

The Life, Times and Faith of Dr Lowell Gess  
“To God Be The Glory!”

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Recognition Program  
for

Dr Lowell Gess & Ruth Gess

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## **The Life, Times and Faith of Dr Lowell Gess – To God Be the Glory!**

In the case of Dr Lowell Gess, real life is far better than fiction. So, we will tell you a true story about our world traveled, missionary man, known in Africa as the “Doctor with a Bible,” who began his life in our Salem community. Lowell is one who always tries to follow the Holy Spirit’s lead. By following those leads, Lowell has had 96 years of rich, productive, fulfilling life. And the leads keep coming! It is very important to Lowell for people to know that The Lord is credited for all accomplishments he has been a part of. Much of the story we share comes from the interesting and inspiring books he has authored. A list is in your program.

***To prepare our hearts for the story of Lowell’s early life, we will sing “Take Me Back” which is on your song sheet. The accompanist will play the chorus twice. Our praise choir will sing it once and then invite our audience to sing this chorus 3 times.***

One could say that Lowell Gess came from humble beginnings. But perhaps farm life was the perfect training to prepare for his calling. On the farm, one learned about nature, animals, sudden weather changes, life and death, seeding and harvest, where food comes from, and how to fix and build things with what was at hand.

Lowell is a fourth-generation member of the German family started with Michael Fredrick Gess and his wife Johanna Schultz who arrived in America in 1856. They settled in Wisconsin before moving to the farm at Paynesville in 1866. One of their 10 children was Frank Gess, Lowell’s grandfather. Frank Gess married Mary Knoble, and Lowell’s father, Arthur, was one of their four children. Some of the Gess family members are buried in the cemetery across the road. Lowell’s wife, Ruth and her parents George and Myrtle Bradley are also buried there.

Lowell’s father married Frances Wolf. They took over the Gess farm in 1915. Lowell’s sister June was born first in 1919, and Lowell was born 2 years later on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1921. This is where our story begins.

Lowell’s parents ran an 80-acre farm with a herd of 33 purebred Guernsey cows. The rich milk was bottled and delivered to clients in town by Model T truck, on which Lowell often road along. Lowell’s mother did the hard work of cleaning and sterilizing the equipment. Lowell remembers the farm as a happy place and a perfect playground with cats, piglets, lambs, new-born chicks, and his beloved dog and constant companion Sport. Lowell experienced a sad shock loss in his young life when a neighbor, believing Sport was killing his sheep, shot and killed his dog. When the killing continued, it proved to his young heart that Sport had been innocent.

Before he was big enough to milk cows, Lowell’s farm work included feeding silage, haying, and endless hours of driving horses to cultivate corn. One horse, Nellie, could be difficult, as she would reach down and nip the tops off the growing corn. Lowell says, ***“I knew the words that would bring the horses to***

**life; words I feared would come out if I were given a general anesthetic. To date I don't seem to have shocked anyone."** While haying, he would sometimes slip away to the railroad track to pick the best tasting wild strawberries of his life.

There was no electricity in the early years. Before the depression of 1929, his father had money to buy a battery-operated radio. He stretched a speaker cord to the barn. His father would say, **"Music for the cows produces more milk."** One day in 1927, his father ran excitedly into the house to say, "He did it, he made it!" Lindberg had crossed the Atlantic Ocean in his plane.

Lowell attended grade school at the gray stucco one-room Sunny Dale School. Students helped the teacher get water from the well, coal from the shed, and to clean the schoolroom each day. School programs were exciting events that drew many people. When he was at his 2<sup>nd</sup> grade program, things suddenly turned silent. Parents hurried children to cars and drove away. He did not understand what was happening until he saw a burning cross across the road. The KKK had targeted the school because a Catholic family had moved in nearby, and their children attended the school. German Catholics and German Protestants ran farms to the North and Scandinavian Lutherans built two churches to the south. At the center, Paynesville had early Catholic, Methodist and Episcopal Churches.

Lowell grew up at a time when church was center to everything. Salem was one of the first German Evangelical Churches built by pioneers who arrived after 1857. There were many church services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, Sunday Schools and Youth activities. Each year the four country churches of the Zion Circuit held revival meetings which were intended to "revive," renew, and further one's commitment to Jesus Christ. Prior to Lowell's day, the meetings were held at tent camps, but by the 1930s the meetings were often held inside the churches. One or more evangelist preachers would give powerful sermons, and people anticipated wonderful experiences of the Holy Spirit.

In 1922, The Evangelical Church purchased a tract of land on Lake Koronis for state-wide meetings. After that, local revival meetings were often held at the new facilities, where there was a large tabernacle with a dirt floor, a chapel, dormitories and small cabins for pastors.

