

2021 M3 Conference

Q&A with Ben Roberts, MD, and Jenny Roberts

“Sharing the Light, Restoring Vision: A Pilgrimage of a Missionary Ophthalmologist and Family”

(Questions answered by Dr. Ben Roberts, unless otherwise indicated)

CLICK LINK TO WATCH SESSION: <https://youtu.be/MUbigrszMDs>

Dr. Roberts, what is the single biggest challenge that Tenwek Hospital has faced over the course of your time serving there?

A big challenge is balancing the workload, for both missionaries and nationals, with rest and staying refreshed in the Lord. I think there's a lot of work anytime you go to a setting where there are increased medical needs, so that's a big challenge.

Did you go to work at Tenwek Hospital directly out of residency?

After completing residency and retina fellowship, we spent about 10 months raising support and doing all the pre-field requirements. Shortly after this, we moved to serve at Tenwek Hospital.

How did your children handle the move to serve? Were you and your wife on the same page right away about such a big move? Was there hesitation? Was it always your plan to be in Kenya for 15 years?

Ben's Response: We moved when our children were very small 4yrs, 2yrs, and 3 months old. As long as they were with us, they were comfortable and settled. The kids feel like Kenya is their home. They tell us often that they are thankful for the opportunity to grow-up there.

Jenny's Response (Mom/Wife Challenges): When you live on mission, there are all kinds of tribulations. Jesus says that in the book of John - that if you are in this world, you will have tribulations. Sometimes the transitions of learning a new culture and adjusting to daily life in a new environment can be hard and will stretch you. It was important for me as the wife and mom to maintain stability and flexibility as we adapted. The ability to provide that stability and flexibility came from Jesus. While helping my kids and husband transition to our new environment, I stayed in Jesus and asked for His daily peace. I also had to be a student of the culture and not overcommit myself those first few years. When everything felt chaotic, we just had to keep trusting and abiding in Him. Flexibility comes into play when everything is constantly changing, and I had to learn to expect the unexpected. It was also helpful for us to have mentors who were experienced missionaries and were available to answer our questions when they came up. We committed to long-term service when we went to Kenya, but we did not set a specific number of years that we would stay there. We sought the Lord's guidance for each term of service. Ben and I were on the same page when moved to Kenya; we both felt strongly that the Lord was calling us to serve at Tenwek Hospital.

Is there any better segue into the Gospel than helping the blind to see?

Truly, there are great parallels between those who are physically blind and those who are spiritually blind.

Is all the care offered without charge?

Actually, no, Tenwek Hospital is not a free hospital. We've learned over the years that when a patient has an investment in their own health, then they take care of themselves, they value that (healthcare) more. I think that's the way God created us. We never turn away a patient if they are blind. Occasionally, we care for patients completely for free. Often, we try to take some payment. I've been paid many times over the years with a rooster or a chicken or a stick of sugar cane. I think there is value in paying for the service that you receive.

Dr. Ben, how have you encouraged your wife and kids to go for mission, leaving behind what every other medical doctor would do to build their career and financial stability?

People often think that we are suffering greatly when we leave the opportunities in the West to go on mission. To be honest, there is great joy in doing what we do. Helping people who otherwise would not receive the help is very satisfying. Regarding leaving a career and financial stability, life in missions often forces one to trust Jesus more.

What was the fundraising process like?

Tenwek Hospital has 8-10 expatriates from the U.S., the rest of the staff consists of people from Kenya. So, those of us who are there on volunteer status (ex-patriates/missionaries), we must raise our own support. Gathering your support team (donors) around you and raising your own support is part of missions. The hospital itself functions day to day with operational costs being paid for with patient fees, and any large hospital project historically requires raising funds, which means having a champion who is willing to take on the project and raise funds for the project to be completed.

Dr. Ben, do you train all of the members of a surgical suite, or are you currently only focusing on surgeons?

