introduced to fire ants. The little red ants in Massachusetts do not attack and bite you viciously. Of course, it was February and warm, so I was wearing sandals when I stepped into a

fire ant hill and then proceeded to do quite a Pentecostal dance. Another lesson learned - always carry rubbing alcohol and ant killer in your camper if you are doing outdoor festivals in the southeast.

Throughout the rest of our first Florida season, we were constantly amazed at how the Lord guided us and provided for us in both big and small ways. We began to gather a following of Bluegrass people who would look for us and want us to camp near them. The Lord seemed to send people to us who needed to hear the Gospel or a word of encouragement. We were accepted into a traveling group of people who were going from festival to festival, and we had the opportunity to share our faith sometimes using words, but more often just by living out our testimony in front of them.

What has always been unique about the ministry is the fact that we live with our mission field. There is often just a few feet between campers and our folks know that we are available for them. That is both the good news and the bad news. We are in a fish bowl and are very much aware that we are being watched closely. Having served in other various ministries we know appearance can be just as damaging as facts. Mike is very careful to never be seen speaking to a woman alone. We also are cautious about where we choose to play music. If a campsite has a lot of large bottles of liquor, we will keep walking, especially at night. There is no point in trying to be salt and light to people who are completely intoxicated. We do seek to visit those folks during the daylight hours, before the liquor is drunk, to play music with them and to get to know them. We've learned that every person that crosses our

path is God's image bearer and whether lovely or unlovely, they need to hear about Jesus.

During the course of our ten weeks in Florida, I had moments of sheer joy in the new experiences of seeing alligators and beautiful flowers and birds, and also moments of crushing loneliness. I desperately missed my children and my family, and especially my sisters in Christ who know me intimately. I can be myself with them and not feel judged. Fellowship is so important in a woman's life and deep friendships with other women are necessary for emotional wellbeing. I clung to Jesus during this time.

Mike is very focused on the ministry and he is an energizer bunny, constantly overbooking us and never taking time for rest. A good example of that was when we checked into a campground so we could have a full hook-up for a couple of days. This was about half-way through the Florida season. He volunteered us to do music at the Recreation Hall when he checked in because the campground owner noticed our Bluegrass Gospel Sing sign hanging in the window of our van. Before Mike could even get the jacks down on the camper our name was being broadcast over the loud speakers and our two days of pulling back and resting didn't happen. We led a Gospel Sing that night and the following day Mike was involved in the campground's folly show. This is where he first sang the Mike Andes song, "I Met My Baby in the Porta John Line." A Bluegrass classic!

Another real challenge for me was trying to do all the things a wife does in very limited space. Most of my baking and cooking supplies were in the back of the van in a Rubbermaid tub as there wasn't any room in the camper. Having 32 gallons of fresh water to use sparingly was quite a challenge. There is no such thing as a real shower when you live in a camper and camp in a farmer's field. This is where I coined the phrase "bird bath shower." Mike spent hours loading up the big blue jugs to put more water into the camper. Finding dump stations for black water became a focus of conversation. Shopping in a different store and town every week and finding decent laundromats to wash clothes in, were part of basic survival skills.

The cramped space was also hard on Mike. He would work at the table on the computer and would have to take it into the back of the van where the printer was if he needed to print something. When it came time for meals, he would have to move his work from the table as that was the only space we had for preparing and eating our meals. It didn't take long before we were convinced that if we were going to continue serving in this ministry we were going to need a bigger camper.

The snail's pace speed of our internet connection was frustrating for both of us. We were using a tethered modem to our cell phone at a whopping 9.6 kilobytes of speed. We would wait until 9:00 o'clock at night when our minutes were free and let the phone slowly download our email messages. Of course, it didn't matter how many times I would say in my update letters, please don't forward us messages or send us

pictures because it crashes our system, people would still send them. One of our weekly chores was to find a public library where we could get online to pay our bills and to update our website.

During our time in Florida, our brat cat, Cassie Lynn was exceedingly unhappy. She had thoroughly enjoyed doing Bluegrass in the summer time when we had a real home to come back to after each festival. Between the horrendous move and all the travel back and forth to New England after our move, she decided that this crazy lifestyle was not to her liking anymore. She let her displeasure be known by having diarrhea every single day we were on the road. By the end of our Florida season, I was asking our update list to pray that we could find a home for her as it was clear to us that she needed to be in one place. We loved her and had raised her from a small kitten, but it became apparent that she needed to be placed in a better environment than what we could provide.



After that first winter out on the road, I will never forget how emotional I was when I saw the “Entering Massachusetts” sign on our way back to New England. I just wept buckets as it hit me full force that I didn’t live in Mass anymore. When you are born and raised in the northeast, your roots go down deep, and it doesn’t matter how many other places you may live, for me, home will always be in Massachusetts.

When we arrived in New England that May, the first place we went was to the Belchertown Town Common to take part in our church's National Day of Prayer. Mike had written a song based on II Chronicles 7:14 called "Heal our Land." He was scheduled to sing it during the prayer ceremony on the town common. While there, an older couple from Dwight Chapel, Tim and Carol, offered us their home to stay in while they went to Tennessee to visit grandchildren. What a blessing for us to have some time out of our small camper in a real house. We went over to pick up the key and see their place before they left. It was during this visit we asked about bringing Cassie Lynn with us, while we house sat. Carol said, "That's fine, we used to have a cat and neither of us are allergic." When she took Mike to show him the circuit breaker box, I said to Tim, "We have been praying about finding a home for Cassie, do you think that you guys could adopt her?" He smiled at me and said, "Ask Carol when she comes back." When I asked Carol, her response was, "I've been praying about adopting another cat, and the Lord told me to wait, He'll bring me one." God has a way of answering prayer in a big way! This was a perfect solution. We moved into Tim and Carol's house with Cassie Lynn for 10 days and then we left her there when we moved back into our camper after Tim and Carol returned. She was happy and well cared for, and we had visitation rights.

Our camper was parked at the home of Kevin and Becky Laramie and their boys, Cameron and Collin. Becky had offered their place to us when we began the ministry full time, as we had sold our house in

Massachusetts and needed a place to be when we weren't at a festival. At the time, we didn't really know Becky and Kevin. They graciously opened up their home for laundry and showers and anything else we needed.

Foolishly thinking we were self reliant people, the beginning of our full time ministry demonstrated our complete dependence on God's people. The Lord used various people to show us it was all about Him and never about us. Robert, from our church, had agreed to check our mail and forward it to us wherever we happened to be. Other folks helped out with gifts of money and food. And we were often invited to have dinner with church family members when we arrived back from the festival circuit.

Thinking back on our first year out full time, one of the most unique things that happened to us was when we first met the owners of "MO." We were camped at White's Beach in Brunswick, Maine. On Sunday afternoon, we happened upon a 1998 Winnebago Chieftain with Maine plates that read, "Pray USA" and had a For Sale sign on the front windshield. We met the owners, Alan & Judy from Westport Island, Maine. White's Beach was their very first Bluegrass festival. They had come to see a neighbor play and to take their motor home out one last time before consigning it to sell.

They turned out to be lovely Christian people and they were more than happy to show us their beloved motor home that they fondly called "MO." Mike didn't get

past the \$68,000 price tag. I did look a lot closer at all that MO had to offer. A full size refrigerator, a full size bathtub, 100 gallons of fresh water and 50 gallons each of grey and black water capacity. Compared to our camper, this was the Ritz Carlton. I loved the slide-outs and Corian counters, the closet space in the bedroom and the overall comfortable homelike feeling it had. Mike just looked at the price tag. We had an instant connection with Alan & Judy and we agreed to stop by to spend a couple of days with them at their home later in the summer.

Mike did do some research on the motor home and quickly decided that there wasn't any way that we could afford it and told Alan that when he called us a week or so later. I filed it in the back of my mind as being a perfect tool for the Gospel Sing Ministry.

We did visit with Alan & Judy about a month later and enjoyed very good fellowship with them. They were struggling with the denomination they were involved with at the time and with prayer and Bible discussion the Lord used us to help them make some good decisions about where they should be worshipping and serving God.

In August, our first year out full time, we also visited with Alan & Pat Lane in Enfield, Maine. The Lord had put us together with them through their son and daughter-in-law who were stationed in Turkey at the time. Chris & Melissa had been members of Dwight Chapel and Melissa had contacted us about Chris' folks while we were in Florida. When it comes to the Lane family, we call ourselves the middle kids. Alan and Pat



are twelve years older than us and we are twelve years older than Chris and Melissa. Through Alan and Pat, we were introduced to a church in Otter Creek, Florida. During the visit with them there, we made plans to see them in Maine. This visit resulted in us being introduced to another church.

The New England summer of 2004 was very wet, and as a result, when we pulled our camper into the Lane's backyard, we sank in the mud and got completely stuck. Across the street was a Christian youth center with a gravel lot. Mike asked Pat, "What church owns that property?" Then he called the pastor of Enfield Baptist church. We ended up meeting the pastor and speaking at his church that very evening. As it turns out, one of his members knew us from Bluegrass and had been to the Gospel Sing at the Blistered Fingers festival a few times. Following the service, the son of this Bluegrass member towed us out of the Lane's back yard and we were able to park on the gravel lot next to the youth center. Since that initial encounter, we have developed a deep spiritual relationship with this body of believers and visit with them whenever we are in the area.

Towards the end of August that first year, while parked at the Blistered Fingers festival in Sidney, Maine, Mike and I briefly discussed the yearly bills we would have coming due in the fall. We were amazed to think we were in August already and somehow between small donations and the annuity, we were keeping up with our monthly needs. We needed about \$2000.00 to cover the cost of our insurances and property tax in South

Carolina as well as the excise tax for our van. We did not lament over it; we briefly discussed the possibility of taking some temporary work when we got back to South Carolina. Within the next 10 days the Lord raised that amount of money through no effort of ours. We found five one hundred dollar bills in an envelope that someone had anonymously stuck through the van window. At Blistered Fingers, a wealthy business man handed us a check for \$500. Between those two donations, a church service, and another couple sowing into the ministry, our need was completely covered. God is good!

We finished the New England circuit in 2004 and, after Labor Day, we found ourselves parked at my parent's house in Hatfield, Massachusetts. We were both emotionally and physically drained from several months of living in our camper in less than perfect weather conditions. This was a season of lots of rain and mud! Our last festival had been Thomas Point Beach in Brunswick, Maine. During the festival, a lady named, Karen, wife of Herman McGee, the banjo player for White Mountain Bluegrass, clutched her heart and died in Herman's arms. It was emotional and sad as she was so young, just 47 years old. We spent quite a bit of time counseling and consoling many of our Bluegrass friends following Karen's untimely death.

Throughout the summer, Mike had continued to look at bigger tow vehicles as we couldn't upgrade to a larger camper without a larger tow vehicle. He looked at a box truck in near-by Northampton, while we were

staying at my parent's house. A box truck is big enough to house the office stuff. So of course, that would mean that our only vehicle would be a big box truck.

At this point, I said to him, "Would you please call Alan and see if MO is still available for sale?" Mike called Alan that evening and asked about the availability of MO. Alan's response was, "When I took it to the RV dealership to consign, I told him how much I needed to get for it and he could sell it for whatever he wanted to anyone on the planet except, if Mike or Mary Robinson want to buy it, I reserve the right to sell it directly to them."

Even though we had told him several times that we couldn't afford it, the Lord had told him that it was going to be ours. With that said, Alan agreed to sell it to us for much less than his original sticker price. He would allow us to pick it up on his tags and insurance and give us time to sell our camper and van and make payments to him over time. He really wanted to see it used for ministry, and because of his obedience to the Lord's commands, we were able to purchase MO later in the fall.

We flew to Portland, Maine and stayed with Alan & Judy for a couple of days, and then drove the motor home back to South Carolina. It needed some work, and Alan agreed to pay for the needed work on it under his warranty. We advertised our camper on Ebay and found a couple in Louisiana to buy it. We traded our conversion van for a small Saturn SL2, fondly known as the "clown car" or "CC", and the dealership cut us a

check for the difference. We had CC set up to tow behind MO. By the end of the 2004 season, we were able to completely pay for the motor home with funds from the sale of the camper and van, and from what we had left over in our savings account.

We praised the Lord for His mighty provision as we planned to go out again and minister in 2005.

## Chapter Five

What is this Yankee doing in South Carolina? Or how many trips can we make up north in the Clown Car?

Heading out in January of 2005 was a completely different experience than the year before. We had a year of traveling and surviving on the road under our belt. We had witnessed the Lord's hand in divine appointments and financial provision and a multitude of answered prayers. Heading south in a motor home is a much different experience than driving a van with a camper in tow. As we began our journey south, Mike

and I continually praised the Lord for the provision of the motor home. We love MO! It is the perfect tool for the job.

When we arrived at Yeehaw Junction, Florida the second year out, we entered with experienced exuberance. We arrived with a full tank of water, filled through a filter at the Flying J in St. Augustine. We also had the propane tank filled in case it was another cold Yeehaw festival. After getting the motor home set up we walked around the field to what felt like a homecoming experience. We knew by name so many of these folks and they knew us. I remember thinking: *This is what Heaven is going to feel like. Seeing old friends who have gone before and reconnecting with people I haven't seen in a long while.* I can only imagine the joy in Heaven of seeing the souls of those that the Lord allowed us to have a part in their salvation experience.

The Gospel Sing was well attended in part, because Valerie Smith, leader of a national Bluegrass band, had announced from her stage show on Saturday evening that she was going to join us at the Sunday morning sing-a-long with her fiddle. Unlike the year before with just three pickers, we had a jam band of 20 playing music with another 100 in the singing crowd.

At this festival we set up our tent and booth for the first time, and had Bibles and tracts and contact information available. We manned it for about 4 hours after the Gospel Sing and had an opportunity to give away a

couple of Bibles and to talk and pray with several people.

One of the most unique things during our second season out in Florida happened at The Indian Mound Festival in Okeechobee with Marty Raybon and Full Circle, a well known Bluegrass band. Prior to coming back to his Bluegrass roots, he was a country star in the band Shenandoah. We had met him our first year in Florida and had an instant brother connection which often happens among believers. This year, he had asked us if he could come out and help us with the Gospel Sing. On Sunday morning he showed up dressed in a suit and quickly figured out it was an all included jam, so he just blended in with the other pickers. As we were finishing up, he asked Mike if he could pray. He spoke to the crowd of a hundred or so people and asked for prayer requests. He turned his guitar so that the back was facing him and he wrote down names and needs of the people who raised their hands. He then prayed for each one of them by name, testifying that had Jesus said to Lazarus “Arise” without calling him by name, all the graves would have opened up. It was so moving and powerful that folks still talk about it.

The following festival was held in Arcadia, at the Rodeo Grounds. It was the last Tater Hill Reunion festival before their band was going to disband due to age and health issues. It was very emotional for them, as they had done a festival for 17 years, always giving the proceeds to the Desoto County Special Olympics program.

Mike's Mom came over from Sebring, and stayed with us in our motor home during the festival. It was somewhat difficult to have a house guest in the middle of our mission field, and we both felt quite conflicted between wanting to make sure Mom was having a good time and serving our folks in the Bluegrass community. It was good however, for Mom to witness a Gospel Sing of Tater Hill's size. She had been with us at the very first Gospel Sing in Gettysburg. Our first one consisted of about 40 folks under a tent in the rain. The Tater Hill Festival had 250 singers and 28 pickers in our jam band. Mom was so proud to hear Mike preach to such a large crowd and made sure to tell everyone who stopped by our booth how she just knew he was going to be a preacher from the time he was a small boy.

The other visit we had in Florida in 2005 was from my eldest son John. Even though he had made a trip to South Carolina in early January, before we left for Florida, he decided to leave the snow and cold of Massachusetts and spend some more time with Mom in March. His January visit had brought him to a decision to sell his trailer and move into our double-wide in South Carolina. I loved this idea of having my son with me when I was off the road and I was excited that he wanted to come to Florida to see us while we were on the mission field. He brought a girlfriend for me to meet and we let them borrow the car for a few days to go to Busch Gardens and do some tourist stuff while we traveled over to Auburndale, and The International Market World festival. It was a little uncomfortable when they came back to the festival, as it was quite

apparent to this mother's heart that this girl definitely wasn't the one for John. And by this time in the trip, he knew it too.

The festival at the International Market World is very different from most festivals. It is held inside of a huge circus tent and there is a carnival atmosphere that surrounds the whole time. There are alligators to look at and a warehouse full of vendors who sell everything from fresh vegetables and fruit to household goods, clothes, shoes, jewelry and just about anything else you can think of. It is quite an amazing place and Mike and I have returned there many times since our first encounter.

We made a car trip over to Tampa following the Auburndale festival to visit with Mike's childhood pastor from Broadview Baptist Church in Maryland. He had retired to Tampa after a full career of ministry and church planting. When Mike was 13 years old, he had walked down the center aisle of Broadview and surrendered his life to full time Christian service. Of course, it took 33 more years before we actually went into full time ministry. The Lord's timing and will is often quite different from our plans. I believe Pastor Twine was quite blessed to hear of our mission and to know the influence he had on Mike's spiritual walk.

The following festival was held on the banks of the Withlachooshee River in Dunnellon. It was held over Easter weekend and we didn't plan to do our Gospel Sing, as the promoters had a service scheduled under the pavilion and didn't see any additional value in the



Gospel Sing. The band of folks that we had ministered to all season disagreed and wanted to have Easter Sunday service with their familiar preacher. We decided to hold it in a picking tent of one of our Bluegrass friends and scheduled it for a time it wouldn't conflict with the festival. We dressed up more than usual as we planned to attend an Easter service at the near-by Baptist church following our service at the festival. We were amazed at how our dress caused issues with some of our folks who felt uncomfortable because they didn't have dress clothes with them. It was a lesson for us to always attempt to be approachable when we are ministering on this mission field. Truthfully, had we known what the service at the big Baptist church was going to be like, we wouldn't have bothered going. For a huge building with a lot of folks all dressed up in their Easter finest, it was dead as a door-nail! I was far more spiritually renewed and challenged by Mike's message to our flock than the lackluster singing and preaching at the Baptist church.

Following the Withlachoochee Bluegrass festival we camped at Village Pines Campground in Inglis. We had a church service to do at Otter Creek Baptist on Wednesday night. The owner's of Village Pines, Bob and Bobbie came over to Otter Creek and participated in the service we led. They are strong believers and after seeing our Power Point presentation and understanding our calling to the Bluegrass community, they invited us to stay with them whenever we come through the area free of charge. We discussed with them the idea of hosting a Bluegrass weekend of jamming and fellowships with Mike preaching and

began to confirm details to have it for the following year. This initial encounter was the beginning of many opportunities for fellowship and ministry at Village Pines in the years that have followed.

On our way back to South Carolina, we made an unexpected stop at the Mossy Oak Music Park in Guyton, Georgia, the home park of the Lonesome Whistle Band, friends we had first met in Vermont. We were traveling to nearby Statesboro, Georgia to visit with an old colleague of Mike's, and it took us right past Mossy Oak, so we decided to stop by and see it. Becky Rose came out and greeted us and took us on her golf cart to show us the park. It was during this unexpected visit that we heard the amazing story of God's grace to Becky. She had been involved in an awful rollover car wreck that had resulted in a terrible brain injury. After laying in a coma for twelve days she awoke in her hospital bed without any memory of who she was. Interestingly, she didn't remember her husband, parents or the children she had given birth to, but she did remember her faith in Jesus. As she described her long struggle to relearn how to be a wife and mother, and the faith it took to get her through each day, we were inspired by the rawness of her courage. This was the beginning of a relationship with Becky and her family that brought us back to the park several times during the course of the ministry. We had decided during this meeting, we would start the beginning of the "northern tour" by coming back to Georgia for the May show at Mossy Oak Music Park.



We only took a couple of weeks off the circuit before heading out to New England, just after the festival at Mossy Oak over Memorial Day weekend. In those few weeks, our son John met a girl named Stefanie whom he was convinced was the one. He told me in a phone call that she reminded him of me and then used my own maternal words against me which were, "When the right one comes along, you will know it." They met on April 22, 2005 and by the time we arrived back in Massachusetts they were already living together in an apartment in Palmer as John had sold his trailer in anticipation of moving to South Carolina to be with us. Stefanie had a two year old son named Tyler from a previous relationship. I had really mixed feelings about this whole situation. On the one hand, after meeting her, I could see the attraction for John. On the other hand, I had experienced having a step-son in my first marriage and I know how difficult a relationship that already includes a child can be. The bigger problem that crossed my mind was the fact that Stefanie was not a believer. She had not been raised in the church and didn't know anything about the Bible or faith in Christ. John had made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ when he was twelve years old. He hadn't been living his faith since my divorce from his father, but I knew it was still there as it tended to come out whenever he was in difficult circumstances.

The summer season of 2005 had many memorable situations. It was the summer of mud. When we arrived at the Blistered Fingers Festival early week in Sidney, Maine, we parked next to the corral at the Silver Spur

Riding Club. It was already muddy as it had been a wet June, and we spun in the muck as we were getting MO parked. By the time the actual festival was due to start, the promoters had arranged to put campers in a paved parking lot four and a half miles from the festival grounds. The slippery, smelly and sinking mud would not allow for heavy campers to park safely with all the additional rain early in the week, plus the weekend forecast called for even more rain. Greg & Sandy rented a van and we also used Sandy's SUV to shuttle people from the parking lot to the festival. Mike and I volunteered to drive the shuttles and we put on 450 miles in two days. It was a fun job and gave us unique opportunity to witness to a captured audience, albeit only four miles at a time. We also shuttled some of the bands, including the Lewis family band from the parking lot to the stage. It was quite a memorable weekend, with people sloshing around in the sinking mud with Wal-Mart bags tied around their shoes, and tractors pulling campers out of the mud on Sunday to leave. Those of us who love this Bluegrass music have to be a hardy bunch as we are often faced with less than ideal situations for enjoying an outdoor music concert.

This was also the summer that we were determined to see a moose in Maine. All over the highways in Maine are signs that say to be cautious because of moose. In the six summers that we had been traveling up to Maine for Bluegrass festivals, we had never seen a moose. We had almost hit one near the Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts, but not once had we seen one in Maine. We went on several "moose hunts" all over Maine. Alan and Pat Lane took us to the Golden Road in

Millinocket, where van loads of tourists go to see the moose. If you ever meet me in person, ask me to show you my sign language, for “Sadly, there are no moose in Maine.” I even reported in our update letters that I was convinced that there was only one moose being held hostage in an obscure zoo in Bangor that the travel magazines took out for photo opportunities to lure the flatlanders to come to Maine. This of course resulted in being sent many emails with large picture attachments of moose in backyards and people even sought us out at the festivals with newspaper clippings of accidents involving moose. Alan made a moose call and even had Mike drink the official drink of Maine, which is this really awful tasting stuff called Moxie, to get the jinx off of him. Mike wore his LL Bean clothes including a Maine hat, but unfortunately we just weren’t meant to see a moose in Maine during the summer of 2005.

During the summer, Mike’s Bluegrass band, The Cowtippers were scheduled to play at several of the festivals at which we were also leading the Gospel Sing. He also emceed a few of the shows. Mike is a very talented man. He is a good singer and guitar player and his winning personality makes him a good emcee. The Lord’s anointing power has given Mike strong Holy Spirit driven messages which have blessed many in the Bluegrass community.

While we were at the Pemi Valley festival in Campton, New Hampshire, it became apparent to us that Mike’s involvement in The Cowtippers was causing some confusion with those on the mission field. We received a lot of comments from people who had been coming out to the Gospel Sings for years. They had no idea

Mike was such a good singer and guitar player. At the Gospel Sing, we are more concerned about showcasing others who attend, and we just lead the singing. Mike actually used some of the comments we heard during his message at Pemi Valley. He clearly stated our purpose is telling people about Jesus and anything else we did at a festival was a distant second to that goal. By the end of that summer, we made the decision that it was time to disband The Cowtippers. It was too difficult to keep the band together with our travel schedule, and we felt the Lord was calling us to focus on the ministry and not divide our attention at festivals between the ministry and taking care of the band.

