Dear Friends,

I’m excited to share that we stand on the threshold of remarkable new possibilities for preserving the vision of rural Congolese populations, and in some cases, restore sight to blind people. This endeavor involves two key activities: training nurses who are based in rural hospitals to triage and treat patients with eye diseases, and to ensure regular visits by eye doctors who will follow up on the patients triaged by these nurses.

Three tropical parasites, trachoma, onchocerciasis (river blindness), and filariasis threaten the vision of Congolese living in villages near water. In addition ordinary diseases affecting eyesight such as diabetes, hypertension, and cataracts are on the rise; in a context where even routine eye care is mostly unavailable. We hope to change that in areas served by our network of 13 Baptist hospitals.

We call a nurse trained in ophthalmology an “IFO” (Infirmier Formé en Ophtalmologie). On a recent visit to the Vanga hospital I observed ophthalmology nurse Nathalie care for Mrs. Nellie, a school teacher:

For months Mrs. Nellie endured a painful, swollen left eye. When she could no longer bear it, she traveled to Vanga from her village 40 miles away. Dr. Jean Aimé drained the infection, prescribed daily medication and dressing changes, and turned the patient over to Nathalie’s care.

Nathalie begins an eye exam of Mrs. Nellie’s good eye.

These table legs point in which direction? The work of an IFO requires a basic tool “kit” including an eye chart, a box of trial lenses, an ophthalmoscope and tonometer.

Nathalie measures Mrs. Nellie’s eye pressure with tonometer.

“You see well out of your healthy eye. We will take care of your other eye for a few weeks because you need medicines every day. You can then go home and teach school again.”

“I’m a school teacher,” Mrs. Nellie shares her concern while being examined. “Will I see again?”.
The first three nurses from the Baptist hospitals in Moanza, Kipata Katika, and Nselo will begin training at Vanga this month. Dr. Jean-Aimé, Vanga staff ophthalmologist, is excited to head up the training.

Equipped with a surgical “kit” and more sophisticated diagnostic tools, Dr. Odjum, staff doctor and cataract surgeon, will begin visiting IFOs, even as another group comes to Vanga for training. In this way, eye care, cataract and other surgery can be offered much closer to where patients live.

The miracle of reaching the “Mrs. Nellie’s” of Congo with eye care is the fruit of a partnership between the Vanga Hospital, the Baptist network of hospitals, “Christ Blind Mission”, Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF), and donors ‘like you’ who contribute to our Better Health Care in Baptist Hospitals project.

In December, MAF will graciously fly Dr. Odjum free of charge to spend two weeks at two hospitals to treat patients and do surgery. Dr. Odjum and Dr. Jean Aimé received their training through a grant from Christ Blind Mission, which also gifted Vanga with new, more modern equipment, preparing it to be a referral center for patients throughout western Congo. With generous donations from supporters like you, I am replacing dated and dull surgical instruments with brand new ones to be used on these eye care safaris.

Thank you for giving! Rejoice with us that new instruments, our prayers together, and the hands of dedicated Congolese medical providers will restore sight to the blind in Congo!

Katherine Niles

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