One of the greatest joys of our time there is being able to train and interact with the young Kenyan professionals. I learn a great deal from them. There is only one true residency program in Ophthalmology in Kenya, and it's in Nairobi. We always have one of the Nairobi ophthalmology residents rotating with us. We are also in the planning stage of developing a fellowship for vitreoretinal surgery; that's my area of specialty. There is not currently a fellowship program for Ophthalmology in Kenya, and we are looking forward to helping to meet this need.

We have several small churches that we minister to in Uganda with various challenges with eyesight being one of them. Do you know of other medical programs like yours or have you considered expanding into Uganda?

The longer we've been there (Kenya), we've grown and have relations and contacts with ophthalmologist all over the African continent. Uganda does have eye care centers. Mengo Hospital is one of the hospitals near Kampala (capital of Uganda) that does a really good job of caring for patients, and there are others as well. There is an organization called COECSA (College of Ophthalmology of East, Central & Southern Africa), the governing body over those training in ophthalmology. They are helping to build eye care centers all over the continent.

Have you encountered individuals who are deaf? What services are available for that population and their education?

I am aware of the NGO called Christian Blind Mission (CBM). It is a German NGO that does offer some services for the deaf, as well as the blind.

How do you decide where you are going to serve?

Praying, listening, and investigating opportunities where there are needs. For us, we traveled to Tenwek Hospital in Kenya on an exploratory trip when I was a medical student. They needed an ophthalmologist, and we were willing to serve there.

Jenny, as a mom and a wife, what are the great rewards that you see now that your children are grown?

Jenny's Response: One of the rewards of living on mission as a family is being a part of ministry opportunities together. It was rewarding for us to travel with our eye team into South Sudan, Liberia, and remote locations in Kenya where there is limited eye care. Some patients in these areas walked for days to get to our clinic; many who came were completely blind. The next day after their cataract surgery, we removed their eye patches, and they could see. Our boys helped guide patients and witnessed their excitement after their vision was restored. Patients would jump up and down, dance, sing, and praise God. It was such a beautiful picture of the Gospel. Not only was physical sight restored, but we saw many whose lives were transformed in Christ. That is incredibly rewarding. Luke, our oldest son, actually wrote about some of those experiences in his college entrance essays. Our boys have been impacted in positive ways through life on mission. It's been rewarding for me to watch them grow in their heart of compassion towards others, to feel comfortable in foreign lands, and to use their gifts and talents to serve others.

What would you say to encourage students to keep pushing through school to then be able to serve?

I struggled with all the studying, reading, etc. required to complete medical school. But, I realized that for that season of my life, God was calling me to study and learn as much as possible to serve Him later. It is a difficult season, but remember that it is just that...a season. God preparing us for His plan. Also, keep the flame of missions alive in your heart by attending events like the M3 Conference and possibly take short-term trips to keep your vision alive to pursue your long-term goal.

Are the high number of people with poor vision and need of care due to a prolonged lack of access and/or other medical issues? Or are there environmental conditions that also contribute to the high number of vision issues you have treated?

Much of the reason we see so many people with poor vision is the lack of medical facilities. There are other reasons, for instance, there is a growing incidence of diabetes in Africa, leading to more eye disease.

Are summer internships available at Tenwek Hospital for Public Health graduates?

We have had people do similar internships at Tenwek in the past. I would refer you to our medical superintendent by email: medsup@tenwekhosp.org.

Can you use old glasses? If yes, do the glasses have to meet certain requirements, how should they be packaged to be mailed, and where should they be mailed?

We used to collect old glasses, but now glasses are available within the country for very affordable pricing. So, I usually recommend not sending your old glasses to Kenya.

Are there significantly less restrictions with sharing the Gospel with patients in Kenya than in the U.S.A?

I think one can pray with and share the Gospel with patients in both cultures. In both cultures, it should be done in a sensitive manner, with the permission of the patient. If you have permission to share, then you should feel the freedom to listen and communicate truth with patients.

Do you have any projects at Tenwek Hospital that you are currently raising funds to complete? If yes, if someone would like to support your project(s), where can donations be made?

We are raising funds for another operating microscope and other diagnostic equipment. If interested, then feel free to donate at www.wgm.org/roberts.