We had three more festivals in Maine following Pemi Valley. Perkinstock in Blue Hill, Maine, Blistered Fingers in Sidney and Thomas Point Beach in Brunswick. By this point in the season, I was so ready to be home for a little while before going out to finish our circuit with two events in New York State.

When we arrived back at Camp Laramee in Belchertown, after Labor Day weekend at Thomas Point Beach, we drove CC over to Palmer on Wednesday to see Stefanie and her son Tyler. John was away on a business trip. John had asked Stefanie to be his bride with a beautiful diamond ring at the grand finale of the fireworks at Grenville Park in Ware during the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration earlier in the summer.

While we were visiting with them, I went online to check email with their fast computer connection only to find I had several emergency messages to call my

family. I checked my phone and sure enough, I had missed a call and the voice mail message from my sister Dori. Unbeknownst to me, our older sister Barbara had been in the hospital in Springfield with pneumonia and she had taken a turn for the worse. She had been intubated and taken to the Intensive Care Unit at Baystate Medical Center. The doctors had asked the family to come. which is never a good sign.

We quickly loaded into the car and began our drive to the hospital. On our way, I called Kevin Laramee and asked him to call Becky at work. She is an Intensive Care nurse at Baystate Medical and she was at work that day. Mike and I quickly made our way to the hospital and found my family in the family waiting room outside of the Intensive Care Unit. Becky, my dearest friend and sister in Christ, who, as soon as she had received the call from Kevin, had been going back and forth between my family and the doctors who were working on keeping my sister alive. The pneumonia had gone into her blood stream and she was in critical condition. After several hours of “hospital time” waiting, we were finally given permission to go in to see her. Her appearance was ghostly and frightening and I remember feeling so helpless and afraid. Because of Becky, we were all allowed to go in to see her and the usual Intensive Care rules did not apply. Following that shocking visit, my father, along with my sister Dori and brother-in-law Mike left. We stayed a while longer to minister to my niece Susan and nephew Joe before going back to the MO for a couple of hours of sleep. Before a restless night of tossing and turning, I sent this email out to the Gospel Sing update list.

September 7, 2005

Greetings:

Mike and I just returned from the CCU of Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, Massachusetts where my sister Barbara Vanasse is fighting for her life. She has pneumonia that has gone into her blood stream and she is in very critical shape. The doctors are doing everything they know how to do, however the next 24 to 48 hours are critical and she may die. She is only 54 and has two children and 4 grandchildren who love and depend on her. Please pray for her. The doctors are estimating that she will be in CCU for 14 to 21 days before being moved to a regular room, that is, if she survives the next few days.

I am not prepared to lose my sister. I'm sending this out to the Gospel Sing update list as I know many of you are prayer warriors and she needs prayer for healing. Also, please pray for my nephew Joe and my niece Susan. They lost their father about 5 years ago and they are still very young and need their mother. They are staying at the hospital tonight and Mike and I and my other two sisters will be going back in the morning.

Thank you!

In Christ,  
Mary Robinson  
[www.bluegrassgospelsing.com](http://www.bluegrassgospelsing.com)

The next several days we were on such an emotional rollercoaster. One meeting with the doctor in charge of her care gave her only a 40 percent chance of survival.



My sister Patti, who is also a nurse, had traveled down from New Hampshire. She and Becky could talk about Barbara's condition using medical terminology, and thankfully, they would break it down for those of us who needed things explained more plainly.

Barbara's organs were being shut down one by one, by whatever infection was raging through her body. Mike and I spent hours counseling with our niece and nephew. Barbara's health was hanging in the balance as the medical staff dialed one medication up and another down. I had the task of trying to be very upbeat and positive with my elderly mother, knowing all the while that if Barbara died, it would kill her too. Mom's health was already frail, and the stress of losing a child would be the end of her.

My niece, Susan was such a blessing to watch during this whole time. She kept a medical journal of everything that happened to her Mom. She basically lived at the hospital, with brief breaks at Joe's house for some sleep and showers. It was such a stressful time for everyone. We stayed at the hospital for hours on end, waiting for the next opportunity to go in to see Barbara. We were suppose to leave to go to New York for a private Bluegrass picking party, but there was no chance I was leaving my sister's side while her health hung in the balance.

After several days of touch and go, the medical team finally figured out Barbara had somehow been exposed to Legionnaires disease, and once they knew what they were dealing with and they could treat it specifically, she began to make positive progress.

Mike and I decided to go the following weekend to the Catskill Mountain Bluegrass Festival in Accord, New York, and as we were driving in, we heard from my sister Patti that Barbara was responsive and beginning to wake up. The following day, my niece called to say that the doctor's had removed the breathing tube and she was breathing on her own. They moved her into a regular room and we went to see her as soon as we returned from the festival in Accord. She suffered from the affects of the sedation for a few days, in what is called ICU psychosis. It was a little frightening, and also somewhat hilarious, as Barbara, under the best of circumstances is a force to be reckoned with. Thankfully, after a few days, the drug induced psychosis passed and she began to be herself again.

It is hard for me to describe all the emotions that I experienced as we traveled this shadow of death road with Barbara. She is eight and half years older than I am, and although we are very different people, we are so very close. Barbara is the kind of person who, when she enters a room, it is like the lights get turned on. She is funny and smart and very kind hearted underneath a veneer of edginess. She can be irreverent and coarse, and honestly she could sell ice to Eskimos. We have shared a lot of life, both good and bad, and I could not and can not imagine my life without her.

Mike and I stayed on in Massachusetts for a few more weeks passed the crisis with Barbara as he had to have a minor medical procedure done and needed time to recover before making the trip back to South Carolina. When we arrived back home in Roebuck in the middle

of October, we were greeted by a freshly dusted and vacuumed house, thanks to the sisters in Christ from Stone Station Baptist Church. The house was in fairly decent shape, considering the amount of time that we had been away from it. When I opened the blinds to the back deck patio, the large glass doors were home to a magnificent spider web, and two of the biggest and ugliest spiders I had ever seen. I think people in the next county could hear me screaming. I told Mike if the house caught on fire, and that was the only door out, I would be dying! He used the sprayer on the outside hose to remove the spiders off the window from a safe distance.

We had planned on being home a few weeks and doing ministry at some of the local churches before heading back north in the car for the Christmas Season. Those plans changed with a phone call from our son John. My ex-husband, Bernie, who had been diagnosed with a severe form of Parkinson's disease called Progressive Supernuclear Palsy (PSP), was acting very strangely. He was having hallucinations that involved my youngest son, and he actually had told the police Stephen was plotting to kill him for his money. Stephen was hauled into the police station with his new girlfriend, Ashley, and questioned for several hours. Of course Stephen had no idea what was going on and responded to the officer's statement of "You are looking at several years" with "For a couple of parking tickets?" After the interview, the police officer told Bernie, "Stephen has absolutely no malice in him and he wouldn't hurt a hair on your head".

That night, Stephen locked his bedroom door, because he was understandably shaken by the events of the day. During the night, the police were at his bedroom door because Bernie had called them to say that he and his brother John and Stefanie were upstairs waiting to kill him. Well, they found Stephen sound asleep, and of course, John and Stefanie were not there. The police suggested Bernie go to the hospital, and he was transported by ambulance to Mary Lane hospital in Ware. The following day, B.J., my step-son, John and Stephen met to figure out a plan of action. B.J.'s wife, Jill, is a pharmacist, and she was quite concerned about all the different medication Bernie was taking. They arranged to take him to his neurologist to figure out what was going on, since the hospital had no reason to keep him.

Bernie's doctor told the kids the disease itself causes hallucinations and they suggested a different medication to see if that would help. Following the appointment, John and B.J. left Stephen and Bernie at the house with Stephen getting ready to prepare Bernie's dinner. It wasn't even 30 minutes before the next hallucinations crisis, and this time Bernie was brought to Wing Memorial in Palmer for evaluation, and was not going to be released until he could function properly.

I kept our cell phone near me at all times in South Carolina during this crisis, and was awoken early one morning by John. I could barely understand him as he was upset and crying. When he finally could put words together he said, "Mom, come home." We were packed and in the car within an hour to head to Massachusetts.

I was waiting to be asked to come. I have learned, as my boys developed into young men, to adjust my parenting to meet their need for autonomy, and only respond with advice and help when asked. Of course, I sometimes forget and open my mouth before thinking, but I honestly try not to impose my opinions on them unless they ask. Although I must admit, the mother in me tends to come out with exuberant expressions of my opinion at the most awkward moments in time. Thankfully, the Lord is still working on me!

Mike was so wonderful during this time. He understood my need to be near my children, and he also understood how they might perceive him if he involved himself. He stayed at the Laramie's while I was at the hospital with Bernie and the boys. Becky & Kevin had set up a bed in Cameron & Collin's home school classroom, so we had a place to stay. Kevin had talked about wanting to build a room in their basement to go with the new pellet stove, so while I was ministering to my ex-husband, Mike was helping build a room at the Laramie's house.

There was a lot of drama during this stretch of time. B.J., the eldest of Bernie's son's, had mistakenly thought he was going to inherit a big amount of money when Bernie died, and was quite upset to learn most of Bernie's earthly valuables had already been put into Stephen's name. I believe Bernie's heart was to repay Stephen for his many years of care during Bernie's suffering with his PSP.

B.J. also made it clear he was quite unhappy at my involvement in the situation, and it made for some awkward moments. Bernie, however, asked for me every day that he was coherent. The doctors at Wing Memorial in Palmer had put Bernie into the psychiatric ward because of his hallucinations. They took him off of all of his medications, including his medication for the PSP, which resulted in his losing the ability to walk or swallow. It is hard to say if the lack of medication caused it, or if it was the result of the end of the disease. He was eventually moved into a regular room, and John asked me to stay with Bernie while he worked. My kids were exhausted from all the time spent with their father, so I was happy to share the burden.

During this afternoon, Bernie, having a few moments of lucidity actually apologized to me and told me that he loved me. I had the opportunity to thank him for our wonderful sons and to forgive him for the abusiveness that I endured during the course of our marriage. I had the chance to witness to him in word and deed by wiping the drool from his mouth, rubbing his feet, and telling him how much Jesus loves him. John came in just as the ambulance drivers arrived to transport Bernie to UMASS Medical in Worcester for better care. I watched my beloved first born son dress his father and get him ready to be transported, and my heart swelled with pride over the awesome man he had become.

Within a few days, Bernie's health continued to deteriorate and he was ventilated and in and out of consciousness. The last time I went to see him, John

asked me to please tell him one more time about Jesus. So with Stefanie and John listening behind the curtain of the ICU room, I took Bernie's hand and said, "Bernie, its Mary." "John has asked me to please tell you about Jesus one more time." "Jesus loves you and wants to be your Savior." Bernie's reaction was to tear up and cry, so I prayed the sinner's prayer with him and, although I can't know for certain if he received Christ, I would like to believe he did. At dinner with John & Stefanie following this encounter, we discussed my going back to South Carolina, as there wasn't much left for me to do now that Bernie was in the ICU. In John's words, "Mom, you've done everything you can do, it's OK for you to go home."

The following day, Mike and I left Massachusetts after worship at Dwight and began our travel back south. We stopped at a hotel somewhere in Pennsylvania, and while there, John called to say that he and Stefanie witnessed a terrible accident on the Massachusetts Turnpike. They were on their way back from seeing Bernie in Worcester and witnessed a truck cross two lanes of traffic and nearly hit them. He asked me to talk with Stefanie, as she was quite shaken and feared for her eternal destination. John did not feel adequate to answer her questions because he had been out of fellowship for so long. She had witnessed the love of Christ in me to Bernie, and between that and the accident, her heart was ready to receive the truth of the Gospel. She prayed the sinner's prayer with me on the phone, and the very next day began to tell her family and friends about her conversion. Joy filled my soul. I

could wholeheartedly accept this upcoming marriage because they both belonged to Christ.

Eight days after arriving back in Roebuck, Stefanie called to say that Bernie had died. I was surprised by how emotionally the news hit me. I struggled so much with the distance again as I knew my children were hurting and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

There was more stress and drama with B.J. over the estate following Bernie's death, but eventually it was worked out, with John stepping in to protect his younger brother. Grief can bring on such strong emotions, and as much as I might want to take my biological children's side, I know that B.J. was hurting too, and my heart felt for the whole sad situation. Now, my struggle was with deciding about pouring myself back into the Clown Car and driving the 950 miles back to New England for Bernie's funeral. It was going to be right before Thanksgiving, as he was being cremated. John actually helped me make the decision by saying to me, "Mom, if you come to Dad's funeral, it will go a long way in showing Stephen how much you love him." My pride in my first born son and his complete unselfishness again confirmed for me that he is not only my son, but also my brother in Christ. With Mike again being willing to drive me back and stay out of the way of my boys grieving, we loaded the car and heading back to Massachusetts.

Mike dropped me off at John & Stefanie's apartment in Palmer the morning of Bernie's funeral, and we met Bernie's twin brother, Lenny and his late brother Bill's



wife, Priscilla, and then drove to the funeral home in Palmer. When I walked in and saw all the pictures that included my life with Bernie and began to see old neighbors and friends, I was glad I had come. Stephen didn't know I was coming, and when he looked up and saw me, the surprise and joy on his face spoke volumes to my heart. At last, after years of separation from my baby boy, things were finally going to get better and I would have my precious child back in my life where he belongs.

At the funeral, which was held in a Roman Catholic Church in Three Rivers, my heart was tender with compassion towards B.J., who really was hurting over losing his father. Since our divorce, I have made numerous attempts to reconcile my relationship with B.J. I have sent him cards and letters, gifts for his children, and boxed up his childhood memories and sent them to him. I've made a couple of more attempts since his father's death, but to no avail. He also has nothing to do with either of his brothers. It is truly sad. After a Thanksgiving dinner at John & Stefanie's in Palmer, which included her family and Stephen and Ashley, we drove back to South Carolina for just a few weeks before heading back to Massachusetts for Christmas. During the fall and early winter of 2005, we put just under 6000 miles on the clown car, and on our bodies, going back and forth between South Carolina and New England.

Of course, 2006 was just around the corner, and that meant loading up the MO and heading back out to do

the Bluegrass Circuit to survive whatever trials it would bring.

## Chapter Six

### Life Changes, Wedding, Birth and Death

As we entered Yeehaw Junction in January of 2006 we began our third year in full time ministry, and seven years since the very first Gospel Sing. Almost immediately, we noticed we weren't able to send or receive email as we had in the past, when parked in the exact same field. We do a lot of communicating through the internet, so this became a focus of exasperation. We discovered through calling AT&T

that the outdated analog towers we used, were systematically being replaced with digital equipment.

After much discussion about cost, we spent an afternoon at the AT&T store across from the Daytona 500 Race track. We wound up signing a contract that raised our monthly bill, but after several frustrating weeks of no internet, we were finally able to communicate again, using the new digital technology.

You would think that beginning our third year of full time ministry, we would be accustomed to life on the road, but there is always an adjustment period after spending any time at home. Even with the motor home, the space is still very cramped. And not having the basic necessities of electricity or television and limited water also takes some readjusting. This particular season was very wet and cold which makes living in a camper all the more cramped and uncomfortable.

Early in our third season out in Florida, we had decided to go to a campground near Ocala so that I could visit with my first cousin, Maureen. The map software we were using took us down a fire road. We found ourselves driving a 34 foot motor home with a Saturn SL2 hauled behind it in the rain on a narrow wet dirt road. With no place to turn around, we encountered a large tree branch which had fallen across the road. Preacher Mike had no choice but to shimmy up the tree with a hand saw to cut the branch down so we could safely pass. It seemed like it took forever, but finally the branch was cut down and we were back gingerly driving on the wet dirt for what seemed like miles and

miles. Finally, we got to a real road that led us to the campground. We've had countless stressful moments like this as we've traveled the roads doing the ministry.

One of the highlights of our 2006 season was meeting Pastor Arlen & Lana Payne who minister at the Big Cypress Indian Reservation. Pastor Arlen had contacted us through our website when he had been searching for a logo. He liked ours and through email we had come up with the idea of bringing some of our Bluegrass friends to the Seminole Indian Reservation to camp and play music in between a couple of our festival dates. We arrived at the reservation ahead of our Bluegrass crowd and had the opportunity to meet with Arlen and Lana and get a basic understanding of the Seminole people. Pastor Arlen and Lana both enjoy and play Bluegrass music, so our ministry was intriguing to them, and we also enjoyed hearing about their ministry to the Seminole Tribe.

The following morning, I was amazed to see a Florida panther walk right in front of the motor home, turn around and give me a "What are you doing here" look. Arlen and Lana took us, along with some of Arlen's relatives who were also visiting the reservation, to Billie Swamp Safari. We enjoyed a time of touring the many attractions it had to offer, including an airboat ride, a swamp buggy ride, a critter show, and winding it up with a lunch at the Swamp Café. This excursion was such a blessing for us. We had not done anything just for fun since we had begun the ministry full time.

The following day we were joined at the reservation by seven of our Bluegrass friends in three other motor homes. In addition to our Bluegrass friends, we had been contacted by the Pursell family from Sunrise, Florida about the possibility of them doing a monthly Bluegrass gospel jam at their church. Like Pastor Arlen, they found us on the internet and we invited them to come to the reservation with their camper so we would have the opportunity to help them get started. We gave them copies of our songbook, shared our logo with them, and explained to them their need to have their own church's CCLI number on whatever additional songbooks they'd be printing. We enjoyed getting to know them and their talented children, and are happy to report that their monthly Gospel Jams have grown tremendously and the Lord continues to use them to minister to their community through their music.

The time at Big Cypress was spent jamming Bluegrass music, preaching, and listening to other preachers along with lots of eating. We had a couple of huge pot-luck suppers on different nights, with the tribe bringing in trucks full of food for us to have. It was interesting however, the Seminoles did not stay to eat with us, but felt obligated to bring food since we were their guests. When things wound down and people began to leave after the weekend had come to an end, I had an opportunity to sit with Lana on her front porch and have some sweet sister fellowship. It was spiritually refreshing for us both to share how the Lord had worked in our lives, and I often think back to that afternoon with thanksgiving.

The next festival, in Miami, was the first time we had the Bluegrass Gospel Sing T-shirts available to sell. Patti Keegan of Keegan's T's from Pennsylvania had designed a T-shirt with our logo and the saying, "It's OK I'm With the Band." We were amazed how many people purchased them, and over the years since then we smile every time someone shows up at the Gospel Sing wearing one of our T-shirts. While at the Miami festival, we were invited to take a day trip to the Florida Keys with some friends from Ontario. It was such a fun day. The couple who invited us treated us to a tour bus ride around Key West, as well as lunch. On the trip back, our cell phone rang and it was Tyler, our soon to be grandson, saying something I couldn't really comprehend. Stefanie soon took the phone and deciphered what Tyler was trying to tell me, which was that Mommy was having a baby. *What? My son is going to be a father? Wait a minute, you guys aren't married yet, how am I going to respond to this news?* Keep in mind, we were in a van full of Bluegrass friends (our mission field) and although I was actually thrilled at the thought of a baby, I couldn't respond with the happy grandma dance until I had a chance to process the news in the privacy of my motor home.

Following Miami, we decided to take a much needed break at a Passport America resort campground in Clewiston. It is a lovely place with a pool and hot tub, and most importantly, a place where nobody knows who we are. We were only going to be there for a couple of days. But, as usual, something had broken on MO, so we had to make a trip over to Okeechobee to an RV parts store to purchase a part. I stayed in the car

while Mike went in. He came out a few minutes later and announced, “We’re going to do a church service tonight here in Okeechobee.” Apparently, the man who was behind the counter recognized Mike from the Gospel Sing and invited us to speak and play at his church that night. It was a Wednesday. *I was not happy.* My response was, “Are you kidding me?” “Isn’t today supposed to be a day off?” “We’ll have to drive all the way back to Clewiston to get our instruments and supplies and then drive all the way back here, so the whole day is shot.” “Did it occur to you to ask me before you told him we would do this?” “I wanted to spend some time at the pool and just relax for a change.”

Of course, Michael didn’t understand my need to be anonymous for a day. He was defensive, and although somewhat repentant over making a decision without asking me, he still insisted we go. In his opinion, because folks support us to do ministry, we need to be available to do it whenever or wherever the opportunity arises. Over the course of the ministry, this sort of difference of opinion has caused friction between us. We are not wired the same way. Mike is an energizer bunny, never stopping and always wanting to be busy. I need rest and a chance to refuel. Mike gets his fuel from continuous work, and unfortunately, all I get from never having a chance to pull back and be anonymous is exhausted, depressed and physically sick. During these times, I cry out to the Lord for help. I often complain to Him about how unfair it is, and then I rest on the promise of eternity and know He will make all things right, in the end.

Our next festival was at Craig's RV in Arcadia. It is a lovely RV park and a great venue for a Bluegrass festival; however, over the course of several years, we've received bad news here more than any other place. In March of 2006, while at Craig's, we received a call from Julie Caouette, informing us that her husband Bernie had been diagnosed with bladder cancer. Intermingled with this news was the revelation that Bernie had asked Jesus to be his Savior while facing the mouth of the CAT scan machine. My reaction to this was a mixture of exuberant joy over his salvation and extreme sadness over the diagnosis. I found Mike, who was out playing music, to report to him what Julie had said.

Several years previous to this, Mike and I had witnessed to Bernie & Julie. We had spent hours talking about spiritual things with them and had given Bernie the NIV Study Bible. Our friendship with them included staying at their home and them flying to spend time with us in South Carolina. We played music together, talked for hours, laughed and truly enjoyed one another's company. We counted them as some of our very closest friends and prayed fervently for their salvation.

Mike purposely waited a couple of days before calling Bernie. In the course of his conversation with him, Bernie described himself as "The New Bernie." His attitude about the cancer was to place it in God's hands, but he strongly felt that he and Julie had work to do for God, and he trusted God would heal him. Mike suggested they go to Dwight Chapel on Sunday, and I



sent an email to brethren there, telling them the good news of Bernie's conversion. We stayed in constant touch with Bernie and Julie often praying with them over the phone, as Bernie faced decisions with his treatment options, and grew in his faith.

Another highlight of our 2006 Florida season was hosting our first Bluegrass Jam week at Village Pines Campground in Inglis in late March. We had several of our Bluegrass friends attend a week long camping and jamming time. We hosted a potluck and fish fry at our campsite one night during the week. On Saturday night, Bob, the owner, had arranged a local band to play on the little stage outside of the Recreation hall.

At the same time, my youngest son Stephen had planned to drive to Florida after work on Friday night to meet up with his girlfriend Ashley, who had flown down to visit her Mom. Stephen and Ashley wanted to see us during his trip to Florida as well, which thrilled my mother's heart. I was sitting, listening to the music on Saturday night wondering why I hadn't heard from Stephen yet. I knew he had left Massachusetts after 8:00 PM on Friday evening and when I had spoken with him on Saturday morning, he had driven through the night with no sleep, so I was concerned for his safety.

Mike and I were sitting in lawn chairs, watching the Big Cypress Band at Village Pines, when Mike leaned over to whisper to me, "I need to go get my jacket, I'll be right back." I sat through a couple more songs, and then it occurred to me that Mike hadn't come back yet. I could see our motor home directly behind the stage,

so I got up to investigate and was quite alarmed when Mike wasn't in the motor home and the cell phone was gone. In my imagination, I thought surely Stephen had had a terrible car accident and Mike was somewhere in the park trying to figure out what to do before he told me. I had worked myself up into a mother panic anxiety attack, when I looked out the front window and saw Mike walking with a little boy who looked just like Tyler, our soon to be grandson. Following close behind him were John and Stefanie. It took a second for it to register in my brain before I flew out of the motor home jumping for joy. I cried as I hugged Tyler and Stefanie and John. They had planned to surprise me and to deliver their April wedding invitation in person.

Mike had been counseling with John and Stefanie over the course of the winter on the phone, as he was going to be officiating at their wedding. I always left the motor home during these sessions and did laundry or took a walk to give Mike and the kids privacy. During one of these conversations, the kids told him their plan to come to surprise me. Mike had been on the phone with them directing them into the campground. Stephen also knew about their coming down, but he didn't tell me, as he knew they wanted to surprise me.

Tyler had just turned three years old. The kids moved their stuff into our motor home to spend a few days with us. It was a bit crowded, but thankfully, the weather was nice during their visit and we were able to go to the beach and to Homosassa Springs State Park to see the Manatees and other wildlife on display. I loved having my family there. It was such a bright spot in that season. We did spend a day visiting with Stephen and

Ashley while John and Stefanie stayed back at the campground.

On Sunday morning we lead the worship service in the recreation hall, and a couple we know from New York, Ron and Rose, were in attendance as were several others from the Bluegrass mission field who had come to Village Pines with us. For reasons only the Lord knows, the message Mike preached that morning spoke to Ron and Rose, and they asked to speak with us following the service.

We had met Ron and Rose in Florida our first year out. Eight months prior to this moment, Ron had called us on the cell phone. He was at the hospital with his head shaved getting ready for a brain tumor operation. He had our number from the front of our songbook, and he said, “I didn’t know who else to call to pray for me.” Thankfully, the tumor was benign and here we were together outside of our motor home counseling with them and praying the sinner’s prayer. It is unusual for a couple to both come to faith at the exact same time. The Lord chose this day for their new life to begin, and we are overjoyed at their growth and continued service in a good Bible believing church they attend back in their home state of New York. What a privilege to have a part in someone’s testimony of faith. We understand the Lord is ultimately in control of everything. In the ministry, we are planting seeds, watering seeds or harvesting the seeds, but it is HIS work, and we are powerless without HIM.

A couple of days later, the kids packed up to leave to go back home, and Mike and I headed over to Dunnellon, and the Withlacoochee Bluegrass Festival. While here, friends of ours from North Carolina asked if we would take possession of “Bob”, the traveling Bluegrass gnome. The small plastic gnome, belonging to the promoters of the Bass Mountain Bluegrass Festival in Snow Camp, North Carolina, was taking a Bluegrass vacation for several months. The idea was to take pictures and write about Bob’s adventure and send it back to Bass Mountain for their museum. We knew we could have some fun with a traveling gnome so we agreed to take him for a while.

We ended our Florida season in Perry. The Taylor County Chamber of Commerce puts on a Bluegrass festival in the state park. Dawn, the promoter, provided us a great campsite with water and electric hook-ups, which was a huge blessing after so many days of rough camping.

The weather in Perry was just beautiful, and a great way to end our Florida season after all the rain and mud earlier in the season. The Gospel Sing was the only scheduled event for Sunday morning. With 50 or so in attendance, Mike preached a message on good versus evil. He used the song “Here I Am” which had been sung by the band Mountain Heart on Saturday night. It is a song which is written from the devil’s point of view. Mike expertly interwove a message, taking the words from the song and contrasting them with what the Bible says. He worked it into an excellent message

that encouraged a response towards the Lord and away from the evil one.

Afterwards, we were swamped with folks who wanted T-shirts, Bibles and bumper stickers. Mike even went back to the motor home to get more T-shirts. At first we couldn't figure out why this week so many people wanted to buy T-shirts, and then we remembered we had asked for prayer for financial blessing to put gas in MO for our trip north.

We had a lot of fun with "Bob", the traveling Bluegrass gnome, at the Perry Festival. We took him and a group of friends from the festival with us to Golden Corral. We made him a black Harley jacket and took his picture on the back of Bob's motorcycle. We also made him a guitar and took his picture on stage playing with the Cherryholmes band. Of course, he attended the Gospel Sing and posed with our banjo playing friend, Keith. I put together a collage of pictures with captions and sent it to the folks at Bass Mountain. Then, once we had started the northern tour, several weeks later, I handed "Bob" off to a Canadian friend and musician named Shirley.

We left Perry and spent nine days in South Carolina before heading to Virginia. We spent Easter with Mike's Mom in Virginia and then left MO with folks from her church and borrowed her van to drive up to Massachusetts for my son's wedding. John and Stefanie had asked me to prepare several dishes for the reception, so having Mom's van to carry supplies in was indeed a blessing.

My son, John married his beautiful wife, Stefanie on Saturday, April 22, 2006. It was the anniversary of the first day they met. We arrived in Belchertown and stayed with Kevin and Becky. We prepared for the wedding and the rehearsal dinner while we stayed in the new room Kevin had built in the basement. He had finished what Mike had started the previous fall when we were there during my ex-husband Bernie's failing health and subsequent death. We call ourselves the Laramie's cellar dwellers when we don't have our motor home with us. They are our host family when we are in Massachusetts, and they are indeed as close as any other family members we have. Becky and I spent no less than seven hours cooking on Thursday, preparing for the Rehearsal dinner and preparing dishes for the wedding reception.

The day of the wedding was hectic to say the least, however, everything turned out beautifully. Michael, who led the ceremony, did an excellent job. Stefanie was absolutely gorgeous, and my precious first born son cried when he saw her come down the aisle. They are good for each other, and truthfully, I could not have hand picked a better wife for my son. I sang the song, "Battle Hymn of Love" right before they took their vows. We had recorded it just in case I was too emotional to pull it off, but thankfully with the Lord's help I was able to do it as a gift offering for my child. Tyler, our instant grandson, absolutely stole the show carrying the ring bearer pillow like a football and dropping it half-way down the aisle. Becky, who was the mistress of ceremony, had told him to go to Pup-

pup, and he obeyed and went running down the aisle to Mike. It was adorable.

The whole day was filled with seeing family and having fun. Due to my mother's failing health, the ceremony and reception were held at the same venue, so once we were able to get her there, she could just enjoy the day and not be worried about having to move again. I thought it was really touching how she insisted on getting out of her wheelchair to have her picture taken with my father and the new bride and groom. She often called John "my pet" and wasn't ashamed of saying he was her favorite grandson.

John and Stefanie had picked the song "Wind Beneath My Wings" for the mother and son dance. It was a surprise to me, and as I danced with my son and listened to the words, "You are my hero, you are the wind beneath my wings," I was a little overcome with emotion. I have always seen my role in both my boy's lives as being their first relationship on which every other would be built. I never wanted my sons to be mama's boys, but rather to be independent contributing members of society. In my opinion, a good mother works herself out of a job, and then can enjoy the fruit of her labor.

Stephen had my friends and other family members laughing most of the day. He has a very unique and clever sense of humor. Of course the amount of alcohol he consumed probably contributed to his antics. He went about kissing his relatives on the cheek while holding his camera out with his long arm to record the

event. He flirted shamelessly with my best friend, Debbie, who had traveled from Williamsburg, Virginia for the wedding. Debbie and I have been friends since we were toddlers, and she is like an aunt to him. When it was time for her to leave at the end of the day, he gave her the lightest peck on the lips and then turned to me to say, “I made out with your best friend,” all the while signing the “I love you” sign with both his hand and his mouth and then signing “Call me.” Debbie and I just belly laughed at how silly he was being.

After the weekend’s wedding festivities were over, Mike and I traveled back to Virginia. We had a concert and presentation at Calvary Baptist Church in Winchester. Unlike the other times we had brought music and a ministry presentation to Calvary, this time we had the help of a local Bluegrass band who were related to one of the deacons.

Next on our schedule was a Bluegrass festival in Buena Vista. Lorraine had invited us to do the Gospel Sing at the festival, which she was promoting. We arrived a few days ahead of her and worked the front gate to collect money and check in the early arrivals. It was fun and we enjoyed Lorraine and The Carolina Road Band as well as the beautiful scenery of the Blue Ridge Mountains that surround Glen Maury Park.



During this period of time, our dear friend, Bernie Caouette had his bladder removed at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. This treatment plan was



his best option for eradicating this aggressive form of cancer. Bernie's attitude about it was really amazing. Since his conversion to Christ, he accepted whatever lay ahead and even joked about how, with his bladder bag, he and Julie could hit the road with us in a motor home and he wouldn't ever have to pull off to pee.

After the festival in Buena Vista, we made our way back north to Massachusetts, stopping to do church services in Maryland and Pennsylvania. We were looking forward to having a few weeks with our home church. Dwight Chapel was beginning a building program, after many years of prayer and fasting, and we were excited to see what the Lord might do.

We were able to attend Dwight Chapel on Mother's Day in 2006, and following the service we headed to Hatfield to visit with my mother, Rose. While we were there, all but a couple of the family began to show up. Twenty-three relatives crammed into the kitchen at 56 Main Street in Hatfield. The amazing part is nobody planned this, it just happened. What a wonderful celebration for my mother, who never aspired to be anything great by the world's upside down standards, but achieved extreme greatness in being such an awesome MOM!

Before we started the New England circuit in June, we had a couple of events including a service at Dwight Chapel. The Cowtipplers, Mike's band played two sets of music during a fiddle contest in Hampstead, New Hampshire. Even though the band had officially disbanded, they would "come out of retirement" to play events if our schedule allowed it. Lynn from Dwight

Chapel, arranged for us to play a concert in a convalescent home for retired nuns in Petersham. Bernie and Julie joined us to bring music to the elderly nuns. It was really a blessing to see Bernie venture out after his bladder surgery and have so much fun co-ministering with us. It appeared the cancer was gone and he was on the road to recovery.

I was invited to attend my son and daughter-in-law, Stefanie's, first ultrasound appointment and to my surprise and joy, found out "Jelly Bean" was a girl. Having raised three boys, I was so excited to have a granddaughter and cautioned the update list to watch out, as I was sure I would be the most obnoxious grandmother ever. I even carried a picture of the ultrasound and showed complete strangers the image.

Our first festival in New England was in Detroit, Maine at the Night Drifters Snow Mobile Club. The weekend was a wash out with an abundance of rain and lots of sloppy mud. The actual festival was moved indoors to the clubhouse, and we were amused by a sign hanging prominently in the back of a truck that read. "Will Work for Sunshine."

We played the open stage on Saturday with a young musician named Ezra to spotlight the Gospel Sing and invite folks to come out for it. We often play the open stage at festivals we haven't done before to introduce ourselves to the crowd and invite them to attend on Sunday morning. The Gospel Sing was well attended for a small festival, with sixty or so people and a jam band comprised of local Maine band members. Mike

preached a good message on “What do you trust is the truth?” I am always impressed with how the Holy Spirit speaks through Mike in such a bold way.

We traveled from Detroit over to Gardiner to have Glenn examine the onboard generator. Glenn is an electronics engineer and he discovered the transfer switch was broken, which explained why the power wasn’t coming into the coach. During this visit, we decided to let Glenn order and install a solar panel on the roof of the motor home. Glenn and his wife, Holly, have solar panels throughout their property. We do so much rough camping we really liked the idea of having the sun help keep our batteries charged.

We heard from Julie that Bernie was back in the hospital with an intestinal blockage. The doctor’s were testing to come up with a cause and plan of action. We hated being so far away during this crisis and asked our update list to pray for him and the situation.

We traveled to Blistered Fingers Bluegrass Festival in Sidney, and it was so hot! We were thankful it was hot and not wet, as we had endured the muddiest Sidney in 2005. We had 200 people, with lots of pickers in our jam band for Sunday morning. The Lord had woken Michael up out of a sound sleep at two o’clock in the morning to put a message on his heart about Father’s Day and the gifts Dad’s get. The Lord also impressed on Mike’s heart to give an invitation to respond to the Gospel. At least a dozen people raised their hands to receive Christ. The believers who were in attendance could feel the moving of the Holy Spirit. I am so often in awe of the Lord’s work. At a secular music festival

in the stoic northeast, not exactly the friendly Bible belt, the Holy Spirit moved among the people there. Wow!

While at Blistered Fingers we heard from Julie. Bernie had been diagnosed with the same aggressive form of cancer that had attacked his bladder. It was now blocking his intestines, and the doctors had surgically bypassed the blockage and were now waiting for Bernie to recover enough to start radiation treatments to stop the fast growing cancer. We were so upset and saddened by this news, and we cried out to God to heal our friend. We traveled from Sidney back to Massachusetts to go to Boston to see Bernie and pray with him and Julie. Julie put up a hospital sponsored website for Bluegrass friends to be able to post well wishes and keep track of Bernie's progress in his fight against this cancer. We asked the update list to please not call or email Julie directly, as she had her hands full and didn't need or want the distraction.

Julie insisted we go to Jenny Brook in Weston, Vermont which was the next festival on our schedule. She would keep us informed on how things were going while we were there. Our plan was to travel back to Petersham and park at Bernie & Julie's after the festival, to be a support for Julie. Mike emceed the show, and throughout the weekend, I was walking up to a cell phone sweet spot to keep informed about Bernie's progress. It was not looking good, and Julie didn't want us to tell the Bluegrass community just how dire the situation really was. I was keeping Preacher Mike informed of all the developments, and we did our

best to put on a brave front in front of the Bluegrass community, but inside we were deeply distressed.

By the Sunday morning Gospel Sing, it was apparent to us that our friend Bernie was not going to survive this plague of cancer. Our hearts were so burdened and heavy, which I am sure was apparent to all the folks who attended. Mike preached about Bernie's conversion, and through his message and a call to respond, eight people received Christ that morning. We gave away every Bible we had left in stock in the motor home.

The other very unique thing that morning was when little Mathew, the promoter's son came up to Mike before we started the sing and asked if we would pray for his upcoming scoliosis surgery. He had witnessed us surrounding, laying hands on, and praying for his Mom, Candi the year before. Candi suffers from MS. Mike even commented from the stage how Candi was "walking around like a teenager." It was quite a contrast from the year before when Candi could barely get up the stairs of the camper and needed assistance to walk even a few feet. So again, at Jenny Brook, in a very secular part of the country, many believers in Christ surrounded this sweet little boy sitting on his Mom's lap and prayed for his healing.

We left Jenny Brook's festival as soon as we could after the Gospel Sing on Sunday, to get back to Massachusetts and be with Julie. We traveled to her house and dropped off the motor home and drove our car to Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Julie

was sitting down in the lobby when we arrived, and she just looked shell shocked. This was all happening at such a break-neck speed. She agreed to come home with us to get a good night's sleep in her own bed. On Monday, the doctors planned to bring Bernie out of his drug induced coma so Julie could speak with him. She had climbed onto his stretcher the last time he was conscience, before he was wheeled away for his last procedure. All of this was so surreal.

Julie insisted on going back to Boston without us on Monday morning, promising to call if she needed us. We went about our business, driving into Belchertown to pick up mail, and while we were in the car, Julie called to ask us to come to Boston. The doctor's had brought Bernie out of the drug induced coma, and he was in painful agony. She agreed to allow him to die, and asked if we would come to be with her and the family at the hospital. Bernie would be treated with sedation and pain killers to make his passing peaceful.

We drove back to Boston, and although we'd been to Brigham and Women's several times before, we were turned around and lost as we frantically tried to get there. Mike stopped and asked a man in a car next to us for directions. The man was talking on his cell phone. He began to give us directions and then said, "I'll show you the way, follow me." If you've ever driven in the city of Boston, you will know how amazing this act of kindness from a stranger was. I am again amazed at God's love and provision in all circumstances.

We hurried to Bernie's room in the ICU. As we entered, Julie was sitting next to the head of the bed on Bernie's left hand side. His daughter Kristen was on his right, and Julie's daughter Michelle was sitting at the foot of the bed. We were all on "death watch" for a man nobody wanted to see leave the planet. There are words in wedding vows which says, "In sickness and in health, till death do we part." Julie personified these vows. She would not leave Bernie's side, laying her head next to his as she whispered lovely things into his ear. If he grimaced or made any movement that suggested pain, she had the nurse come in and administered more medicine. She didn't leave his side to eat or drink for hours. We brought her some food from the hospital cafeteria; however she was completely focused on Bernie and her last hours with him.

After we'd been there several hours and it was very late into the night, Mike and I went to the ICU waiting room to lie down for a little bit of rest. We both felt emotionally and physically drained. Mike went to sleep quickly, and I rested on a couch and closed my tired eyes but couldn't sleep. I became aware of a storm outside. The thunder was piercingly loud, and I was terrified by how the hospital seemed to shake from the storm. It sounded like a freight train was traveling right next to me. I was gripped with fear. Finally, it stopped and I allowed myself to breath normally again. Within 30 minutes of the storm, a nurse came into the waiting room and asked us to go to the family. Our dear friend Bernie had died.

How my heart broke to see Kristen crying over her beloved father, and Julie with a face full of tears over her soul mate. The grief and pain hung in the room as we all said our good-byes. After a time, the nurse came in and told us how things are handled after a death. We made a plan to travel home. It was decided I would stay with Julie and drive her back to Petersham. While Mike went to get our car out of a different parking garage, Julie and I walked outside to where her car was. I commented to her, "I can't believe the pavement is dry." She asked why, and I responded; "Didn't you hear the terrible thunderstorm." She hadn't heard it, which amazed me as it was so very loud.

Julie insisted on driving and followed Kristen home, and then Michelle, to make sure they got home alright. I was so impressed with the strength Julie showed during this time of horrible grief. She and Bernie were two halves of a whole, and although she had just experienced the worse loss of her life, she still wore her mother's hat, making sure her daughter and step-daughter arrived home safely after the long night at the hospital.

We got back to Petersham at dawn on Tuesday morning, and went to bed for a few hours before figuring out the next step in the process. Julie asked Mike to preach Bernie's funeral, and Mike agreed to do it, but we both felt so inadequate for the task. I kept thinking about how graceful and godly my Pastor's wife, Jill is. She always seems to have gentle timely words for any situation, and I knew the Bluegrass folks



would be looking to me for that same level of comfort and wise counsel.

The funeral was scheduled for Friday, at Mt. Hope Cemetery in Acton, Massachusetts. The viewing was also held in Acton, on Thursday. Bernie was a retired Fire Captain from the Acton Fire Department, and it was fitting he would be buried in the town he had so faithfully served.

Some weird things happened over the course of a couple of days after Bernie's passing. Kristen had a hair dryer randomly come on while sitting in a wooden holder her father had made for her. Our car's windshield wipers came on in the clear sunshine, without us turning them on. It happened a couple of times within three days of Bernie's passing and has never happened since. We asked our Pastor, Emmanuel about the strange happenings and he told us that, in the Jewish tradition, it is believed the soul of those who die stays around for three days after death. There is, of course nothing in the Bible about this phenomenon. Quite to the contrary, the Bible states clearly, absent from the body, present with the Lord. But still, the strange things did happen and we can't logically explain them.

While driving around doing errands with Mike, it suddenly hit me what I heard the night of Bernie's death. In the Bible, when Moses went up to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus, he heard the Lord's voice. In contrast, while Moses heard the voice of God, the people

surrounding the mountain heard peals of loud terrifying thunder. The Bible also says, in John 14:1-3, from the NIV® New Testament.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

I believe the Lord allowed me to hear Him coming to get Bernie Caouette and take him home. In the course of my walk with the Lord, I have come to believe with my whole being, the Savior who bled and died on a cross for my sins will be the first one I will see when it comes my time to die. I belong to Him, He bought me with a great price, and I am precious to Him. I am humbled He would open my spiritual ears and allow me to hear Bernie’s going home. The experience has grown my faith and renewed my determination to serve the Kingdom while I am able.

The day of the funeral, I was so proud of Michael. Knowing how much he loved Bernie and still loves Julie, he handled the service with such grace and calmness. His words describing Bernie were a great tribute to his life. He had the chance to share Bernie’s conversion experience which many of his relatives didn’t know. It spoke peace to the believers in the crowd when they realized Bernie was in Heaven and they would see him again.

After the service was over, the funeral director gave us the information card for Bernie. Listed as Bernie's church was the Bluegrass Gospel Sing. In that moment, we had the amazing realization how the Bluegrass Gospel Sing is church for so many people up and down the east coast.

I also had the opportunity to comfort and witness to the many friends and family who were in attendance. The Lord spoke to my heart clearly that day to never again feel inadequate to Jill. Jill is the perfect Pastor's wife for the fellowship of Dwight Chapel. The Lord enables her to accomplish what He has planned for her life. In the same way, the Lord has given me the Bluegrass community to love and care for. I am the perfect person for this ministry because the Lord has designed me specifically for this good work.

We stayed at Julie's until Wednesday morning, offering counsel and comfort to her and the other members of the family. Bernie had a German shepherd dog who he loved. It was so heartbreaking to watch Autumn lay listless at the bottom of the stairs looking so sad and dejected. Say what you will, animals have a sense about things, even when they can't communicate directly. Autumn's demeanor spoke volumes about what she was feeling.

Our next festival was in Brandon, Vermont. We had a large Gospel Sing of 300 or so people under the back drop of the Green Mountains. Mike preached a message about what mark are you going to leave on this world?

He, of course, brought in the recent passing of Bernie and the mark he had left on our lives.

Following Brandon, we headed back to Maine to the White's Beach Festival in Brunswick. Mike emceed this show and we of course did the Gospel Sing on Sunday morning. It was interesting to watch the growth of the ministry at this festival over the time frame of three years. The first year we had five pickers at the sing, compared to the twenty-two pickers we had this third year.

From Brunswick we headed almost to Canada to The County festival in Fort Fairfield. We could now say we'd been at both ends of Interstate 95, where it begins near the Keys in Florida and ends in Houlton, Maine before heading into Canada. We exited in Houlton and then drove another 40 miles north to get to Fort Fairfield. A terrible storm came up while we were traveling and we pulled off at a remote gas station. We watched in horror as a circular wind shook the motor home and the rain pelted its top and sides. A big metal sign at the gas station went flying off, and we sat terrified as we prayed the Lord's protection over us. Thankfully, in the same quick way the storm came up, it also departed, leaving us in one piece. We finished our travel to the festival and were so impressed with the beauty of the landscape. There are miles of crops and rolling hills, with the Canadian border in clear sight.

On Sunday morning, Mike preached a message about the border, and what you need to cross the border into another country. He expertly interwove the idea of what

is needed to cross over into an eternity in Heaven. A declaration of goods and a passport won't do you any good, but only a life stamped with Jesus blood as Savior will allow you in.

The following week we were in Cornish at the Ossipee Valley Bluegrass Festival. Uniquely, this time at Ossipee, marked the first festival many of Bernie's friends and family attended since his passing. It was very bittersweet. Eric Gibson, who is a well known Bluegrass musician among the subculture, played Bernie's Arch Top Banjo for a song during his Saturday night set. Eric and Leigh both had come over to the campsite and visited with Julie and family. Bernie had made sixteen gloriously loud and wonderful Banjos during his life time. The Arch Top was number ten, and to have it played by someone with Eric's level of talent as a memorial to Bernie was truly special.

The Gospel Sing was attended by well over a hundred and forty folks, with twenty-seven pickers making up the jam band. Mike preached about Bernie's life and spiritual journey, as many of the people in the crowd knew Bernie personally and had not had the opportunity to attend his funeral.

Earlier in the week, Mike and I, along with some other folks from the festival, had made our way over to Center Conway, New Hampshire to take part in an outreach event sponsored by White Mountain Chapel. The church provided free food to all who stopped by to listen to us sing and play under the Gazebo. This area attracts tourists, so we had a good group stop by to hear

us. We gave away New Testaments and Gospels of John and Mike interspersed the Gospel message in-between the songs we did. We were involved in this successful outreach event many times over the course of several years.

For the next several weeks, we continued on the festival circuit doing whatever was most needed. Sometimes it was helping the promoter set up tents, print signs and line the fields to make ready for the campers. Mike and I also host lots of dinners while parked at the festivals. We feed band members wholesome dinners, as many of them are going from festival to festival and have to depend on greasy vendor food most of the time. We also are conscience of the sound people and the emcee, and often carry a plate of food over to them. Jesus fed people during his ministry. Of course, He being the God Man also was able to heal them of their physical ailments. We don't have the power to heal, but we do have the ability to bring the Gospel light, and give good counsel and an encouraging word. Sometimes, the most powerful message is in what you do, not what you say. The Bluegrass community sees us picking up trash and serving in whatever capacity is most needed, and the Lord uses our service to bring people into the Kingdom.

In addition to the festivals, we did several church services towards the end of our New England season. Mike had the unique opportunity to preach a message at the Baptist church in Enfield, Maine where the new pastor and his wife were sitting in the congregation. This church had been without a pastor for a while, and the deacons had really done an awesome job of keeping

the church stable and growing. Mike preached a strong message, exhorting the church to get behind their new pastor and allow him to be the leader. Afterwards, Pastor Scott thanked him, and one of the deacons came up to Mike to ask if Scott had talked with him beforehand. He hadn't, it was the Holy Spirit doing what the Holy Spirit does best. We are happy to report, in the several years since this initial meeting with Pastor Scott and Dawn, they continue to serve and grow the work at Enfield Baptist Church.

During late summer in Maine, I began to experience horrific joint and back pain. I thought that perhaps I had been bitten by a deer tick, and had contracted Lyme disease. Mike brought me to the Emergency room in Waterville, while we were at Blistered Fingers to have some tests run. Our next challenge was figuring out what doctor I could see to review the results, as we were traveling to the next festival. Life on the road takes a lot of organization. We found a doctor in Gardiner, to see a few days later, after we were settled at Thomas Point Beach for the Labor Day weekend festival.

All the usual suspects of joint pain were ruled out, and the doctor gave me the diagnosis of idiopathic arthritis, which according to my own excellent primary care doctor, means the doctors are idiots, and don't have an explanation. I started taking Advil on a regular basis, hoping that once the festivals were over and I was out of the cold damp night air, I would have a chance to recover. I also sensed that some of my physical infirmities might have been associated with spiritual

warfare. We had an amazing summer with dozens of people coming to faith in Christ. I wasn't about to let some joint pain discourage me from serving the Lord.

Six years past the initial diagnosis of idiopathic arthritis, I still suffer with joint and back pain. Our life style, which includes lots of windshield time, and hours of sitting in uncomfortable lawn chairs at the festivals, contributes to back and muscle pain. I've learned to live with it and it only makes me more excited about the prospect of Heaven where there will be no pain!

We finished the New England tour and drove our car home to South Carolina the second week of September, leaving the motor home in Massachusetts. We planned to take a two week vacation out of the motor home before heading back to Massachusetts for our granddaughter's birth and various other planned activities.

While in South Carolina, we happened into a very unique revival meeting held at the First Baptist Church in Woodruff. It was sponsored by the Woodruff Ministerial Association, which consists of forty different churches and ministries of various denominations. During our brief times home, we had always been impressed with the strong sense of community in the little town of Woodruff. The association consists of pastors from different worship styles, who meet monthly for fellowship and prayer for the community. The revival meetings were so spiritually refreshing. We couldn't help but think of what Heaven will be like, with every nation, tongue and



people worshipping together. We purposed in our heart to get to know the association and meet the pastors involved, once we returned home after our trip back north to meet our granddaughter.

We returned earlier to Massachusetts than originally planned, as Stefanie had an episode of false labor, and I couldn't bear the idea of missing my first biological grandchild's birth. Because we were there a week early, we were able to take our grandson Tyler to the Belchertown Fair. He slept over with us in the motor home so we could take him to the big parade on Saturday morning, during the fair weekend. This marked the beginning of many fun sleepovers with Tyler and the subsequent grandchildren to come.

Dwight Chapel always has a significant presence at the fair to shine the Gospel light, and this year was no exception. Mike and I played two sets of music at the fair and also had a chance to witness as so many folks stopped by the booth for free balloons and soda. The church had designed a faith survey with valuable prizes attached, and 150 people filled them out. Many folks asked for follow-up visits from the church following the fair.

In the middle of October, just before our wedding anniversary, we were involved in a memorial show for Bernie Caouette. Julie and the family decided to start a scholarship fund in Bernie's memory. Mike emceed the event, and The Cowtippers came out of retirement to play it. There were lots of bands there who donated their talent, as Bernie and Julie Caouette are well known and loved in the Bluegrass subculture. Among

the bands who donated their time and talent to the scholarship show were the Gibson Brothers. Eric and Leigh Gibson performed along with Mike Barber, their excellent bass player.

On the day Mike and I were married, Mike had sung an Eric Gibson song to me that Eric had written for his wife, Corina for their wedding day. Mike had written a third verse to Eric's song to make it personal to us. Eric has always felt so humbled that we would want his song on our special day. The day of the scholarship show, Mike asked Eric and Leigh if they would do the song, "She Paints a Picture" and dedicate it for our anniversary, which was the following day. So Eric announced from stage that it was our wedding anniversary and proceeded to dedicate the song he wrote to us. Unbeknownst to me, Mike had arranged to go up with them to sing the third verse. I was completely surprised, and I laugh every time Mike talks about the day he was a "Gibson Brother."



We welcomed Makenna Olivia-Mae into the world on October 25, 2006. Her features were so similar to my son, John's, my heart just swelled with joy. In the same way it is impossible to describe the emotion associated to having a child, it is equally impossible to adequately describe the love you are overwhelmed with for your child's child.

We stayed in Massachusetts until the first week of November, and then made our way back to South

Carolina, stopping along the way to stay overnight with Mary Jo and Charlie Leet. They had purchased a beautiful piece of land near the Crooked Trail in Virginia and were designing a Bluegrass community with two acre house lots and the farmhouse in the middle for community jams. It is such a great concept to purposely pick neighbors who share the same interests. Our very first Gospel sing in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania had taken place under a Geo Dome tent that Charlie had invented. We had reconnected with them at a festival in Florida. Charlie and Mary Jo had played music for many years with the band “Dry Branch Fire Squad.” Sitting in the living room of the farm house of their property, I recalled that the very first Bluegrass show I had ever seen was Dry Branch Fire Squad at Dave Helman’s Country Corner Coffee House in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Here it was, eight and half years later, and I’m sitting in their living room playing music with them. There is a tremendous amount of wisdom from the movie “Forrest Gump” – “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get.”

We settled back into life in the house in South Carolina, attending and ministering at several Woodruff Ministerial Association events, as well as volunteering to deliver Thanksgiving dinners for shut-ins and elderly.

During this period of time, I became increasingly aware of Mom’s failing health and her attitude toward dying. The Holy Spirit prompted me to write my mother the

following letter and send it to her before our trip back to Massachusetts for Christmas and New Year's.

*December 13, 2006*

*Dear Mom,*

*I've been getting things ready to come back to Massachusetts for Christmas and it occurred to me that this could probably be the last Christmas that I'll have with you.*

*I know that your life here on earth, may be coming to an end and I know from talking with you various times, that you are ready to die and that you don't have any fear of death. I also know how frustrating your life has been the last several months with your feeling so useless and helpless to do anything. I know you have been feeling like you are getting weaker every day and are powerless to do anything about it.*

*The reason for my letter is for me to be able to put into words how grateful I am that the Lord gave me to you and you to me. I have always been so proud to be your daughter. I believe that you were designed by the Creator to be a mother. I always felt and still do that even if everyone else in the whole world was against me, you would be for me. I have tried to copy that model with my own children that they would always know that no matter what, their mother loves them profoundly. That unconditional, unselfish, putting us*

*and our needs first is the foundation from which my life has developed into what it is today.*

*I know that during my life time, some of my actions and choices have caused you pain, and for that I am deeply sorry. I remember having an almost all day “fight” with you when I was a teen that left us both with a headache that we ended up sitting at the kitchen table taking an aspirin and drinking tea. I don’t remember even what the fight was about, other than I wanted to do something that you wouldn’t let me. Thanks for not giving in and for maintaining the authority of my mother. That was a huge lesson that I needed at that time in my life.*

*I often tell my children that “they are my something” to leave behind when God calls me home. I am so proud of the men that they have become and I look forward to watching them continue to learn and grow into mature good citizens. I hope you realize that you will leave behind 5 grown children who are the people that we are because of the love and guidance that we received from you.*

*I pray that your faith in Jesus will sustain you in whatever time you have left to be here and that you’ll listen for His call and know that your memory, the essence of the person that you are, will live on in the hearts of your children. Thanks Mom! I love you!*

*Love, Mary*

*PS: Like my mother, I am hopelessly practical and wanted you to have this on this side of the grave.*

We arrived in Massachusetts in time to participate in the Dwight Chapel Christmas caroling, as well as in the Christmas Eve services. We so love our church family, and can't imagine being anywhere else at Christmas time. At 6:00 AM Christmas morning, we were awakened by the Laramee boys to help them wake up their parents and be a special part of the Laramee's Christmas tradition. Later, we had breakfast and opened gifts with Stephen and Ashley, and then the four of us traveled over to John and Stefanie's for Christmas dinner. I purposed in my heart to etch into my memory how Makenna felt in my arms, her smell, her smiles and coos, as I knew it would be several long months before I'd see her again.

New Year's Eve was spent in Hatfield, celebrating my Dad's 79<sup>th</sup> birthday. The house was full with my siblings, my kids and grandkids, a few of my nieces and nephews, as well as my precious mother. I had spent a couple of days in Hatfield, helping Mom prepare for the upcoming Christmas and New Year holiday when we had first arrived back in Massachusetts, and she never mentioned the letter I had sent her.

As the celebration was winding down, my mother was sitting in her usual chair in the den, and I went over and knelt down to say good-bye. Mike and I would be leaving for South Carolina to prepare for the Florida season of Bluegrass, and wouldn't be back in Massachusetts until May. My mother and I both

instinctively knew this would be the last time we'd see and touch each other. Others in my family were in the kitchen, chattering away, and were unaware of the tender exchange my mother and I were experiencing. She picked this moment to say, "Honey, I got your letter, and I want you to know how much it means to me." "I keep it close by me so whenever I feel down, I can reread it."

As a knelt at my mother's knees, the tears rolled down my face as we both just knew this would be the last time we'd see each other. What do you say to the person who gave you life and was coming to the end of their own life? I honestly can't remember what I did say, other than "I love you Mom." What else is there?

As we traveled back south, I reflected on the wide range of emotions I had experienced in our trip back home. I was thrilled with my precious granddaughter and was filled with complete joy over her. But at the same time, my heart was desperately despondent over the thought of losing my mother.

We returned to South Carolina for a couple of weeks to prepare for the 2007 Florida season. During this time, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer and she refused treatment, as it was pointless, and asked for Hospice to come in. I called her often, and she sounded upbeat and loved her Hospice workers. While driving back from Spartanburg one day, Mike remarked that "Your Mom is sounding well. She may still be with us when we get back to Massachusetts in May." To which I responded, "My mother is going to die the week we are in Arcadia."

I can't explain it, other than to say there are times in my life when I've just known things. I believe that the Lord, who knows everything, has, at different times in my life, enlightened me to the future, to either build my faith, or to prepare me for what is ahead. During our 2007 season, I was dreading singing the song "Will the Circle be Unbroken" to end our Gospel Sings on Sunday mornings. Singing about the hearse coming to take my mother away was hitting my heart directly, and my emotions often took over during this song.

We did travel to Arcadia, for two back to back Bluegrass weekends at the beginning of February, after attending Yeehaw Junction's Bluegrass festival at the end of January. We rough camped the first week, and then moved into a site for the following weekend's Bluegrass jam. During the course of the second week, I began to have pain and symptoms of a bowel obstruction. I managed to get through the Gospel Sing on Sunday morning, and then Mike drove me over to the local hospital.

I was admitted to the hospital on Sunday afternoon with a severe case of diverticulitis, which is an infection of the bowels. I was so sick! I called my Mom to tell her I was being admitted to the hospital. She told me it was a good thing I was in a place where they could help me get better. She also said she thought she was coming down with my father's cold. Her actual words were, "I think I'm catching your father's damn cold." Mom was never crazy about the fact that my Dad's barber



shop was in the house, and that people could walk through the door any time he had his sign out.

The only other time I had ever been in the hospital was when I gave birth to my sons. So being sick in the hospital was a whole new experience for me. They started me on an IV of antibiotics and fluids, and I laid in the bed amazed that somehow, just a few hours before, I was standing in front of people singing and playing music. Unfortunately, I have a very high tolerance for pain, which means by the time I seek help, I'm usually very sick. Mike left me there while he went back to Craig's RV to pick up our motor home and move it over to Roger Bass's house in Arcadia, as our reservation was over at Craig's.

On Monday, we heard from my sister Dori that Mom had indeed caught Dad's cold and was not doing well. She suffered with COPD and lung cancer, so a virus was really restricting her air. The Hospice nurses had been called in to administer more medications, as she was really struggling with breathing.

By Tuesday, the reports from home were sounding dire, and here I was stuck in a hospital bed fifteen hundred miles away. I'm not sure there's ever been a time that I have ever felt worse, both physically and emotionally, it was overwhelming. On Tuesday night, after Mike left to go back to the camper, I had called for a nurse to help me to the bathroom, because I was so weak from the infection. The care at Desoto Memorial Hospital was really terrible. After waiting a long time for help, I finally got out of bed myself, to try to make it to the bathroom. I dropped to my knees from weakness and

began to vomit from the infection. The violent vomiting caused me to lose bladder control. When the nurse finally came in and found me on the floor, she yelled at me for making a mess. I was so humiliated because I'd wet my pants, and the less than compassionate nurse put an adult diaper on me because I didn't have another pair of underwear with me, or a cell phone to call Mike to bring me a pair.

I'm not sure I can accurately describe the weight of being physically ill while experiencing the emotional trauma of knowing that my precious mother was dying, and I couldn't be there with her. I lay there, praying for the Lord's help. All at once, the despair was replaced with peace, as the Holy Spirit surrounded me. I heard a distinct voice speak these words into my ear, "Grace saved you and grace will save your mother." After that, my emotions calmed, and I was able to sleep because I knew the Lord would receive my mother into His presence.

On Wednesday, I was well enough to finally be released from the hospital with oral antibiotics, and Mike drove me back to the motor home parked in Roger's yard. I remember distinctly looking at the clock when I arrived back at MO. It was three in the afternoon. My sister Patti called at twenty minutes after three to tell me "Mom died." It was Valentine's Day and at ten minutes after 3:00, my precious mother, Rose had died. Patti was with her, but my other siblings couldn't get there because of a terrible snow storm that blanketed the area on Valentine's Day. Patti had arrived

the day before, from New Hampshire, and had spent the night in Hatfield with Mom.

I can't help but be in awe of how omnipotent God is in every detail of life. The Lord knew my sensitive heart would not be able to bear watching my mother gasping for breath. He also knew my youngest sister, who is a nurse, needed to care for Mom in her last hours on earth. She told me how it blessed her to be able to care for her, the way she's cared for other people's elderly parents.

Mike arranged for our trip back north. We left our car at his childhood Pastor's house in Tampa, and Pastor Twine drove us to the airport on Friday, February 16, 2007. We rented a car at Bradley International Airport in Hartford, Connecticut and drove to Hatfield to stay at 56 Main Street, the home I was raised in and where the family would be gathering as we prepared to say good-bye to our mother.

I had called the priest at St. Joseph's in Hatfield prior to leaving Florida, to ask him if the letter I had written my mother could be read at her funeral Mass. The arrangements were set to have calling hours on Sunday afternoon, from 2:00 to 5:00 o'clock. Mom's wishes were to be cremated. She was a very private person with people outside of her family, and she didn't want people seeing her body. My father wanted an open casket, so we compromised on having it opened for just our family, then closing it when the public arrived at 2:00 o'clock. After the funeral, she would be sent to be cremated, and her ashes returned to my father. She and

my Dad have a plot purchased at the Main Street cemetery in Hatfield. We had talked about having a service at the cemetery around Mother's Day in May.

My mother's funeral was scheduled for 9:00 AM on Monday morning, which was President's Day. I thought it was really fitting that Mom died on Valentine's Day, and that her funeral was on President's Day. She was indeed the leader of our home and family. We piled into cars at the funeral home. My father rode with Mike and me in our rental car, so we followed directly behind the hearse on the trip from Northampton to the church in Hatfield. I remember distinctly making eye contact with a young woman who cut in front of the funeral procession. In my mind I was screaming at her, *What are you doing, don't you know we are grieving for our dead mother?* Such a contrast from the funeral processions in the south, where EVERYBODY stops, steps out of their cars, and waits respectfully on the side of the road until the procession has completely passed.

When we approached 56 Main Street in Hatfield, the hearse came to a complete stop in front of the house, which was such a great tribute to my Mom. She loved that house and had made it such a loving home for her family. Since her passing, it doesn't feel like home anymore. Now it's just a house made out of wood and plaster and slate.

The funeral Mass was unusual for a Catholic service, as we had a number of letters read in honor of my mother. Both my sisters, Dori and Barbara, had written a letter

to Mom after her death. Mike read the letter I had written to Mom before she died. I found it in her pocket book near her downstairs bed. As she had told me, she kept it near her, to reread it whenever she felt down. When Mike finished reading my letter, he said, “This is my tribute to you, Mom.” And he sang the song, “Some Day” a cappella from the front of St. Joseph’s Catholic Church. To this day, folks from Hatfield still talk about how memorable a service it was.

After the funeral was over, we all headed to the American Legion, where my brother Dan had arranged a catered brunch. My best friend, Debbie had driven up from Virginia, and of course my children were there as was my now four month old granddaughter, Makenna. Makenna was the one bright spot in the whole thing. It would have made my Mom happy to see her smiling, engaging face during the viewing and funeral. Mom loved babies.

The next few days were spent helping my father figure out how to write checks and keep track of them in his check register. The first one he ever wrote was to the funeral home, as Mom had always done all the record keeping in the family. Mike and I sorted through Dad’s barbershop receipts and expenses to duplicate what my Mom always did to get him ready for taxes. This has become a yearly task since Mom’s death.

We left to return to the Gospel Sing ministry a few days after Mom’s funeral. I wondered how effective I would be, having just survived such a huge personal loss. We

picked up the motor home and headed to North Miami, and the adventure continued.

## Chapter Seven

### Back Home

We returned to Florida and continued with our scheduled festivals, beginning with the festival in North Miami. It felt right to be back with our mission field, and I was surprised at how easily I was able to slip back into ministry mode. A few weeks into the month of March, with a couple of more festivals under our belt, we heard from John and Stefanie that we were going to be grandparents again. Shortly after Makenna's first birthday, she would become a big sister, and Tyler, at four, would have two younger siblings.

Towards the latter part of March, we once again found ourselves in the circus atmosphere of the Auburndale Bluegrass festival, and we had the opportunity to meet a dear lady named Shannon. Her husband, Stuart is a really good banjo player, and he and Mike had been picking together. He told Mike about Shannon and her debilitating condition that kept her trailer-bound.

We decided to walk over to their trailer to meet her. Shannon and I had one of those instant connections. Shannon suffers from a pain disorder called Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD), also known as Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. Her pain level was evident by her many facial grimaces, brought on by even the least amount of movement. It was heartbreaking to watch her. She is younger than I am by half of dozen years, and had been suffering with this pain disorder for nine years before we met. We prayed with her and asked permission to put her condition on the update letter for prayer.

Around this time, Julie Caouette was planning a trip to Florida to visit with her Mom and sister in Naples, and would be staying with us at the Withlacoochee Bluegrass festival following her family visit. It was really great to see her. We had a well attended Gospel Sing the Sunday morning of this festival. With Easter fast approaching, Mike preached an excellent message on the difference between religious traditions and the truth of the Bible.

The following weekend, we held Easter morning service at the Perry festival. It was freezing! Lenny from Ontario actually played his fiddle with gloves on. This was my first Easter without my mother, and I found myself weeping periodically throughout the weekend as I thought of her. A lady we had met from Wisconsin the previous year had brought over a small knitted infant hat on Easter morning for our new expected grandchild. Anyone who knew my mother knew how adamant she was about keeping a baby's head covered and warm. I took this gift as a sign my mother was still looking out for me.

Following the next festival, at Dixie Land Music Park in Waldo, we started our trek back north to Georgia. We were scheduled to do a Sunday evening church service in Rincon before heading back to South Carolina. While driving on I-95, we saw signs for construction and the beginnings of orange cones. Just as we approached the area under construction, MO locked up and Mike pulled off the road just before the cement barriers began. We were so grateful to be off the road. If this happened after we had hit the one lane construction site, we would have held up all the traffic behind us. We called AAA and waited for them to send a tow truck. We also called our friends from Rincon to let them know we weren't going to be at their church.

We waited about four hours on the side of I-95, and when the tow truck driver arrived, he deduced that the issue was with the emergency braking system. So, he and Mike crawled under the MO in the cold wind and disengaged the emergency brake. The regular brakes



worked, and the driver followed us to a truck garage in Savannah. The following morning the mechanic there said he didn't have time in his schedule for several days to look at the brake and suggested we take it home to South Carolina and have it fixed there. It was an interesting ride back home, as every time we stopped for a break, I would have to hop out to put blocks under the tires to keep the motor home from rolling away.

Once back in South Carolina, we took it to an RV garage in a near-by town. They had it for a few days and clearly didn't know what they were doing. We were due back in Georgia for the Mossy Oak Bluegrass Festival the third week of April. Mike was scheduled to emcee, and following that, we would head to Massachusetts so I could participate in the Ladies Retreat with my sisters from Dwight Chapel.

We made the decision to take MO from the near-by RV garage, to a big Chevy truck shop in Columbia. We arrived on Sunday evening and slept in MO to be there first thing on Monday morning. They had it fixed in a matter of a couple of hours. It turned out to be a fairly inexpensive fix of a pressure switch. The Lord really spoke to both of us concerning this particular situation. Why do we worry so much about things we've prayed for? We know how faithful the Lord has been to us, and yet, every time we are faced with an unexpected burden, we fall into a pattern of fretting.

We did make it back to Belchertown and our host home with the Laramée's in May. We took part in the National Day of Prayer with our church family, and we

kitty-sat for Cassie Lynn at Tim and Carol's home. I was also able to attend the Ladies Retreat in New Hampshire with my sisters in Christ from Dwight Chapel. This was my first Mother's Day without my mom, and it helped to have a chance to visit with family. We also were available to help John and Stefanie move into their first real home in Barre from their apartment in Worcester.

The third week of May, we traveled up to Yonder Hill Campground in Madison, Maine to take part in the Bill Smith Memorial Bluegrass Festival. Bill had tragically died in March, and the Bluegrass community was coming together to help his widow Lori, and her children cope with the loss. Mike preached a tender message to Bill's family and friends on Sunday morning comparing the Bluegrass community to a church family, and encouraging those in attendance to bear one another's burdens in times like these.

It was a very emotional weekend for everyone involved. On Sunday afternoon during a performance by Bill's Bluegrass band, his wife Lori and brother, Don came up on stage and took part in one of North Star's most noteworthy songs. Lori had shared with me earlier in the weekend that, since Bill's death, she hadn't even listened to Bluegrass music, never mind played it. The weekend gave everyone a chance to share, cry and remember a very dear man and talented musician.



I had seen my regular eye doctor before we left for Maine and his office was suppose to arrange for me to see an ophthalmologist as I needed to have a cataract removed. After several calls to my eye doctor's daughter/receptionist, it was clear to us with our very limited time off the mission field, she was never going to follow through and arrange an appointment. Some times you just have to take matters into your own hands, so we drove over to Holyoke to the ophthalmologist office praying the whole way.

We arrived at the office at twenty minutes before two o'clock, with our calendar in hand, and we stopped outside of the door and held hands and prayed. "Dear Heavenly Father, you know our hectic schedule, please intervene dear Jesus, and make a way for this to somehow work." As I explained to the receptionist our limited time and how I needed to see the Doctor for a consultation, a nurse popped her head out from behind a file cabinet and said, "Our two o'clock just cancelled. Do you want to take that appointment?" Then, when I had just finished filling out my medical history, I was being called in to be examined. Dr. Kevin turned out to be a brother in Christ, and his first remarks to us were, "I sure hope you guys didn't pray my two o'clock into a ditch." The Lord had heard our prayer and had answered it immediately. Because we had recently had our yearly physicals, Dr. Kevin was able to arrange to fit me into his next surgery schedule, and with the exception of having to drive back from Blistered Fingers in Maine, for a follow-up appointment, all the dates worked around our very hectic travel and ministry schedule. Praise the Lord! By the end of the summer, I

had both eyes done and no longer have to wear glasses for distance. What a blessing to have a brother in Christ who can restore sight with his skillful hands and who also understands Kingdom building and ministry.



The summer of 2007, Mike and I carried a donated banjo to several festivals and sold raffle tickets for it. The money being raised was for Lori, Bill's widow. This was one of those times when Mike and I really struggled with the idea of gambling and how it appears to our mission field. Most of the festivals we attend have some sort of 50/50 raffle, where 50 percent goes to the winner and 50 percent goes to help defray the cost of the festival. As a rule, Mike and I do not want anything to do with handling money. We shy away from working the gate at a festival, not because we aren't completely honest, but more because of the fear of even the appearance of sin. We know we have an enemy in Satan, and we don't ever want to leave ourselves open for attack. We also know promoters who have had their money boxes stolen from them when their workers have been distracted by a festival attendee, and we are apprehensive about putting ourselves in that position. With that said, after some prayer and contemplation, we agreed to carry the banjo and sell chances on it because we're involved in so many festivals, and we had the best opportunity to raise a lot of money for Lori and her family.

We have come to purchase 50/50 tickets at the festivals we attend, with the conviction that should we happen to

win, we would turn our 50 percent back to the festival as a testimony. This has happened a few times. Earlier in the ministry, we had carried around raffle tickets to sell at the Catskill Mountain Bluegrass Festival to raise money for Candi Sawyer's expensive MS treatments. We raised about \$1,000 for her, and I believe Lori Smith was given a check for \$5,000 at the Thomas Point Beach festival over Labor Day in 2007. This is one of those areas where the greater good of being part of the sub-culture we are serving, outweighs our personal conviction, about the act of gambling.

This was the summer Becky Rose, from the Mossy Oak Music Park fell ill while performing with the Lonesome Whistle Band at the Brandon, Vermont festival. She had pneumonia and was taken by ambulance from the festivals grounds to a hospital in Rutland. Mike and I stayed in Brandon for a few extra days to minister to her and the family in practical ways, such as preparing food and taking it to the family and band mates staying in their bus in the hospital parking lot. The folks at the Bluegrass festival raised \$800 to help the Rose family with hospital expenses. Over the course of the years, we've come to realize how similarly the Bluegrass community and a church family respond to one of their own needing help.

By August, we had done several church services, outreach events, and lots of counseling for various sad issues of life. The weekend of Pemi Valley, we had a huge Gospel Sing Sunday morning, and by Sunday afternoon I was completely exhausted from all the activity of the week. I sat in the listening crowd, while

the Pine Hill Rambler's Band performed on stage. Doug Downey, the banjo player, was singing a song he wrote after his mother died. It is a tender, heartfelt song, and it hit my emotions directly. They were the last band on and as soon as they were finished, Mike and I had to pack up our car to drive over to Franklin Baptist Church to do a program of music, testimony and preaching. I remember being so frustrated and expressing to Mike, "I can't even take the time to cry for my mother because we're always so busy taking care of everybody else."

The church in Franklin was stifling hot, and not well attended, compared to the 250 folks we had at the Gospel Sing that morning. I pulled it together enough to do the service. I remember feeling so wiped out, and having to reach really deep to minister to the small number of people the Lord brought out.

I am so glad the Lord knows all, and I don't know anything about His plans and why He puts us where He wants us. He had brought a man to the Franklin church the night we ministered there, and used our service and Mike's preaching to bring him into the Kingdom. Pastor Scott emailed us the testimony of this man who came forward during a time of invitation, and told Scott he had received Christ the Sunday the missionary couple were visiting the church. Praise God! In spite of my exhaustion and resentment over being there, God still used us to bring one of his children to a saving knowledge of Christ.

By the middle of August, Mike and I began talking about our living situation. Although we liked the house in South Carolina, we dearly missed our sending church family and our kids and grandkids. We were expecting a new grandson in early November, and we began toying with the idea of trying to find something inexpensive to live in when we were off the road.

Mike's sister Patty had visited us in South Carolina, and she liked the house and was talking about moving into it as a renter. She had just gone through a painful divorce and wanted to start over fresh in a new state. We contacted her with the idea of her actually moving in with a lease-to-own agreement, with us being the bank, giving her the opportunity to eventually own a home, and at the same time, freeing us up to move back to Massachusetts.

We began looking online, and asked our church secretary, who also is a Realtor, to begin searching for an inexpensive home. We wanted to be within one hour of Dwight Chapel, and we couldn't spend a lot of money or have a lot of overhead. Seemed like an impossible task for Massachusetts but with God, nothing is impossible. After looking at some single wide mobile homes that were in fairly horrible shape, and had huge monthly ground rents, we happened upon a small townhouse in the town of Barre, less than a mile from where John and Stefanie lived. It was a very strange piece of real estate.

Years ago this section of Barre, called the Italian section, housed mill workers from the Barre Woolen

Mill. In 1960, the mill went out of business, and sold the housing to independent owners. The unit we looked at had been purchased by a man who renovated the four units under the same roof for each of his grown daughters. Now these units were being sold as one quarter houses without condo association fees attached.

The unit we looked at was cheap, under \$45,000 and although dated and in need of some sprucing up, it was well built. We really liked the idea of having on-street parking and not having to worry about clearing the snow from a driveway as well as a very small yard. The last remaining daughter still living in the house, was happy to have a clean and quiet missionary couple buy her deceased sister's place. She offered to look in on it when we were gone and to keep what little grass we had mowed. This was an answer to prayer.

By the end of our season, we were back in South Carolina, preparing the house for Patty's arrival, and packing up what we would be taking to Massachusetts. We would be closing on our new place the beginning of November, and were looking forward to being back at home when our new grandson was born. We had all of our boxes packed and stored in the shed before we left for Mossy Oak our last festival, as Patty would be at the house with her moving truck when we returned from Georgia.

Mike and I do this really corny thing every year on our wedding anniversary, and this year was no exception. We do a little video on the end of our wedding video. It's short and sweet, just a few minutes of what our year



has been, with the Shania Twain's, "From this Moment" playing in the background. We usually put out our cake topper and the unity candle, and anniversary cards, and make this little video in front of the antique hoosier. When our anniversary came around this year, everything was packed and in the shed. With the Shania Twain CD playing from the car, we did our 2007 anniversary video in front of packed boxes in the shed in Roebuck. This was our eighth wedding anniversary and the fourth time in eight years of marriage we were moving. With every move, we've purged and paired down, and carefully considered what we really need.

One of the fruits of the ministry for me personally, is how I view material things. Nothing here is permanent, including where we live. I often remind myself that no matter where I happen to be, whether in the motor home, staying with friends, or in my own home, this is all so very temporary, and everything belongs to God. My real home is in Heaven, and Jesus Himself, is preparing the perfect place for me that I won't ever have to pack up and leave.



Once we returned from our last southern festival, we helped Patty move into the house. We stayed for a few days, helping her get a feel for the lay of the land. We would be picking up our own moving truck to pack and head north, by the end of October.

On October 24, 2007, Mike and I were shopping at the Lowe's in Spartanburg, when our son John called to tell me Stefanie was in labor. Our grandson apparently was going to make an early appearance. Makenna's birthday is October 25, 2006, so we spent the day praying Stefanie could hold on until after midnight, so both the grandchildren would have the same birthday. We were in the motor home, sitting in the side yard of the house in Roebuck, as we had surrendered the house to Patty a few days earlier. We were watching the Boston Red Sox in the World Series. John called off and on throughout the evening to give us progress reports of Stefanie's labor. He called around 11:30 pm to say the next call we received would be when the baby was being born. He wanted me to hear his birth, so he planned to call and put the phone down so I could hear my grandson's entrance into the world.

Mike and I prayed it would be after midnight, and rejoiced when midnight came. The phone rang a few minutes after twelve, and at 12:13 am on October 25, 2007 we welcomed Camden John Fenway into the world. We refer to him and Makenna as our Irish twins, born on the same day, one year apart. Interestingly October 25<sup>th</sup> was also Mike's father's birthday.

Our trip north came within a few days of Camden's birth. It was no where near as stressful as our trip south had been in 2003, and I was overjoyed to finally be back HOME in Massachusetts.

By the end of 2007, we had done a total of 53 events, including festivals, nursing home ministry, out reach

events and church services, and Mike was already planning and booking our 2008 season.



We had a house guest, or perhaps I should say a MO guest at Yeehaw Junction, our first festival of 2008. Our adopted Bluegrass daughter, Paula traveled with her Mom Wendy to spend the festival with us. I loved having her there. She washes dishes! We hosted a dinner for the Gibson brothers who had made a whirlwind trip to appear at the festival and then quickly returned home so Leigh would be home for the birth of his son. It was fun to hear Eric and Leigh and Mike Barber recount stories of the road. We laughed ourselves silly at their antics and humorous impressions of life on the Bluegrass road.

Following Yeehaw, we accepted an invitation to spend time in Naples, Florida with Bluegrass friends, Steve & Charla. Charla had been thrown from a horse and was in the hospital, but still insisted that we come to their place in Naples. We arrived there and couldn't believe how beautiful a spot it was. We camped next to a canal, with palm trees swaying and the sounds of birds chirping. We witnessed a hawk swoop down to catch a fish in the canal. It was so peaceful and beautiful. (Well for us, not the fish.)

Charla returned home to bed-rest, and while we were up in the house visiting with her, the dogs alerted us to two black bears within a few feet of their porch. I had never seen bears up so close. It was really cool. During

our visit, Steve took us out on his boat to explore some of the houses and inlets around Marco Island. We watched dolphins play and stopped to collect beautiful shells. It was a perfect day.

While we were in the area, we visited with Julie Caouette's Mom, June, and saw her sister, Jeannie who was working at the Ritz Carlton in Naples where we had lunch. The following day, we had been invited to a dinner at a mansion in Marco Island by some Bluegrass friends. Both the Ritz Carlton and the Marco Island mansion confirmed in my heart how meaningless wealth is, and how grateful I am to be content with little. In my mind, the mansion, which resembled a hotel more than a single family home, seemed so over the top and obscene for just two people. It was interesting to us that, although the house was valued at two and half million dollars, you still had to jiggle the handle of the toilet in the downstairs bathroom in order to get it to flush.

I marked the first anniversary of my precious Mother's death at the mansion, and in the midst of my sadness, I retrieved a voice mail from our four year old grandson Tyler. We had sent him some of the beautiful shells from our boat trip with Steve, and he left us such a precious voice mail. I think I listened to it about a dozen times. Nothing like the sound of a four year old telling you he loves you, to take the sting out of losing your Mom.

The Florida tour continued with church services and festivals, and a very encouraging word came to us

while we were at the Withlachochee festival in Dunnellon. One man went out of his way to tell Michael, "You'll never know the difference you've already made." The road can get very long, and it's easy to get discouraged. It seems that during times of discouragement, the Lord often reminds us the affect we are having for the Kingdom even, when we are completely unaware.

We found out while in Dunnellon that Mike wasn't going to be needed to emcee the April show at Mossy Oak Music Park which freed us up to change our plans. Our niece, Stephanie and her husband, Greg had just lost their baby girl. Sarah Haven died in Stephanie's womb, and she was induced to deliver her lifeless daughter. Our hearts were breaking for her, and we decided to visit Stephanie and Greg in Alabama, after the Leakesville, Mississippi festival. The Leakesville festival, Two Rivers, lived up to its reputation. We had heard from several people to make sure to arrive rested, because Ms. Bertie will make sure you leave exhausted. She had tours, silly contests, band club meetings, and pot-luck dinners going on throughout the week. She scheduled our Gospel Sing for Wednesday, as this is always her Gospel day. We enlisted our friends from Vermont, Jay and Martha to help us on stage, and they invited some additional pickers to help us with the music. David & Ruth, who are music vendors, passed out about three hundred Gospel Sing books and we so appreciated their help.

Mike's Uncle Jeff and Aunt Sara Lee came over from Lucedale, to see us, and they knew so many of the folks

there. The family resemblance between Uncle Jeff and Mike is quite remarkable. I believe this Mississippi crowd embraced us when they realized Mike had a connection to one of their own. On Saturday morning of the Leakesville festival, Mike and I, along with Jay and Martha, dressed up in denim overalls and participated in Ms. Bertie's Hillbilly contest. We called our band the "Snowbillies" and sang three songs. The last song we did called, "Church Policy", we had just learned from Angelica Grimm of the Doerfel Family Band. It's a song that basically pokes fun at the politics of all church denominations. It was quite a hit with this crowd, and Ms. Bertie asked us to perform it again before Dailey & Vincent's show on Saturday night. This gives us the right to proudly say "We opened for Dailey & Vincent."

Following, the festival, we began our journey home with a friends-and-family tour which included a church service at Mike's first cousin Milton's church. Many of Mike's relatives were in attendance, as well as Jay & Martha, who helped us with the music. The Eastview Church of God in Lucedale, Mississippi, is a Pentecostal church. It was so LOUD. I leaned over to Jay and whispered, "I don't know about you, but I'm scared." Jay and Martha are fairly reserved and quiet Christians from a Methodist background. Mike, of course, made sure to tell the church I had said this, and got a laugh from the congregation, many of whom were related to him.

We spent some time parked over at cousin Violet's in Satsuma, Alabama, and had a chance to do some

touring in Mobile. Violet has a good friend in the Secret Service, and we were able to meet her and see counterfeit money, and tour her incognito office.

We traveled from Violet's over to Gilbertown, and visited with Mike's cousin Dorothy. She encouraged us to come back the following year, to speak at what had been Nanny Robinson's church. Mike's grandmother was such a godly prayer warrior. When she died in her nineties, the pastors who spoke at her funeral all said that the Lord would have to raise up several people to pray as much as she had. She prayed day and night, and often woke up Aunt Joanne in doing so. Mike loved her, and we hoped the Lord would work it out for us to speak at the church she helped pray into existence.

We did travel over to see Greg and Stephanie and their two year old son, Caden, in Northport. They were going through such a difficult time. In addition to losing their precious baby daughter, someone had broken into the house they were moving from in Huntsville, shortly before the moving truck was scheduled to pack it up.

We left them, and traveled over to the Nashville area, and visited with Dennis and Judy, from Clarksville. We were able to share with their Sunday night small group, and Judy took us on a tour of the Opry Mills Mall and the Opryland Hotel, which is the size of a small city.

My niece, Maureen, and her family live in Woodlawn, so we made a trip over there. My great niece, Amaya led me to see her bedroom, and I was so shocked to see my older sister Dori there. She had flown in to spend a

week with her daughter and granddaughter. My niece was really struggling with the death of my mother, her grandmother. This was Maureen's first experience with major loss, and it put a spotlight on her feelings of isolation from her extended family.

Our last visit in Nashville was with Mike's first cousin, Lyndal. We had the most awesome and wonderful experience with her. She treated us to the once-in-a-lifetime experience of going to the Grand Ole Opry, at the mother church of country music, the Ryman Auditorium. Because the Dove awards were scheduled, the Grand Ole Opry was uncharacteristically moved back to the Ryman Auditorium. It was the "Songs of Faith, Signature Show." We saw Little Jimmy Dickens, Connie Smith, Jeff and Sheri Easter, Steven Curtis Chapman and Ricky Skaggs, among others. This experience will be remembered as one of the highlights of our lifetime, and I honestly felt like the Lord had orchestrated it just for us. We will never forget it.

After arriving back in Massachusetts, we stayed very busy between fixing up our little townhouse, visiting with grandkids and family, and the usual doctor and dentist visits. Before starting with our northeast Bluegrass tour, we traveled to New Hampshire for my nephew, Benjamin's High School graduation from a Christian school in Concord. I have a deep spiritual connection to my nephew Benjamin. It was at his baby dedication that I heard a clear presentation of the Gospel for the first time. A week later I accepted the gift of Salvation and began my journey as a believer. Although I had attended a Roman Catholic church



throughout my childhood and had done all the sacraments and duties associated with being a Catholic, it wasn't until Ben's baby dedication that faith in simple terms clicked with me and changed the entire direction of my life.

I was reminded of this event in my life by a conversation with a man named Tony from our mission field. He had come to see us at our first northern festival, in Carver, Massachusetts. He recounted the first time he ever heard Mike preach, several years prior to this conversation. He recalled Mike preaching for about five minutes in between Gospel songs at the Gospel Sing. He shared with us how he initially had a lot of anxiety over the thought of somebody preaching at a Bluegrass festival. Then he told us that, in his opinion, "Mike had more to say about faith in five minutes than he had heard his entire life." This man is older than us by at least a decade, and we were astonished by this revelation. Even more so, when he told us, he and his wife had gotten up at six in the morning in order to be at the Gospel Sing for nine. We were so humbled by this, and prayed the Lord would continue to use us to be salt and light to the Bluegrass community, and anyone else He saw fit to have cross our path.

Prior to going to this festival, we had helped with a feral litter of kittens, in our neighborhood. A young feral mother cat had given birth to six kittens at the house next to ours. When the neighborhood kids began to disturb the litter, she moved them under our porch where they couldn't be reached. Our neighbor Lisa had

found a shelter not far from us who had said they would take the mother cat and kittens, if we were able to catch them. I love cats, and ever since we gave Cassie Lynn to Tim and Carol, I really missed having a cat in my life. I would reach in to pet the baby kittens under the porch and would leave food for their cautious mother.

When the kittens were about four weeks old, they were bravely coming out from underneath the porch, and going right into the street. I grabbed them up and put them into our enclosed porch, upstairs. When Lisa came home from work, she helped us catch the mother cat so the following day we could take them to the shelter. We knew the mother cat had given birth to six kittens, but we'd only caught five. So the search began for the sixth kitten. Mike raked out the area underneath the porch and shined a big halogen light to attempt to find the last kitten. Lisa and I both searched around the neighborhood and decided the sixth kitten must have died, as after all, this was a feral litter. I played with the kittens on our porch, and the following day, when we brought them to the shelter I just cried, at having to give them up. There was one little boy kitten who was gray and white, and he had such a sweet little kitty face. Oh, how I wanted to keep him, although I usually prefer a female cat. After we'd taken the kittens to the shelter, we traveled to the Edaville Railroad Park in Carver, for the festival. It was blazingly HOT. We parked the motor home on the black asphalt parking lot, without electricity. Mike was the emcee, and I remember thinking how glad I was we didn't have a kitten in the motor home as it was about 100 degrees inside.

After returning home from the festival, we had about nineteen days before we would leave for Maine and spend three weeks out on the road. The day we were going to be leaving for Blistered Fingers, I was outside sprinkling ant killer around the foundation of the quarter house and I spotted a puff of white fur underneath the porch. “Oh my goodness, there’s the sixth kitten.” I quickly went into the house to retrieve the key for underneath the porch. It is latticed and locked. The feral sister kitty of the mother cat had run out from under the porch and was yowling in the middle of the street. When I looked underneath, I could see a small puff of white fur sandwiched between two long wooden boards that were lying underneath. I grabbed up the tiny sixth kitten. She looked just like the boy kitten we’d given to the shelter. I called Mike, who was over in Belchertown, “Mike, I’ve found the sixth kitten, and I’m keeping her.”

My daughter-in-love, Stefanie came over to give me a ride to the store to buy cat food and litter. I had already named the kitten Emma before Mike arrived back at home. Mike wasn’t as thrilled about the idea of having a cat on the road. He basically declared, “We’ll try her on the road, and if she becomes a distraction to the ministry, or too difficult to deal with, we’ll take her to the shelter when we get back in a couple of weeks.”

It’s funny how the Lord works things out. Emma rode up to Maine snuggled in my hair, probably thinking she was in a space ship. Being a feral cat, she didn’t have any idea about people or cars, and certainly not about a

big old motor home. I called the shelter from the road and determined the mother cat and kittens had been tested for feline leukemia and distemper, and they were fine, so I had every reason to believe Emma was fine too. I marveled at the idea of her surviving for nineteen days without a mother cat. She was under the porch in the same horrible heat we experienced in Carver, and she lived through it without food or water. I thanked the Lord for her and felt He had heard my heart cry for a cat. Emma did her part by completely adoring Mike, and not only winning him over, but wrapping him around her little paw. In our family dynamic, Mike is her lover and I am her play thing. She fights with me and bites me and paws at my legs to play with me, and she purrs and pushes faces with Mike. She became, and still is, a vital part of our family and ministry. Following Emma's first Bluegrass festival at Blistered Fingers, we headed to Vermont for Jenny Brook.

Mike emceed the Jenny Brook show, and during the supper break on Saturday night we had dinner with Kim and Wendy and their daughters, Paula and Pam. This family has been part of the Gospel Sing ministry from the very beginning, back in Moodus, Connecticut. A young man named Rob had camped near the girls. They invited him for dinner, and he told us a very interesting story. He had decided to ride his bike for a fifty mile trip on Friday, and had not prepared for that long of a journey in the extreme heat and humidity. He told us about feeling very dehydrated, and that he was beginning to panic, not knowing how he would have the energy to get back to the festival grounds. On a deserted road in the Green Mountains of Vermont, he

spotted a can of Mountain Dew on the side of the road. He argued with himself about drinking it. When his weakness and thirst took control, he opened it up and heard the seal break. It was cold and fizzy, and perfectly delicious. At this point in his story, I interrupted him with this thought, “You know an Angel left that for you, and when you get to Heaven, he will remind you of the time you took a bike ride in the mountains of Vermont and he left you a cold soda.” From what we understood, Rob isn’t a believer yet, but he did come out to the Gospel Sing on Sunday morning and listened intently to everything Mike preached. We are confident he will eventually come to faith, and his testimony will include the “Mountain Dew” story.

This was the summer we first did music at the prison in Springfield, Vermont during the Basin festival in Brandon. We had been invited by John and Betty to bring music and testimony to the inmates there. I was a little anxious the first time doing prison ministry. There were background checks and metal detectors, as well as the idea of being in a room full of criminals. We did not have amplification and we were battling the hum of electric fans in a stifling hot visitor center, as this prison isn’t air conditioned. We had gotten permission to give our song books away, as well as Gospels of John and The New Testament Bibles we carry. It was an interesting experience, and the Lord showed me several truths while ministering at the prison. I could see the Holy Spirit looking back at me from several of the inmates. I also could see pure evil in some of their eyes, and it was a little unnerving.

I was really moved by how many were young men in the same age bracket as my own two sons. The truth is, everyone sins, and some people get caught and sent to prison. I was reminded of the passage in God's word that tells His children to visit those in prison, and I was grateful to have the opportunity to obey one of God's commands. This particular night, I kept noticing a young blonde man, and when the concert was over, he came up to thank me. Before I could even think about it, I asked him if I could pray with him. He seemed a bit taken back and a little embarrassed, but he consented to my request. We stepped towards the wall and I prayed a strong, Holy Spirit driven prayer over him, describing how much His Heavenly Father loves him, and how He has a plan for his life. I found out later from John and Betty that his name was Greg, and he was coming to some of their Bible studies at the prison. Greg was having trouble accepting Jesus and the idea of a Heavenly Father who loves him completely, because his birth father had thrown him against a cement wall when he was just a toddler. He suffers with some brain deficits because of the injury inflicted by the one person who should have protected him the most. I, again, stood amazed at how sovereign God is.

Later in the summer, we hosted an outreach event at our home church, Dwight Chapel. The Carolina Sonshine Band had played a festival in Gray, Maine called Stonehedge. They were excited to play a concert at our church on their way back south to North Carolina. We left our camper in Gray, and traveled home in the clown car on Sunday afternoon in order to help facilitate the band's arrival. This was the first of

many times we have invited national traveling bands to do a concert at our sending church. It is a great outreach event to our community, and it gives our friends in traveling bands the opportunity to sell CD's and collect a love offering on their trip back south after performing at a northeast festival.



It was yet another summer of beating down rain. It is hard to describe what it feels like to be in a metal box with the sound of constant rain. We set up our single microphone and recorded what it sounds like to live inside of a snare drum, and shared it with our home church when we reported back to them in the fall.

The August Blistered Fingers was again a fruitful time of ministry for us. Mike preached a great message on “What is the most important day of a person’s life?” Out of an average life span of eighty years, you have twenty nine thousand two hundred days to live. He gave examples of “big days” such as graduation, marriage, birth of children and grandchildren; then winding up the inventory with, “coming to faith in Jesus Christ” as being the most important day in your lifetime.

Labor Day weekend of 2008, marked the end of the Thomas Point Beach Bluegrass Festival. Pati, the promoter, had made the announcement that she was going to be calling it quits after thirty years of doing the festival there. She planned to bury a time capsule, and her last festival was going to be a fantastic show, with a

lot of big headliners. Mike and I decided to go back to Thomas Point Beach and do the Gospel Sing there for the last time. In previous years, we had been on the beach, and part of Pati's Sunday morning service, which is very different from what we normally do at a festival. So this year, we paid for tickets and camping, and parked in a strategic place on a corner. We advertised the Gospel Sing at our camp site and by word of mouth all during the week.

Sunday morning, we woke to no water in the camper. I mean no water, not even enough to brush our teeth. Our friend Brian had pumped water into MO on Saturday, and had apparently broken a seal with the high pressure he used. While we slept, seventy five gallons of fresh water had leaked onto the ground. Thankfully, Dave and Molly were right next door and were able to pump in enough water so we could rinse off and not be offensive to whoever might come out for the Gospel Sing. Just before I was getting ready to go outside of MO to help Mike with set up, our kitten Emma got tangled up in a plastic bag full of empty water bottles, and went running all over the motor home, scattering bottles and knocking things over as she frantically tried to get untangled from the bag. It was quite a way to start the day.

We used a microphone and a small amp for the Gospel Sing, so we could be heard above the sounds of generators and folks walking by. We were amazed at how many people came out. We had forty three musicians, which broke our previous record of thirty seven. We estimate one hundred to one hundred and



fifty folks in total came out to our last Thomas Point Beach Gospel Sing. Mike preached a short message starting with the question, “What if Pati has had thirty festivals so that this morning, you hear the Gospel for the very first time?”

Afterwards, we met a man named Dave. He had attended a Gospel Sing the previous summer in New York. He wondered who the leader had been, as he knew it wasn’t us. We told him it had been our “Son in the Lord” Basil who had preached at the Upper Hudson Bluegrass Festival while we were at Blistered Fingers. Dave’s testimony was that he had been wandering away from his faith for many years. Something Basil had preached brought him back, and since then he has been faithful in church attendance and in fulfilling his role as the spiritual leader of his home. We also met his Christian wife, Mary, who had been praying for Dave for years. What a joy to be able to share this with Basil when we called him later in the day.

Very early in the ministry, well before we had gone full time, we’d met Basil. For that whole summer, it seemed the Lord put Basil in our path. He was on a spiritual journey, looking for God. The Lord used us to bring Him to a point of faith in Christ. We had kept in contact and watched as the Lord grew him. Like the Apostle Paul with Timothy, we felt a deep spiritual connection to him. How awesome to now see Basil’s preaching having a positive affect for the Kingdom.

We had two more schedule festivals before our 2008 season ended. In addition, we had several church

services scheduled for the fall, and would again be participating in the Bernie Caouette Memorial Scholarship show.

Our children, John and Stefanie were expecting another baby and unlike her other pregnancies, this pregnancy was problematic. Stefanie had contracted MRSA, which is an infection caused by a staph germ. It is a common problem in hospitals and nursing homes and does not get better with the typical first-line antibiotics that usually cure staph infections. In addition, she was having horrible gall bladder symptoms, which she just had to live with, as she couldn't have her gall bladder out, until the baby was born. Added to the stress, they had recently sold their house in Barre and were looking for another house that would hold four children, a dog and a cat.

My Auntie Emma had recently been put into a nursing home in Worcester, because of Alzheimer's. I contacted my cousin, David who was looking after Emma's affairs and asked him if my kids could stay in her house, while they looked for another place to live. He agreed, and the kids moved in and quickly decided to purchase Auntie Emma's house. David made it very easy for them. All the money was going to the state for her care, so he gave them the lowest price the law would allow, which was a great blessing with another baby on the way. I couldn't help but think how happy it would have made my mother to know her favorite grandson was living in her sister's house, and raising his family in her hometown.

I had an operation during this time off from the festival circuit. I was tired of living with incontinence and decided to go through a bladder sling surgery to lift my bladder and stop leaking when I laughed or sneezed or coughed. As I never seem to be able to have any medical procedure go easily, I had complications and was sent home with a catheter because of swelling and clotting. We were due back on the road within days of this operation to take our motor home back south before the snow, and to report to a couple of our southern churches.

We returned back home, and in early December we experienced an ice storm. We lost power early Friday morning, and we were forced to pack up and move into my father's house for Saturday night, as our house was forty-six degrees inside. Thankfully, our electricity was restored on Sunday. It showed us the need for an alternate heat source, and we purchased and installed a propane heater below the kitchen window on the enclosed front porch as a way of keeping our pipes from freezing, should this happen again.



As 2008 was coming to a close, Mike and I attended a couples retreat at Monadnock Bible Conference Center in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. We really enjoyed meeting the missionary couple who lead the conference. An enjoyable part of this retreat included going to a Christmas Cantata at Jaffrey Bible Church. This was our third marriage retreat since getting married in 1999. We both very much value marriage, and are so thankful for the marriage the Lord has given us. We decided,

however, after attending this conference that we don't need to spend our limited resources on another marriage retreat, as unlike most couples, we are together every single day and we guard our relationship carefully.

We finished the year with Christmas and New Year celebrations, and were excited about heading out early in 2009.

## Chapter Eight

### Our Job Year

Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? Job 1:8a NIV®

In the beginning of 2009, we can imagine Satan at the throne of God asking the Lord's permission to sift us to see how committed we actually are to the mission of spreading the Gospel to the Bluegrass community.

We started our 2009 season by leaving a little ahead of our normal schedule in order to beat an expected snow/sleet/freezing rain event. We packed up our little CC to the brim and headed out with Emma in tow. We did run into the snow and ice in the mountains of Pennsylvania and it made for some white knuckle driving until we drove our way out of it.

When we arrived at Patty's house in Roebuck, South Carolina, our motor home's starting battery was dead and every time Mike tried to start the MO, it caused the alarm system's horns to go off. In the dark and cold, Mike was undoing the horns and was able to charge the battery enough to get the MO started and moved into the backyard. The next issue was with the hot water tank and refrigerator. Neither component would work on propane, so again in the dark, Mike laid in the red clay with flashlight in hand to clean the propane spiders out of the mechanism's so that the propane could ignite and stay lit.

Following the purchase of a new starting battery and provisioning up the refrigerator, we left for Florida hoping to get about three hundred miles before stopping to rest. The days travel found us on the east coast of Florida. Our "Next Exit" book lists in red, places where RV's are welcome to stay overnight. However, in this particular tourist area, there was no overnight camping allowed. We were forced to drive inland for another two hundred miles before we found a Cracker Barrel where we could stop for the night. We were exhausted, but still marveled at the amazing difference between the frozen tundra of the northeast and the warmth and flowers of Florida. Emma looked with awe at a couple of pelicans in a holding pond next to where we parked. I can only imagine she was thinking; *I never saw anything so big come to the birdfeeder at home.*

We traveled the following day to Zolfo Springs, and the Pioneer Park. We had a couple of days to recoup from

traveling before we headed over to Arcadia and the first “Tomorrow’s News” Bluegrass festival being held at Craig’s RV.

We took a car trip over to Tampa to visit with Pastor Twine, and while there, our son John called to say Stefanie’s water had broken. She was thirty four weeks along and had many complications with this pregnancy. I had put her on our update letter for prayer several times, and we were somewhat anxious about the outcome. Unlike the other children, this baby did not come easily, and although her water broke on January 15<sup>th</sup>, the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, the baby had not yet arrived. The festival started on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and I REFUSED to travel over to Craig’s RV while I waited to hear about my newest grandchild. Craig’s RV, although a lovely park, has held a lot of bad news over the years for me and I had no intention of being there until my grandchild was safely born.

Mike took the car over to be part of the festival, while I stayed at Pioneer Park in the motor home waiting to hear from John. I spoke with him several times during the day, and the last time he called was right before the baby was born. Unlike the other children, we didn’t know the sex of this one. I was listening on my end of the phone when the baby was delivered. The ensuing panic of hearing the nurses and doctor trying to restore breath into the baby’s body was horrific. I dropped to my knees and pleaded with God for this little life. The relief that swept over me when I heard his cries is hard to describe with mere words. I’m sure it was just moments, but it felt like a lifetime.

Gavin Michael Joseph entered the world at 3:20 PM on January 16, 2009. He was immediately whisked away to the Neo-Natal Unit. Later in the evening, I called John and it broke my heart to hear Stefanie just wailing in the background. Because of her MRSA, the medical staff refused to let her see or touch her newborn son. She was emotionally and physically spent from a hard pregnancy and labor, and to add this insult to injury was heartbreaking for everyone. It's not natural for a mother to be denied access to her newborn. Thankfully, the following day he was moved to a better hospital, where Stefanie was given full access. The next few weeks were a rollercoaster of ups and downs as John and Stefanie balanced the medical needs of this premature baby with their three other children that were still back home.

Mike and I traveled over to Craig's RV to finish the festival there. Mike ended up doing a good deal of the emcee work, and we had a good Gospel Sing on Sunday morning. This was our first opportunity to meet Keith and Darlene as well as Victor and Malieka, who have turned out to be really good friends.

While there, we received a call from our Pastor Emmanuel asking us to help with brethren who were having some serious medical issues, while on vacation in Orlando. Pat and Laurie have been friends of ours for many years. We had all three of their now grown children in Youth Group. Pat began exhibiting heart problems and it was determined he needed open heart surgery for by-pass. Mike and I agreed to go to Orlando

to help with the family before we headed to the Yeehaw Junction festival later in the week.

Pat was transferred to Florida Hospital South for his heart surgery, and we helped Laurie get settled into a new hotel, near the hospital. Then we picked up their children with spouses and grandson at the airport, to deliver them to their respective hotel rooms and then to the hospital. Mike and I tackle problems well together. He drove Andy over to the car rental garage while I waited with the others in baggage claim and helped coordinate all the details. We were determined to get the kids to the hospital as soon as possible so they could see their Dad before his surgery early the following morning. Another couple from our sending church, Alan and Jennie, were also making their way down to Florida to be a support to the family.

The following morning, we all gathered in the waiting room while Pat was having his open heart surgery. Al and Jennie had arrived and were sitting there along with Pat and Laurie's son, Danny, Andy and Ali, Rocco and Jackleen, and their young son, Ethan.

I began to feel quite dizzy and disoriented. Laurie is a nurse and we've known each other a long time. She took one look at me and knew something was wrong. She felt my pulse and called a nurse to take me to the Emergency Room. I was whisked to the front of the triage line at the Emergency Room and taken into a private room where heart monitors were applied and blood drawn.



The cell phone didn't work inside this part of the hospital, and it seemed as though every time Mike walked outside to make a call, I was moved into a different part of the Emergency Department. My heart rate was high and I began to experience pain in the upper part of my abdomen, and even had a sudden onset of vomiting. Laurie came down and made a little noise about my care, and before I knew it the nurse was coming in and applying an angina patch, and then I was moved for the third time to a different part of the hospital within the Emergency department.

Just after Mike found me, a young technician came into the room to do an EKG. I was already hooked up to heart monitors, and before she could do the EKG, my blood pressure dropped to a low 45 over 25 and I blacked out. I remember feeling it coming on and it was dreadful. First, I lost feeling in my extremities, and then my eyes began to cloud and my sight diminished to blackness. I remember praying aloud before I completely passed out, "Jesus, if you take me now, would you please take care of Mike and my kids?"

Even though I couldn't see or feel anything, I could hear the code going out for me and the sound of many shoes running towards my room. I honestly thought I was going to die, and was truly surprised to come back to awareness as my blood pressure began to recover. The first thing I said to Mike when I could speak again was, "If I don't make it, you have to keep doing the ministry, and please take care of my boys." And then I added, "Oh, I haven't even had a chance to meet my new grandson."

As my blood pressure continued to recover and I became fully conscience, I noticed that Kelly, the technician, was visibly upset. In an instant, I switched to Pastor's wife role and counseled with her. She had recently lost her father to a sudden heart attack, and watching me go down really freaked her out. I held her hand and prayed with her for the grief she was experiencing in the loss of her father.

I was moved into the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit, where I spent the next few days. I had many opportunities for witness while I lay in the bed. One of my ICU nurses was from the Muslim religion, and she and I had some thought provoking discussions the first night I was in Intensive Care. Another nurse, Bob, a Christian who was having some problems with denominational differences, also made for some good biblical discussion.

My symptoms continued to be scary, and I honestly felt like I was on an episode of the TV show "House." I was tested for just about everything. I had a brain scan, an ultrasound on my heart, a cat scan with contrast on my abdomen area, and lots of blood tests. My white blood count was up, and they treated me with broad spectrum antibiotics. My potassium levels were low, so they gave me IVs with potassium. My liver enzymes were elevated. It was a few days of complete rollercoaster and I felt like a pin cushion from all the needles.

The greatest blessing in the whole thing was experiencing how omnipotent God is. When I fell ill, I

was sitting in a first class hospital and not in the field at Yeehaw Junction, forty miles from civilization. The young people Mike and I had the pleasure of ministering to in Youth Group came to visit me and pray for me. It wasn't exactly like having my own children there, but it was close. I left the hospital without a definite diagnosis, as doctor's practice medicine. The best guess was that I had been somehow exposed to something environmental that my body was reacting to.

Our friend Pat had a lot of serious set backs following his surgery, and he and Laurie ended up staying in Florida for several weeks before he was finally able to return home to Massachusetts.

We had missed Yeehaw Junction because of my illness, and following my release from the hospital we made our way to Highlands Hammock State Park in Sebring. We were greeted by Bluegrass friends, Ted & Irene from New Hampshire and Paul & Maria from New Jersey. We did a couple of Bluegrass concerts while in Sebring: one at Mike's Mom's park and another one at the recreation hall at Highlands Hammock, with help from our northeast friends.

Our season continued, and during a visit in Naples in mid February, we received a call from our neighbor that water was coming into the basement of our quarter house! The unit next to ours is owned by a woman in California. It was her father's place and had remained empty for two years while his estate was being probated. We had cautioned her about the fact there

was no heat over there, and Mike had even offered to go over and turn the water off and wrap the pipes, but to no avail.

The fire department broke through a basement window and pumped out a foot of water from her basement. The heating pipes had burst from the second floor and soaked all her father's remaining possessions on the first floor and filled the basement with water, which had seeped into our unit. The front door of her unit could not be closed because the threshold had expanded and swelled with all the water. What a mess! Here we were fifteen hundred miles away, worried about whether or not we would have a home to go back to. The California owner was less than responsive, and a neighbor took it upon himself to go in and take out the stinking bed mattress and soaked carpet, as the odor was terrible and seeping into our side.

After a few days of worry and fretting, we called Stephen's girlfriend Ashley's Uncle George who is the Building Inspector in the town of Barre. He had been on vacation when the flood occurred. He immediately went over to inspect, and issued an order to ensure that the structure would be fixed correctly. He assured us she would have to remediate the damage to both his and the Health Inspector's standards. He also inspected our unit to insure we had no extensive damage. We had lost a few items that had gotten wet, including a large portfolio of pictures we used for church presentations. All in all, it could have been so much worse and we were grateful to Ashley's Uncle for his immediate and professional help.

During this time we were still traveling and busy with the ministry. We found ourselves in a new venue for the oldest running Florida festival put on by the South Florida Bluegrass Association. They had moved to Haulover Beach Park in North Miami. It was an interesting place for a Bluegrass festival. The campers parked on the asphalt parking lot, with the intercoastal waterway in view of the performance tent and a short walk under the road to the Atlantic Ocean on the far side of the festival.

We had arrived early in the week, and immediately Edy from Ontario came running over to us exclaiming, “Come with me, come with me.” We followed her under the road to the Atlantic side, and to our amazement, we found ourselves at a nude beach. This was definitely not a “Baywatch” moment. Quite to the contrary, it was amazing to me that folks who look so bad would want to show off all their baggy, wrinkled skin. We watched with amusement every time a new person would arrive at the festival, Miss Edy would go running over to take them to the nude beach. Thankfully, this venue did not last with the South Florida Bluegrass Association, and it moved to a more appropriate place for a festival in following years.

Our next festival was a new one for us. Our good friend, Charlie was trying his hand at promoting at the Sabal Palm Campground in Palmdale. It was quite a contrast from the asphalt parking lot of Haulover Beach. The campground had hook-ups as well as plenty of grassy, level area for rough camping. There was a

permanent wooden pavilion with a large recreation room behind the stage area as well as a pool, laundry room and plenty of flush toilets. We had such a good time at Palmdale, entertaining dinner guests just about every night. I truly enjoy showing hospitality to folks. The root word of hospitality is hospital, which is a place of healing. I believe when I invite folks over, it sends a message to them that they are important to me, and more so to Jesus. I often think about how Jesus interacted with all the people who crossed His path during His ministry. My prayer for those who have sat at my table is for them to see the love of Christ in me for them.

Valerie Smith and Liberty Pike did three dynamic shows at Palmdale. I believe this was the festival where Mike and I first attended her vocal workshop. Val has had an interesting journey with her singing voice. Because of tumors, she had surgery on her vocal chords and had to completely relearn how to talk and sing. Some of the techniques she learned, and has expertly taught, have been useful for me as I have developed my voice over the years in the ministry.

There are several bands which Mike and I feel particularly close to, and Valerie's is one of them. Becky Buller, who performed with Valerie for over a decade is an amazing songwriter and an excellent fiddle player. I love watching Becky perform on stage as she really understands entertainment and connecting with the crowd, but mostly because she is my dear sister in Christ. Over the years of traveling the circuit together,

Becky and I have developed a warm sister relationship. I am grateful to the Lord for bringing her into my life.

Following Palmdale, we made our way over to Village Pines in Inglis, to do another weekend of music ministry there. This time, Evans & Karen from Chesapeake, Virginia joined us, and we had such a good time with them ministering to the folks who came out to see us. This marked the first of many times we would serve together at different venues around the Bluegrass community. Karen has such a beautiful voice and plays the bass proficiently. Evans plays the resophonic guitar and harmonizes with Karen. They are good Christian people who understand serving the Kingdom, and we count them as dear friends.

When we pulled into Village Pines, Bob, the owner, commented on how bad our engine sounded. We thought we had a manifold exhaust problem as we'd lost two bolts. We had already arranged for our friend, Charlie to work on it after the Leakesville, Mississippi festival and before the Dothan, Alabama festival. We asked for prayer for this, as we had another four weeks of commitments before Charlie would have a chance to fix this, and we didn't want to get stranded.

Unfortunately, it became clear to us as we white knuckled our way from Village Pines campground to the festival at the International Market World in Auburndale, the engine problem was significantly worse than what we'd first thought. Charlie met us at the gate and said, "I don't like the sound of this." He didn't think we should continue to drive it, but he also

didn't have time to work on it because of his commitments with doing sound. He wouldn't be available to fix it until after the Perry festival, three weeks later. Yikes!

We had a packed schedule as well, and now we had to come up with alternate plans. Anyone who has had car trouble knows how inconvenient it is to have your car in the shop. Our vehicle is also where we live and how we most effectively minister to our mission field. The first problem to solve was having a place to house my son Stephen and girlfriend Ashley, who were coming to Florida on vacation and arriving the Sunday evening of Auburndale. We had planned to spend the first part of the week with them near Orlando in the motor home before driving them to Clearwater for their visit with Ashley's Mom, Lisa. We found a hotel in Orlando with a kitchenette that would allow pets and that had enough space for four grown adults.

We talked with a man named Tom, who is someone we see at the Florida Bluegrass festivals. He happened to be sitting next to us at the Auburndale festival. He works for Bartow Chevrolet, and he assured us they are reputable and wouldn't take advantage of an out-of-towner. We made the decision based on our hectic schedule to head to Orlando with the car and get settled into the hotel before going to pick up Stephen and Ashley at the airport. Then Mike would drive back to the motor home Sunday night and wake up early Monday morning to drive it over to Bartow Chevrolet, before rejoining us in Orlando.



The next few days were spent enjoying the sights of Orlando with Stephen and Ashley. I decided it was actually a blessing in disguise to not have the motor home, as our hotel was much more spacious and comfortable.

We took the kids over to Clearwater on Thursday and then drove our car over to Williston to do a service at the Cowboy church there. On Friday, we checked out of the hotel and drove over to the garage in Bartow, only to discover that they hadn't even looked at the motor home closely. They did however manage to leave it wide open for the flies to invade and for anyone to walk into. With our stopping by unannounced, we moved up on the list and they gave us the same diagnosis that Charlie had given us, which was we needed a new engine. They were going to need some time to work up a quote and promised us a written quote by Monday.

At this point, we moved into our friends, Allen and Leora's townhouse in Winter Garden with Emma. Their daughter, Lynne was also visiting with her husband Dick and their elderly cat. Six adults and four cats and two very stressed out missionaries!

Over the weekend, we heard from Pastor Arlen who was responding to our email prayer need with the offer to let us borrow his Class C motor home fondly known as B.O.B. (bucket of bolts.) We were due in Perry the next weekend. We decided to make the drive to Big Cypress to pick up Bob on Monday, stopping first at

Bartow Chevrolet to get the Blue-Ox, which is the device to tow our car, and some supplies.

When we arrived at Bartow Chevrolet on Monday morning, they gave us the astronomical price of \$11,327.00 for a rebuilt motor. After gasping, we told them to put MO back together, as we were taking it out of there. Charlie had already priced a new engine, delivered to the garage at International Market World in Auburndale, for just under \$5000.00. Charlie said he would come to Auburndale after the Perry festival and would do all the labor for a really reasonable price, whether it took one week or three. Such a blessing!

We paid Bartow \$330.00 for their time and I was inside of MO when the mechanic was putting it back together. They repeatedly warned us it could blow and leave us stranded on the way back to Auburndale. Tom, the “friend” from Bluegrass, stuck his head in the door and said to the mechanic, “I just heard the sad news.” The mechanic gave him an eyebrow look, alerting him that I was in there and heard the comment. I felt really betrayed by this. We trusted Tom, even though we really did not know him. This was a huge lesson for us. Just because a person shares a common interest, like Bluegrass music, doesn’t mean they have your best interests at heart.

I followed Mike over to Auburndale in the Clown Car, praying fervently the whole time. Anyone who has ever traveled in Florida knows you basically drive from one red light to another. The mechanic had said that the stopping and starting could cause the engine to finally

quit, and not to drive fast but to keep it at 20 miles an hour. Amazingly, as we approached each red light, and there were *many*, they changed to green. We didn't stop once in the seventeen miles between places. Mike was feeling badly about all the traffic that was backing up behind us, and just at the time it crossed his mind, a tractor pulled in front of him doing about 20 miles an hour. As we arrived at the International Market World, I breathed a heavy sigh of relief and thanked the Lord for his protection. I am convinced an angel was on top of the MO, changing the lights as we approached and keeping us safe during that horrendous trip. I asked the Lord to please show me this day again from His perspective when I get to Heaven.

We plugged MO in next to Pete and Ida who would keep a close eye on things until we returned following the Perry Festival. We packed up the CC with supplies, then made the long trip to the Reservation to pick up Pastor Arlen's camper to use for the next few weeks.

After one night in the Reservation, we traveled back to Winter Garden, stocked up Bob, picked up Emma and headed to the festival in Perry. We had called Miss Bertie from the Leakesville festival to tell her we wouldn't be coming, because we'd blown our engine and would be heading back to Auburndale to have it fixed following the Perry festival.

Staying in Bob was a much different experience than our very comfortable and predicable MO. The refrigerator didn't work on propane and all the food we bought for the trip was spoiled by the time we arrived

in Perry. There was a propane leak in the hot water tank. We had to open the window to breathe while the hot water was heating, and then as soon as the water was hot, turn the heater off.

During the festival, Val Smith came over to Bob and gave us a private vocal workshop. We also hosted a family band from Maine, The Mueller's, who agreed to help with the Gospel Sing at the Leakesville festival in our place.

Mike preached a strong message to a crowd of about 50 people on Palm Sunday about the sacrifice and high price Jesus paid to enable us to have fellowship with God.

We traveled back to Auburndale in the borrowed camper and set it up in front of MO, with Charlie's van behind MO. The plan was to use the MO for cooking, showering and sleeping, and Bob for Emma and I to be out of the way, while Charlie worked on the engine with Mike helping, when needed. It was an amazing process to watch the broken engine removed through the driver's door with the help of a forklift. The same forklift carefully placed the new engine in place with Charlie and Mike guiding it. Once the new engine was in place, Charlie wanted us gone so he could work at his own pace. We packed up CC again and headed over to Winter Garden to stay with Allen and Leora and to celebrate Easter weekend with them.

Leora is my adopted Bluegrass momma. I love her and she loves me. She and Allen were such a calming

influence and encouragement to us during this time when everything was so unsettled and not normal.

Following Easter weekend, we left Emma with Allen and Leora and went back to Auburndale to pick up Bob and to then return it to Pastor Arlen and Lana in Big Cypress. We arrived there early enough in the day for Mike to finally go fishing in the Everglades with Arlen. Lana and I shared a wonderful afternoon of sister fellowship, which I desperately needed.

When we arrived back at Auburndale after a night at the Reservation, and after going back to pick up Emma, we were dismayed to discover that the brand new shiny engine wouldn't run. We had Emma locked in the back of MO, as Charlie repeatedly tried to get the new engine to run.

I can't really describe the level of frustration at being stranded for a month. It was such a blend of stress and blessings. We had put so many miles on our body in the little car, getting to and from church services, the long travel to and from Big Cypress to borrow and return the Class C camper, the moving in and out of Allen and Leora's townhouse in Winter Garden, and the unknown of when is this ever going to end?

I spent my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in the dusty fields of Auburndale, next to the buffalo pen. In an act of sheer desperation, I booked a nonrefundable flight back home for me and Emma while Mike was outside discussing our situation with Pete. I was just so tired of living out of zip lock bags and desperately needed some

normalcy. We had one more festival on our southern schedule. Mike was scheduled to emcee at the festival in Dothan, Alabama before we were suppose to head home so I could attend the Ladies Retreat with my sisters in Christ from Dwight Chapel.

As I drifted off to sleep that night, I had absolutely no peace about leaving Mike to go home. By the morning, I had completely repented, as the Lord had spoken to my spirit clearly that I needed to finish our schedule. Mike and I are both commissioned missionaries, it is our calling, not just Mike's. With Mike scheduled to emcee, my role as his support system is crucial to him doing an excellent job. I hated the idea of not being there with him to do what we do best, which is to, work together as partners in this life.

Now the question: how can we possibly get the money back for a ticket I was not going to use? For those of you who know Preacher Mike, you know he can persuade with clever reasoning. He called the airline and basically said, "My wife has had a mental breakdown from all the stress of the last month, and I am very afraid of what might happen should she fly home alone without me." The agents reply was, "Mr. Robinson, we will be happy to refund the cost of the ticket." Another crisis averted!

We found a big Chevrolet dealer in Orlando, and arranged a tow truck to take MO there. Charlie packed up to go home to see his wife, Ginny and to get ready to do the sound at the Dothan Festival. We thanked him for all his hard work. We so love Charlie, he is such a

blessing to so many people in the Bluegrass world. We packed up our car again to move back in with Allen and Leora. I took a picture of Emma looking out of the car window as MO was being put on a tow truck. The look of absolute concern on her little kitty face was just priceless.

The following morning, we drove over to the garage to discover the mechanic had left the engine cowl off and feral cats had gotten into the motor home and sprayed all over the inside. The garage took absolutely no responsibility for this, so Mike and I headed to a Wal-Mart to purchase a black light and lots of vinegar. Mike shamed the garage into putting us to the front of the line for service, as we now had to clean our home before we'd be able to live in it. It stunk!

We stayed parked in the lot directly across from where MO was parked to make sure they would work on it. The mechanic discovered that Charlie had mistakenly miswired a couple of things, causing a sensor to fail. Nine hours labor and \$1,100 later we were happily on our way with a new functioning engine.

We had reservations for one night at a full hook-up campground near Orlando, where we would get moved back in and clean everything up, pick up Emma in Winter Garden, and then leave for Alabama the following morning. We were so happy to be driving our MO! Sadly, our euphoria was quickly interrupted by the sound of scraping metal on the passenger side of MO. Turns out we were being hit by a car making an illegal turn into our lane. We were stopped at a traffic

light, when a young man in a car attempted to pull in front of us misjudging how close his side mirror was to us.

Unfortunately, he then attempted to flee the scene by backing up and coming around us on the other side. Mike blocked his path with our 34 foot motor home and jumped out and stopped him. I called 911 and the police were dispatched. After taking his tag number and a photo of him with our cell phone camera, we drove into a Methodist Church parking lot about 25 feet away from the intersection and awaited the authorities.

This 22 year old man immediately called his insurance company and told them that we hit him. Of course, once the police got there and examined the damage and took a look at his record, it was clear that he was not telling the truth. We had the opportunity to press a charge of fleeing the scene, but we chose to show mercy and not press charges against him.

In the next hour of the police making out an accident report and charging him with the accident, we found out Josh had been running from God for a while. He's the son of a preacher. He had just had a baby boy four days prior to this event with his girlfriend. He did not have a valid driver's license, and the police wanted to have his girlfriend's car towed at his expense. As he only lived a few miles away, Mike offered to drive him home in his car with me following in the CC, and the stunned by our merciful actions, police officer following us both. As we considered the spiritual conversation we had with Josh, we decided this was a



divine accident and we were meant to be at the stop light at that very moment in time to be the ones Josh ran into. We gave him a New Testament and prayed with him to stop running from God. We offered to help him find a good church to take his young family to. If the incident could be used to bring this young man back into fellowship, the damage to MO was really minor by comparison.

We finally arrived and set up at the campground, then proceeded to black light and treat all the areas of cat pee we could find before heading back to Winter Garden for a last evening of fellowship with Allen and Leora. When we got ready to leave, Mike opened up a cloth bag and Emma ran into it. Then Mike put her over his shoulder. Leora insisted that Mini, her one-year old female cat, have a chance to say good-bye to Emma, so Leora put Mini up to Emma's face and she licked her face as if saying "Good-bye my kitty friend." It was adorable. When we arrived back in MO, Emma acted like our little detective and alerted us to any areas we missed in our quest to clean up the urine odor from the feral cats.

It was so wonderful to wake up in our MO, in someplace other than Auburndale. We began the process of closing up to head to Dothan and when Mike turned the key to start the engine, **NOTHING HAPPENED!**

I called Dwight Chapel and Emmanuel answered and after hello's, I told him, "We can't get the motor home to start." He groaned a sigh that matched exactly how

despondent we felt at that moment. Our Pastor was bearing our burdens with us. We are so thankful to God for him. Our sending church, had over the years since the beginning of the ministry, increased our support to the point that we are the highest supported missionary in the church's budget. In addition, when we blew the engine, our church took up a love offering over two Sundays, that covered the cost of the new engine, in the crate. With all the help we've received in financial, prayer, and emotional support, Mike and I can never own this ministry. It is shared with a whole lot of people. Individuals from various churches as well as the Bluegrass community have played a vital part in keeping us on the road. We often thank and praise God for all the co-laborers He has sent to us as we minister for Him.

Mike headed out to an Auto Parts store with the starter in hand to have it tested. They said it was defective and sold him another one. Mike installed it, but he broke it with the last turn of the wrench. So, he loaded up and headed back to the store. We called the Orlando garage, and they said we were welcome to have it towed back there and they'd have a look at it. No thanks. The second starter also didn't work, and the store didn't have another one for Mike to try. So without a cell phone, and it getting late, he drove all the way back to Auburndale to pick up yet another starter to install. In the dark, he replaced the starter for the third time, and he still got nothing when he turned the key. I believe at this point, Mike could change out a starter at a red light, blindfolded.

The following morning, we went up to the campground office and prepaid for several days to keep our crippled camper where it was parked, and then began the process of packing up CC with supplies to drive the 350 miles to the Dothan, Alabama festival. In all the stress, as we were rushing around to remember everything we needed to take, I suddenly felt like somebody was driving a knife into my back. I had such a horrific muscle spasm, it left me writhing in pain. Mike just looked horrified and exclaimed, "Maybe we shouldn't go to Dothan." To give clarity to this moment I need to explain my heritage. I am half French Canadian from my mother's side and half Irish from my Dad's side. By this point, my Irish was up. "We are going to Dothan." It came out in a low, guttural place in my voice which told Mike the level of conviction I had. I was determined to go to Dothan because, as far as I could tell, the evil one really didn't want us there. Emma, who normally travels very well, yowled all but 25 miles of the 350 mile trip. I thought my head was going to explode.

When we arrived, our dear friend Charlie, who had spent so much time on our motor home, had taken his and Ginny's nice camper over to the festival and had it all set up for us to live in. I love him! Mike and I decided we were not going to waste a minute worrying about the motor home and were going to completely focus on the ministry we could have at the festival.

This festival was run by our friend and brother in Christ, Travis Perry. The bands he picked to perform were believers and good friends. The Lord ministered

to us through them. Marty Raybon laid hands on us and prayed for us. Gary Waldrep prayed for us. The Wilson Family listened to our tale of woe with sympathy. We saw Bobby Davis, Becky Buller and Valerie Smith who played on Friday at the festival. Becky's wedding to Jeff was quickly coming up, and she and I had a chance to talk about marriage and God's plan for marriage. It was a great distraction from all the stress from the previous weeks.

While at the festival, our friend Allen had gone over to the campground. I should mention that Allen was a retired mechanic who owned his own shop in New Hampshire. He hotwired the motor home and got it running, which meant Charlie would not have to make the 350 mile trip back to Orlando to get it started. Joy and happiness! In the midst of all the turmoil, we were so thankful to the good and godly friends who helped us during our time of need. We experienced first hand the verse in NIV® Galatians: 6:2, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

When the festival was over, we left Emma in Charlie's camper, and he towed her back to Marianna, Florida to his house, while Mike and I drove back to Orlando. We would take MO to Charlie's house in the panhandle for him to figure out and fix the problem with the starter. Then we would finally travel back north to Massachusetts.

Mike wired a button to the wires Allen left exposed so I could easily reach down and start MO. He had bypassed the ignition to the starter, as apparently we

weren't getting enough voltage to turn the engine over. The hot wire button worked perfectly and we were again overjoyed to be driving the MO.

We returned to Charlie's house and spent the night there before he determined we had a blown relay switch. When we replaced that, MO happily started up the conventional way. We had lots of miles to cover to get back to Massachusetts so I could make it to the Ladies Retreat.

Our first stop was the house in Roebuck, South Carolina for the night. As we were still in the breaking-in period for the new engine, Mike would have to change the oil and filter the following morning before we could continue on the road. The girl at the parts store in Alabama had sold him the wrong oil filter, which meant a drive into Woodruff to buy the correct one. We were getting ready to leave South Carolina, and again MO wouldn't start with the key. Thankfully, we still had the hotwire button which turned the engine over, and away we went.

We stopped for fuel just off of Route 77 in Galax, Virginia where Mike met a Christian man at the pump who prayed for our motor home. After fueling up, he turned the key and halleluiah, it started. But now we couldn't move forward, because the emergency brake failed and clamped onto the drive shaft. Mike crawled underneath and began to hammer away at the linkage to disengage the emergency brake so we could keep rolling. We felt like we were being beaten to death by Satan himself.

Thursday night after three grueling days of travel, we finally arrived at Becky and Kevin's house. We did a tally of miles on the road, clocking a total of 2417 miles in a week. We were so exhausted. The motor home continued to have some electrical issues, with the automatic step coming out while we were driving on a busy section of road near Hartford, Connecticut.

On Friday evening, while I was at Camp Spofford in New Hampshire with my sisters in Christ as well as my daughter-in-love Stefanie, who joined me for her first Ladies Retreat, Mike decided to go home to Barre to see what things looked like after the neighbor's flood in February.

I called Mike on Saturday from the retreat to find out how things looked at home. The poor guy just couldn't catch a break. Although, the house was in good shape, considering how much damage had been in the adjoining unit, when Mike woke up on Saturday morning, there was no water. A water main had broken and the whole south end of Barre was without water. He retrieved a half empty bottle of water from the car so he could brush his teeth. I felt so badly for him. I was imagining him being able to take a good long hot shower at our house, and he didn't even have water to brush his teeth.

My nephew Joe, who is a brilliant mechanic, came over on Sunday afternoon, after we'd gotten back from church, to look at the engine. He and Ty, my niece's husband, determined that the alarm system in the motor home was causing the weird electrical issues. They also

said we needed new front tires, a front end alignment and a strap on the exhaust pipe. Joe suggested a garage he knew well, and Mike made an appointment to have the alarm system taken out and the other work done, along with finally having an appraisal for the body work from when Josh had run into us.

Our first northern festival in Madison, Maine was cancelled by the promoter which gave us an unexpected extra week, to get the motor home washed and looking good, after a long winter of trials. The garage had done an excellent job fixing the damage from the accident and we were eager to get back to our mission field.

We headed out to attend Harry Grant's festival in Wind Gap, Pennsylvania. We had never been to Harry's festival, and he had us scheduled to do the Gospel Sing at 8:30 on Sunday morning. When we pulled in to the festival, the parker on the golf cart pointed to a field for us to park in. Unlike the professional way Harold, from the Florida festivals or Buster, from Blistered Fingers directs a camper into their camping spot, this guy directed us right into the middle of a sinking mud hole where we got stuck. A tractor pulled us across the field, plowing up mud with earthworms to a point where you couldn't see air between the dual tires because they were so caked with mud. The same tractor had to pull us out on Sunday afternoon. We were so frustrated! We had just spent a whole day washing the motor home, which is not unlike washing an elephant. This would turn out to be the first and last time we would attend what now is always referred to as: "Mud Gap."

Our season continued with festivals and church services until the next MO crisis, which was a blown hydraulic hose, which had the big slide-out inching it's way out as we drove back to Camp Laramie from the Grey Fox festival in New York State. Grey Fox is what we call, the "Woodstock" of Bluegrass festivals. We had not been there in years, and through the prompting of our good friend, Dusty, we decided to try it again. It had moved from the side of a mountain onto a more flat and camper friendly ground. It is such a huge place, with so many different things going on, that we hardly saw people we knew. We did meet an interesting fellow who introduced the woman he was with as his "Grey Fox wife." To which I responded with my hand out, "My name is Mary, I'm always Preacher Mike's wife." We did manage to run into our friends from Connecticut, Frank and Barbara Shaw. They sang a song Barbara wrote called "Preacher Mike." It is a really nice song and we felt so honored and humbled to have a song written about us. Barbara gets our update letter and she felt inspired to write after my terrible illness in Orlando earlier in the season.

Following Grey Fox and the hydraulic hose repair, we made our way to Cornish, Maine to the Ossipee Bluegrass festival, as well as another outreach event in Center Conway, New Hampshire. This Ossipee would turn out to be our last one. The promoters had decided to have much more progressive "acid grass" type bands. Quite a number of our Bluegrass regulars were very upset at the music coming from the stage, and swore never to return. In addition, Mike was very uncomfortable with emceeing the show as the



promoters did not appear to respect the bands, and purposely let things run way off schedule.

We headed over to Pemi Valley and the Branch Brook Campground in Campton, New Hampshire, where we encountered yet another issue with our motor home. We kept burning out the fuse which controlled the emergency brakes. Mike spent a great deal of time under the MO, trying to figure out what was going on. Our good friend, Garry, who is a mechanic and a garage owner, came down the hill to where we were parked and discovered some melted wires around the new engine. We made a trip in torrential rain to Manchester to purchase some replacement pressure switches to go on the emergency braking system, which seemed to do the trick. We thanked the Lord for this development, as it caused us to discover the melted wires, which could have caused an engine fire. Praise God!

On Sunday morning we awoke to rain and thought, *oh no, we've never been rained out at Pemi, what are we going to do?* Thankfully, by the time we headed over, the sky was just gray and overcast and we felt we could hold the Gospel Sing outside as we normally had in the past. We had a really amazing God moment during this Gospel Sing. We had turned and were singing just to each other for just a moment, and at that exact time the Lord parted the clouds and shined a ray of sunshine down on us. We felt blessed and acknowledged by our Creator. Nobody really knows, except our Lord, what Mike and I endure in the process of spreading the

Gospel to the community of people who follow Bluegrass music.

We made the decision, with more rain in the forecast for the following week, to not go to the festival in Alburgh, Vermont. We had heard how it is a mud hole when it rains, and as we had never been there before, we decided this would be a good time to go home and try to recoup a little bit before finishing our season.

The next festival was also a new one for us. We left on a Thursday to travel to Greenville, New York. We set up camp and put up our picking tent thinking we'd host some jams to get to know some of the New York folks. Shortly after we arrived, we spotted Harry who promotes the Wind Gap Bluegrass Festival, and invited him over for a spaghetti dinner. The whole time I was serving him food and engaged in conversation, I was feeling physically awful. As soon as he left, I told Mike I needed to go to the hospital as I was fairly convinced I was having another bout of diverticulitis.

Because we had some issues with our Massachusetts insurance paying the bills from my Florida hospital stay, we made the decision to drive over the border and go to the Berkshire Medical Center in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. I was admitted, and IV antibiotics were started because I was correct in my self diagnosis. Unlike the time I spent at Desota Medical in Arcadia, Florida in 2007, the care at this hospital was superb.

Mike was back and forth from the festival to the hospital. Honestly, I was somewhat relieved to be sick.

It was hot and muggy outside and we were rough camping. The hospital had a clear television signal, a good Wi-Fi signal, and air conditioning. It's terrible to be so burned out and exhausted that being hospitalized is the only option for rest. On Sunday morning, Mike led his very first Gospel Sing without me. And after spending three nights in the hospital, I was released on Sunday afternoon.

We wrapped up the 2009 northeast circuit with a new festival in North Creek, New York and then went back to Maine for Blistered Fingers, in Sidney, then The County Festival in Fort Fairfield, and finally the festival at Paul Bunyan Campground in Bangor. This was interspersed with a couple of church services in between festivals.

While we were stopped at a campground, enjoying having a full hook-up and Wi-Fi, our credit card number was stolen and our computer hacked into. As we were driving south to Buena Vista, Virginia and Nothin Fancy's festival in September, I was reloading software after nuking the computer to wipe out the virus. Never a dull moment!

We had a week in Massachusetts before leaving for Virginia, and in that time frame we purchased a 2006 Saturn Vue. Our clown car had 140,000 miles on it and we'd been looking for something bigger for almost a year. I was rejoicing that I would only have to endure one more 1000 mile trip in the CC once we dropped MO off in South Carolina.

We arrived back in Massachusetts to officially be on furlough in October. Of course furlough for us means doing ministry other than at a festival. In the next few weeks leading to the holidays, we had several church services, the Caouette Memorial Scholarship show and long car trips for services in Maine and Vermont planned.



We celebrated our ten year wedding anniversary with a trip to the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. This area of Massachusetts is called the Berkshires and it is a beautiful part of the state. We figured out that, in ten years of marriage, we had lived on the road over half of our married life.



I had to have my first colonoscopy to determine if I was going to need surgery, as I now had two hospitalizations under my belt for diverticulitis. It is a horrible procedure to prepare for, and after all the preparation, it had to be aborted and rescheduled under heavier anesthesia, due to my unique anatomy. Have I mentioned that nothing is ever easy for me? Thankfully, although my colon is loaded with diverticula pockets, the doctor didn't feel I was in need of surgery at this time.



We lost a dear friend during this stretch of time. Dudley Berry, who with his wife, Linda promoted the Brandon, Vermont festivals for years, passed away after a short illness. We traveled to Vermont to be part of his wake and to sing for his funeral service. I wish I could say we get accustomed to losing Bluegrass friends, but we don't, and it hits us directly in the heart every time.

Towards the end of the year, just before Christmas we received the extremely sad news that young Craig, a sixteen year old talented fiddle player from Maine, had died tragically playing the choking game. The choking game has hit the national talk show circuit and news programs, describing this phenomenon of teenagers purposing cutting off their air supply, in order to have a brief high, when oxygen is restored. It is a dangerous game that has resulted in lots of young people losing their lives. This news broke our hearts in two. We are dear friends with Craig's grandparents and had known him for years. We had so many pictures with Craig playing his fiddle at the Gospel Sings in Maine. It was heartbreaking!

As 2009 drew to an end, Mike and I recapped all the horrible things we endured during the year, as well as all the blessings and provision from God's people. We came to the conclusion that we were more determined than ever before to keep spreading the Gospel and trusting God in all things.

NIV® Book of James, Chapter 2, Verse, 12:

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

## Chapter Nine

### What’s Coming Next?

Once the shellshock of all we physically, emotionally and financially endured wore off, I began the process of writing this book. A truly daunting task considering we continue to travel and serve and face all sorts of challenges. The first words of this book were recorded on February 23, 2010. I remember foolishly thinking I would have the draft completed by that fall. Well, it is two and half years later and I’m still typing away.

As “My Journey in His Story” continues, I need to condense down the next three years into just highlights, and promise to write a sequel if this book actually is bought and read by more than my family and closest friends.

Our 2010 winter season in Florida proved to be very healing for us as we traveled the same roads. We parked at the Auburndale Festival in the exact same place we’d been stranded for a month. It was exhilarating to start up and travel out of there on our

own power. Following Auburndale, Mike and I pulled into Theme World campground in Davenport, which is where we'd come after Josh hit us and where we were stranded until Allen hotwired the engine.

This time around we had the opportunity to go to The Holy Land Experience in Orlando. It is a living replica of first century Jerusalem, and throughout the day you can attend dramas which make the Bible come alive before your eyes. I will admit that, with 11 years ministry experience, I have developed some calluses and do not react in the same emotional way to the Word as I did earlier in my Christian walk. A day of being immersed in praise music and drama reached a part of my soul and reminded me again of what a sacrifice He made for me. HOW AWESOME IS MY GOD! We had the opportunity to have communion in the Upper Room, with an actor who played Jesus, speaking words from the scripture and deliberately walking around laying his hand on the shoulders of everyone there. Throughout the day, there was worship in song with everyone in attendance singing and bowing in prayer. We witnessed several people make professions of faith right there in the park. It was so uplifting and we are so glad that we took the time and expense to attend. What a difference a year makes.



2010 was the last year our friend Steve Dittman, promoted Bluegrass shows. We were privileged to be at his last festival at Sertoma Youth Ranch in Brooksville.

Steve put us at the end of vendor row which worked well for us, as after all, we are Jesus vendors.

Towards the end of our southern season, we did have the awesome privilege of leading worship and presenting the Gospel Sing ministry to Mike's Nanny Robinson's church, The Heritage Church of God in Gilbertown, Alabama. This is something Mike had always wanted to do, and I couldn't help but imagine his prayer warrior grandmother smiling down on him from Heaven.



Mike's Mom hit the milestone of turning 80 years old in May of 2010. Through lots of planning and deception we managed to pull off an amazing surprise party for her. During a visit with her in Sebring over the winter, we got hold of her address book. We invited a number of people from her book. In addition to these folks, we had the secretary from her Virginia church email an invitation for her party to her church family. In total, we had 33 people, from all areas of Mom's adult life, waiting in the back dining room of the Golden Corral in Winchester. There were folks that she used to camp with in Front Royal as well as people she sees at the various Gospel Sings she attends. Pastor Twine, from Broadview Baptist in Maryland, flew in from his retirement home in Tampa. In addition, her granddaughter Rachel from North Dakota came along with her soon to be Fiancée, Jeff. Her grandson Joseph drove over from Maryland, her granddaughter Stephanie and great grandson Caden came from



Alabama, and Judy, her very close friend from Clarksville, Tennessee came as well. It was so awesome! Mom thought we had traveled back to Virginia from Massachusetts for my friend Debbie's daughter Kelly's college graduation, so we really surprised her. She went from tears to laughing then back to tears, and will be reliving this event for a very long time. I have learned the importance of appreciating laughter and taking the time to enjoy the celebrations of life. There are plenty of periods of mourning and sadness, so to balance them out by truly embracing periods of celebration, honors the Lord. He is a good God, who truly wants His kids to enjoy the life He's given them.



The new and exciting thing in festival travels in 2010 was the new venue for the Blistered Fingers Festivals in Maine. The Litchfield Fairgrounds is quite a bit different from the sloshing smelly mud we endured for years at the Sidney location. The promoters, Greg & Sandy built a new and much larger stage, with ample back stage area, including a dressing room. Fairgrounds make a really excellent venue for a festival, as there are outbuildings and flush toilets and shower houses to enjoy, and lots of flat grassy area for camping and jamming.

Their first June festival at the new grounds gave Mike a chance to pull off a gag with our friends, The Bluegrass Diamonds, a talented and entertaining group from New Brunswick, Canada. Sandy called Francis off the stage

and Mike came in the other side wearing a matching Diamond shirt that Lise, Francis's wife, had lent him for the gag. To a shocked crowd he sang the "French Song" in French with Vincent and Louis. It was funny how many of the Canadians during the rest of the weekend, asked my very southern husband if he was French?

A little later in the summer we again found ourselves traveling over to the prison to do a concert for the inmates. What made this year different from others was the last minute decision to move the concert from the usual Visitor Center to the prison yard. We so wish we could have had a picture taken of Mike and me in the middle of the prison yard with about 70 inmates lined up sitting and standing against the fence watching us. It was very unique to get to go so deeply into the prison. We got locked down with the prisoners after we'd finished the concert and had turned our microphone off. While the guards accounted for everyone, several of the prisoners approached us to sing a few more songs before they would be taken back to their cells.



We were so blessed the Lord worked out our schedule so we could attend the groundbreaking ceremony for Dwight Chapel's new building. We had one Sunday off the summer of 2010 and it happened to be on the day our brethren were going to praise and worship on the land our new building would soon be erected on. It was such an awesome blessing to be part of this day. Mike and I had prayed, fasted and given towards this vision

for our church since the late 1990's. Isn't it awesome to see answered prayer? From the very beginning, when we had gathered for prayer after a week of fasting, I had envisioned what Emmanuel would look like behind the pulpit of the new building. I knew in my spirit the Lord would bless us with this, if we continued in faith and prayer.

Mike and I regularly pray for souls to be saved and to be Kingdom bound through our ministry. We completely understand that we are powerless to save anyone and know that it is all the work of the Triune God. One Saturday afternoon, while we were sitting at our booth at the Pemi Valley Bluegrass festival, a lady walked past us and then turned around to speak to us. She said, "Oh, you're those people." "I took a Bible from you about five years ago at the Brandon festival." "I read it everyday on my bus ride to and from work, and I want you to know I've come to faith in Christ." "Thank you." Then off she walked. We have no idea what her name is, but it doesn't matter. Because we are faithful in setting up a booth and having New Testaments, Gospels of John, and Gospel Tracts as wells as festival fliers to give away, the Lord used our insignificant little Bluegrass Gospel Sing booth to draw this sister into an eternal relationship with Him. Praise God!

The August Blistered Fingers festival had us back in Maine, where many of the young and talented musicians who loved young fiddle player, Craig, gathered for a tribute set of music in his memory, on Saturday afternoon. This tribute to his life and love of

Bluegrass festivals was very poignant. Preacher Mike talked about him fondly, referring to him as our “barefoot fiddle player,” as Craig had participated in many of our Maine Bluegrass Gospel Sings. He sang the song, “Someday” a cappella in his honor. It was a special song to remember curly haired Craig, and we look forward to seeing him again in Heaven.

When our festival season was over in mid September we attended our niece Rachel's wedding in Grand Forks, North Dakota. It was such a blessing! Rachel sang herself down the aisle. She sang the Shania Twain song, “From this Moment.” We were sitting in front of Jeff and watched his tearful reaction when he realized it wasn't the Shania Twain recording but Rachel singing it for him. Rachel is very shy and for her to have pulled this off flawlessly was amazing and a great gift for her soon to be husband. Most people didn't even realize that it was her that was singing until she got all the way to the front of the church and took the wireless microphone off. The other very unique thing about this wedding is their first kiss EVER was after they were pronounced man and wife. Jeff and Rachel are both very strong believers and they wanted to honor the Lord in keeping completely pure. Funny, we followed them to the park for pictures after the wedding and all they did was kiss. It was truly a blessing to be a part of this very special day.

The end of 2010 was medically challenging for me, as well as quite costly. I had developed an inflammatory cyst which had eaten my jaw bone and caused me to lose the upper back molar on the right side. The whole

ordeal was horrific; it cost us thousands of dollars and was so physically painful. Even so, I still thanked Jesus that the cyst was benign and that I wasn't facing cancer.

During this time, our very close friend from Dwight Chapel was diagnosed with colon cancer. Sheryl is the first person we had met when we started going to Dwight. We had several of her children in Youth Group, and knowing how carefully she watched her health conscious diet, it seemed inconceivable to me that she would have to face the beast of cancer. Over the course of the years, there have been many people I had prayed over and put on the update letter for prayer. This one, hit me particularly closely, and I cried out to the Lord for mercy on my sister Sheryl.

On December 9, 2010, I celebrated the twenty year anniversary of accepting Jesus as my Savior. I remember thinking about all the different ways He has sustained me, taught me and shown me grace. I cannot imagine going through this life without Him.



The beginning of 2011 brought the news of Russ Marsden's passing. Russ and Sue have been dear friends of ours for many years. Promoters of the Pemi Valley Bluegrass Festival, they helped us make some of the initial contacts with the Florida promoters when we first set out full time. Russ had suffered many physical ailments, but it was Alzheimer's that finally took him. He died January 1, 2011 or 01/01/11. Anyone who had

the pleasure of knowing Russ knows how much having a unique death date really fits him.

In February of 2011, in Greynolds Park located in North Miami, a young, dirty and odorous drifter approached us and asked about helping with the festival so he could attend without paying. Later in the evening, I watched him from a distance leaning against a tree trunk completely enthralled with the music coming from the stage. I decided I have never enjoyed a show as much as I did through the eyes of this young wanderer.

This year brought us another scary moment with MO, as we were traveling out of Florida after our southern season was done. The serpentine belt broke, and Mike had to do some serious driving to get us off the highway and into a vacant business lot in Macon, Georgia to fix it.



We moved Mike's Mom out of Virginia and into the house in Roebuck in April of 2011. It was a monumental task full of many stressful moments. The Lord blessed our efforts by working out all the details in His perfect timing. Mom loves living in South Carolina and we are thankful she is happy.

The spring time of that year found us traveling to New Hampshire to officiate the Memorial Service for Russ Marsden. It was a fitting tribute to have so many Bluegrass friends come together to remember him.

This spring also found us tearing apart the inside of MO; replacing worn out carpet with linoleum, and exchanging the old uncomfortable couch for a leather reclining loveseat.

In June, we traveled to Jenny Brook Bluegrass Festival at the Tunbridge fairgrounds. Mike was backstage, as he was emceeing, when I approached him with the scary radar on our blackberry's weather application. It gave him the chance to stop the show and give the audience time to take cover. A spectacular storm arrived about twenty minutes later and resulted in a close lightening strike. The result of that strike was many months of cascading electronic failure in different systems in the motor home that kept Mike quite busy with diagnosing and repairs. We decided that having a fourteen year old motor home made Mike a part time preacher and a full time motor home mechanic.



In July, while we were on the road doing the Gospel Sing Ministry, our home church opened the doors to its new building. My dear friend, Becky Laramée described how everyone met outside for a breakfast on the grounds and then entered into the new and beautiful building singing the song, "We will enter His gates with thanksgiving in our hearts; we will enter His gates with praise." We were so thankful for the Lord blessing the work of Dwight Chapel. This new and beautiful building was the result of many years of sacrificial giving and prayer. The phrase for Dwight Chapel's mission to the community is, "Enjoying Christ and

Spreading His Fame.” In a day where so many New England churches are disbanding because of lack of worshippers, to watch this beautiful building be erected on a busy and visible stretch or highway is a testimony to a good and faithful God.

We were parked at the Blistered Finger’s Bluegrass Festival in Litchfield in August, when we received the news to evacuate the fairgrounds because of the approaching Hurricane Irene. Even though the Sunday show, including our Gospel Sing, was cancelled we had actively participated in more prayer and counseling ministry the week we were at Blistered Fingers than we had during any other single week in the history of the ministry.

During the fall of 2011, we added an additional five week tour that included three Georgia festivals. While we were at Newell Lodge in Folkston, Georgia over Halloween weekend, our home state of Massachusetts was being plummeted with a freak snowstorm. It caused massive power outages and changed the landscape for many months following.



The beginning of our 2012 season brought another dental issue with a raging infection of an upper molar as we traveled from one end of Alabama to the other. The Lord, through our cousin Violet, provided a brother in Christ, Dr. Court to help me by pulling the tooth and providing excellent care for very little money. Just like Dr. Kevin, my ophthalmologist, Court and I prayed



together during the procedure. It is awesome how the Lord provides for His children.

The highlights of our 2012 season included a unique nighttime swamp buggy ride into the deep of the Everglades with an Indian friend named Santo. Santo, nicknamed Nine, is from the Keetoowah tribe. He had recently moved from Oklahoma to the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation. He took Mike and I, along with Pastor Arlen & Lana's daughter Rachel and granddaughter Kaylana, deep into the Reservation's Everglades. It was quite amazing to be so far removed from all civilization and to see the stars and night sky so vividly without distraction. We experienced owls and alligators, deer, rabbits and possums, and lots of spider webs. I'll never forget this night in the Everglades.

John and Stefanie made a trip to Disney in the spring of 2012. We arranged our schedule to be able to spend three days enjoying the grandchildren in the attractions in Orlando. We waited anxiously at the entrance of Magic Kingdom for them to arrive. The grandkids had no idea they were going to see us and it was so wonderful to have them come running into my waiting arms. The awe and amazement of witnessing Disney through my young grandchildren's eyes is an experience I will forever be grateful for.

Our Disney trip brought us to stay with Allen and Leora in Winter Garden. This would be the last time we would see our dear friend Allen. The cancer that he'd been fighting for the last year of his life, took him a few

weeks after this visit. We praise the Lord for giving us those last moments of fellowship with him before he took a turn for the worse, and we look forward to seeing him in Heaven when our time comes.

2012 also brought the death of a well known Bluegrass fan in New England. Alice Waters and her late husband Ray had been voted “Number One Fans” many years ago at the Thomas Point Beach Bluegrass Festival. Just shy of her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday, feisty Alice passed away peacefully. She had asked Mike to preach her Memorial service, and we were honored to take part in a wonderful Bluegrass celebration of a very dear lady who will be sorely missed by many folks associated to the Bluegrass subculture of the northeast.

In early August, of 2012, I *thought* I had completed the draft of my book. In the last few chapters, I just pounded the stories out in hopes of finally being finished.

At Blistered Fingers, in late August, something dramatic happened that could not be left out. During the supper break on Saturday night, my daughter-in-love, Stefanie, called. She NEVER calls on the weekends because she knows how busy we are. I took the phone from Michael and went back into the bedroom as we were entertaining my editor, Dave Fritsch, and had just sat down to eat dinner.

As soon as I heard her say, “Mom,” I hit my knees as I just knew whatever was coming out next, wasn’t going to be good. “There’s been a fire in the barn and John is

pretty rough.” “Gavin hid and John found him.” “He had to throw the boys out the window, “Camden’s not hurt, Gavin is, but not badly.” This is a call no mother wants to ever get. Stefanie had been at work, and our nine year old grandson had calmly called her and said, “Mommy, you need to come home, the barn is on fire and Daddy isn’t O.K.”

We were five hours from home, and I was in full mother/grandmother panic. I called my friend Becky and left her a pitiful voicemail at home. I called her cell phone and she answered, and I told her what Stefanie told me. She immediately left the grocery store and headed to the hospital, all the while, praying, “*Lord, how am I going to tell Mary if John is badly hurt?*” I called my youngest son, Stephen’s phone, he didn’t answer! My next call was to his new girlfriend, Phoebe, who thankfully, did answer. Stephen was in the shower. Phoebe said, “I’ll get Stephen out and we’ll go right over.” Stefanie had gone straight from work to the hospital and nobody knew if the house had survived.

Mike called our Pastor, Emmanuel who was willing to go right over, but we thought it would be better if Becky went. John and Stefanie and the grandchildren know her well. Emmanuel activated our church’s prayer chain, and then we waited to hear.

I cannot describe my sheer terror, during this time. I was so rattled and upset and all I wanted to do is jump in the car and drive home. When the phone finally rang, it was Becky calling, and the first thing out of her mouth was, “He’s O.K., he’s hurt but he’s O.K.” She

then said, “Gavin is acting like Gavin, you want to talk to him?” Gavin got on the phone and said, “Mickey, our garage caught on fire and I got scared and hid, Daddy found me and he threw me out the window.”

Tears of relief swept over me! The next call was from Phoebe who told me the barn was gone, but thankfully, the house was intact. The siding of the neighbor’s house had melted off from the extreme heat of the blaze.

John called a little after midnight and described what had happened. Preacher Mike used what he said and interwove it into a message on Sunday morning at the Gospel Sing. He described how John’s training as a firefighter prepared him to save his children and himself, in what could have been so tragic an event. He then compared this to our necessary preparation for Eternity, namely faith in Jesus Christ.

We decided to drive the motor home over to Thomas Point Beach when we were done with Blistered Fingers and park it there later Sunday afternoon. Once parked, we packed the car and headed home, as we needed to see John and the kids. I was such a wreck!

On Monday morning, we traveled the thirty minute drive over to Warren to see our family. As soon as we walked in the door, all four of the grandchildren started talking to us about what happened. It was so chaotic and loud. Then, my precious first born child turned the corner and I laid eyes on him. He was bandaged and stitched and I sobbed from relief as I held him. I cannot imagine living on this earth without my son. We had

stopped at Dunkin Donuts to buy the kids donuts, and as soon as we got them settled around the dining room table, we went outside with John.

In the charred remains of their garage/barn he recounted the events of the day of the fire. He had been doing several things at once on a typical Saturday afternoon. He had mowed most of the lawn earlier in the day, and had asked Makenna to pick up the toys in the very back by the play structure so he could finish mowing. The lawnmower and gas tank were just inside the closed garage door. The two little boys were playing near John in the large two and half story building. John was heating up a small soldering tool to fix some wiring for emergency lights he was going to show to a friend, later in the day. He heard Gavin, the three year old say, "Daddy, there's water on the floor." When he walked out to look, Camden said, "No, it's gasoline." Camden then ran into the workshop at the other end of the barn. John told Gavin to go with Camden and reached for his Fire Department radio to alert the Dispatcher of the gas spill. Right after he called it in, Makenna opened the door to the finished room at the other end of the garage and John yelled at her to "Get out, there's a gas spill." Within a minute, it ignited and he called it back into the Fire Department. "Re-tone, re-tone, it's a structure fire." The radioed dispatched recording of this is so very scary! Hearing the terror in my son's voice just breaks my heart in two.

John and the two little boys were trapped inside of the workshop with the door closed and the smoke coming in from underneath it. The only escape was a window. John used his axe and broke the glass which brought

oxygen to the fire. The door of the workshop blew off, and the room quickly filled with thick black smoke, with flames following closely behind. The frame of the window wouldn't allow them to get out. John hit it three times with his axe and it wouldn't budge. He grabbed the jagged, broken glass with his bare hands and shook it, ripped it out, tossing it out the burning building.

He then grabbed Camden by his arms and swung him as far as he could away from the broken glass to the ground, which was 10 feet, four inches below. As he was swinging him out, he took a gulp of air and screamed for his neighbor to help him. Meanwhile, out of fear, three year old Gavin had crawled eight feet away. John did a firefighter's sweep to find him. He told me, "Mom, it hurt so bad to breathe, the fire was so hot and all I wanted to do is jump out." He also said, in the moments of searching for Gavin, all sound went away except for Gavin's screaming and crying. On his third sweep, he knew if he didn't find him, he'd have to jump out and leave him or they would both die. During this last sweep, he touched Gavin's foot. He grabbed him by his feet and tossed him head first out of the window, and then immediately jumped out himself. His neighbor, Mike, broke John's fall, and amazingly, Gavin only suffered a cut on the back of his head from a ten foot fall onto broken glass and uneven cement.

Our grandson, Tyler, witnessing all this from the top of the property with an hysterical Makenna said, "As soon as Daddy's feet came out the window, the flames came shooting out after him."

John didn't know where Makenna was, as the fire broke out right after he'd yelled at her to get out. He grabbed Gavin and ran up to the front of his house to put eyes on all four of his children. His arm was burned, and his hand was bleeding from the broken glass, and his body was black with soot. The Fire Department was already on the scene, and John was concerned for his fellow firefighter's safety. He told them where the dangers in the barn were located. His scuba tanks were stored in the front of the barn. He knew they would explode in the heat, and they did.

The Assistant Fire Chief had to tell John to get into the ambulance as he was a patient not a firefighter. The Warren Fire Department did an amazing job at containing the inferno. They had the fire out within 30 minutes. The siding melted off the empty house next door, from the heat. John and Stefanie's home, although damaged by smoke, was saved! If John was not a trained firefighter with a radio, this could have been a very different outcome. Gavin had three staples in the back of his head. John suffered from smoke inhalation, a second degree burn on his right forearm from searching for Gavin, and stitches in his hands from shaking the window frame out. Thank you Jesus!

My emotions over this are still so raw. I go from a place of sheer anxiety and terror over what my son and grandsons experienced, to overwhelming praise and worship to my God for sparing them. When I consider the heroism my baby boy exhibited, I am so **VERY PROUD OF HIM!** I believe with every fiber of my

being that the Lord has something very special planned for John, and also Gavin. I had to reopen the draft of my book to include this amazing story of God's power and love. I thank Jesus for the family He's given me. I love them!

Mike and I have finished the festival circuit in 2012 and already have most of 2013 booked. As we consider all the miles behind us, we are completely committed to doing this ministry until the Lord tells us to do something different. We are honored to be counted worthy by our Creator to show His love to all who cross our path.

And My Journey in His Story continues.....



## Chapter Ten

Wink! Wink!

We often are asked how we survive this very unusual lifestyle of constant travel and limited conveniences. We can answer that question with two words; faith and humor.

Mike and I are very much wired like the characters of Jerry and Elaine in the Seinfeld series. We sometimes mock for sheer enjoyment some of the crazy things we see and hear in people as we travel the roads. People tickle us, and we often belly laugh for hours at some of the completely idiotic things we witness.



We have signals to shield each other from unnecessary musical trauma, such as raking our fingers across our upper legs in the, “nails on a chalkboard” description of a local jam band who can’t carry a tune in a paper sack. How is it that people who are completely tone deaf don’t know it? We have an “exit stage right” signal to get us out of situations that are completely a waste of time. We also have little key phrases to save us from people who want to take up all of our time with useless

and non spiritual chatter while we sit captive at our booth.

We are often amazed how over the course of our years doing the ministry, that the most persecution we've ever received has been from professing believers over denominational differences. We've been accused of being unsaved and false teachers because we don't use a certain version of the Bible or teach on works as the main theme for salvation. We have heard from folks as we've traveled that Jesus is an Alien from a distant planet and that the government conspires to keep people from knowing that truth. As I said, faith and humor is the only way to survive this crazy gypsy lifestyle.



It is amusing to us to when people talk with envy about our cool life of just going from one festival to the other. Obviously they have never given any thought to what that actually means physically and financially. The saying of “walk a mile in our shoes” often comes to mind. I hope you have enjoyed reading about this amazing God journey that Mike and I have been on for the last thirteen years. We humbly ask for your prayers and support as we continue serving the Kingdom through the Bluegrass Gospel Sing Ministry. Please visit our website often to see where we are and what we are up to. It is: [www.bluegrassgospelsing.com](http://www.bluegrassgospelsing.com). If you would like to travel in the bus with us, sign up at our web site to receive the weekly updates which are the source for this book.

If you haven't found your name in my story, please be understanding. I could not possibly write about every experience or person we've encountered in the last thirteen years. We've ministered to thousands of people and encountered too many situations, both joyful and tragic, to possibly report.

My prayer for all who read this journal of my life is for you to realize how precious you are to your Creator. To realize He has an amazing journey for you to follow. Jesus LOVES you and HE is so worth following!

Finally, in closing, I wish to share my life's verses with you. King James Version, Proverbs: 3: 5&6:

*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart  
And lean not unto thine own understanding*

*In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He  
shall direct thy paths.*



## **Song Credits:**

Pg 38

### **I Met My Baby in the Porta John Line**

Michael Lynn Andes Pinecastle Publishing Co.

BMI #197650627

Pg 79

### **Here I Am**

Ronnie Bowman, Shawn Lane - Cat Town Music

Sony/ATV Songs LLC BMI # 8176672

Pg 81

### **Battle Hymn of Love**

Paul Overstreet, Donald Schlitz - Scarlet Moon Music,

Screen Gems-EMI Music, Inc. BMI # 90592

Pg 82

### **Wind Beneath My Wings**

Larry Henley, Jeff Silbar - Warner House of Music

BMI #1678281

Page 100

### **She Paints a Picture**

Eric Ian Gibson - Brown Bird Songs BMI #4427910

Pg 106

### **Will the Circle be Unbroken**

Ada R. Habershon, Charles H. Gabriel

©1908 Public Domain

Pg 111, 182

**Some Day**

Olive Stockton-Music, Tim Stafford Daniel House  
Music Miss Link Music BMI#3987461

Pg. 123, 183

**From This Moment**

Robert John Lange, Shania Twain - Loon Echo, Inc.  
Publishing BMI # #4225005

Pg. 128

**Church Policy or Matter of Policy.**

By Tracy Dart

Pg 180

**The French Song**

by Harry Pease, Larry Vincent.

Pg. 186

**We will Enter His Gates**

Leona Von Brethorst - © 1976 Maranatha! Music

Please find/like us on Facebook at:

<https://www.facebook.com/MyJourneyInHisStory>

If you have questions about the Bluegrass Gospel Sing and Jam please write, call or e mail us at any time.

Also, if your church would like us to come and share our story, please contact us at:

Mike and Mary Robinson

PO Box 305

Belchertown, MA 01007

Cell 617-962-6025

Sign up for our e mail update listing at:

[www.bluegrassgospelsing.com](http://www.bluegrassgospelsing.com)

[maryrrobinson@earthlink.net](mailto:maryrrobinson@earthlink.net)

[preachermikerobinson@gmail.com](mailto:preachermikerobinson@gmail.com)







Are we there yet?