It was at a fall revival meeting at Salem in 1932, conducted by a dynamic preacher, that Lowell received his call into missionary service. He tells the story, **"My soul was at peace, as two years earlier (at age 9) I had stepped forward during one service, knelt at the church altar, and received forgiveness of sins and newness of life in Christ Jesus. The pastor challenged: 'What is God calling you to do? How are you going to live your life?' Under the spell of the moment there came an awareness of an inner message of... 'be a medical missionary.' This was so strong that I went forward and knelt at the communion rail and prayed, 'Thy will be done.' In the testimony time that followed, I was asked about my coming forward. I simply answered that ..... 'I was being 'given direction for my life.' 'Be a medical missionary' was so strange that I decided not to confide in anyone. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to acknowledge it. I simply would be in full time Christian service."**

Lowell was an 11-year-old boy whose main activities were cultivating corn and playing soft ball. He knew only what he was taught about Africa in school, and about missionaries in church. He couldn't imagine leaving home and friends. Later in college he purposely avoided subjects related to medicine. But, the Lord gently persisted. It was another ten years before he told his parents.

Lake Koronis Assembly Grounds would eventually be known nationwide for camps, retreats, and other events. At age 15 Lowell walked down the straw-covered aisle of the tabernacle "Billy Graham-style" to dedicate his life to Christian service. Eight years later he would meet Billy Graham. Lake Koronis Assembly Grounds would always be special to the Gess family. Eventually all 6 children would become summer staff members, and Andrew would marry Carrie in the Chapel.

A wonderful thing about the Salem community was that uncles and aunts, parents, grandparents and cousins lived on farms a few miles apart. They knew, socialized and shared work and equipment with their neighbors. Grandfather Gess owned a steam engine with a fly wheel to run the grain separator. It was fired with straw. One night Lowell and his pal, Floyd Arndt, went to the steam engine after the crew left. They wondered if it still held steam. On a dare, Lowell pulled the whistle cord. The whistle blew and was heard throughout the community. The boys never admitted what they did.

Life was good. Then two things happened that would draw the Gess family away from the Salem community. The stock market crashed in 1929. Literally overnight, traders tried to sell their stocks and no one would buy. Banks closed their doors. Fortunes were lost as well as some lives. Lowell was 8 years old, and it must have been hard for children to understand all the worry around them. His parents lost their savings. They had milk, eggs, pork, and popcorn to sell, but there were no buyers. Most people were in the same predicament. Finding money to buy flour, sugar and salt was a big problem. Old clothes had to be mended and re-mended, and cast-offs were shared as children grew.

The second catastrophe was a severe drought over the Midwest, turning it into a dust bowl. Each year his father planted a crop, but for three years the grain binder wasn't used. Crops dried up. The animals became thin. They were at the end of their rope. The up-to-date buildings, beautiful house, 80 acres of land and livestock had to be dispersed at auction. The bidding stopped at \$5000; take it or leave it. His parents had to take it, despite the extremely low price. This was a common story over the 15 years following the crash of '29. Many farmers lost everything to a creditor, and many had to sell out as Lowell's family did.

To better their prospects, they moved to St Paul where Lowell's aunt ran a merchandise store. His parents bought a small grocery at Chatsworth and Rondo, with living quarters above, and ran it for 3 years. Sales were slow, so Lowell's father sold vacuum cleaners too. Lowell and June attended Central High School just two blocks away. Lowell ran an icehouse, delivering and cutting ice with an ax to fit on the cars' running boards. Between customers, Lowell would throw a softball at the back wall of the ice house. He pretended to be Johnny Vollmer doing his "snap ball" delivery at St. Paul Softball league games. Batters were awed by Vollmer's speed.

One day, quite by accident, it all came together - he threw the ball and it sped to the ice house like a bullet. With more practice, he would duplicate that original serve. He fortified the wall on the ice house. He painted a bull's eye on it. He trained himself to hit the target consistently. This would change his life. One day the shy, retiring kid shuffled to the pitcher's mound to play with the adult, bearded men. They won that game and went to the top of the league. Lowell was off to a fast ball pitching career and he was in demand until he suffered a back injury around age 30.

Of those growing up years, Lowell said, ***"The youth at church formed a strong bond that carried over into school. All strove for good grades. Pranks and vandalism were not popular. Honesty was taken for granted. Help was available for the stranger. No hobo was refused food at our door. The strongest drink available was a root beer – usually from an A & W."*** In honor of these wise words and Christian values, we are serving root beer floats after the program today.

His parent's fortunes improved by 1939, when his mother inherited her parent's house in Nerstrand. There his father found work as a house and barn painter, while his mother, a licensed school teacher, taught all 8 grades in a one room school house for 15 years. Lowell stayed in St Paul, and started college. At Macalester, he heard famous speakers such as E. Stanley Jones, Dr Walter Judd, Rosa Page Welsh and state governors. Lowell adapted to college life quite well during these relatively carefree years. He was offered interesting ways to support himself. Professor McLean gave Lowell a "secret" job of grading English papers of other students. He wasn't allowed to give a failing grade as that was the professor's job. He waited tables at the Lindbloom Café, and peeled potatoes at his dormitory to cover half his board. He received payment for helping "whisk" a disabled professor up and down stair cases before there were elevators. Sleep was usually in short supply. Yet, Lowell continued in basketball, softball, hockey and handball. We should not leave out that he dated "charming ladies," though he lamented that they all married other future ministers.

Lowell attended North Central College in Naperville, Illinois for one year, but finished his degree at Macalester. His competency and faith led him to be elected as president of the Young People's Union and the United Christian Youth Movement. He relates that the fellowship of outstanding Christian young people and their leaders blessed his life. The district superintendent of the Evangelical Church heard a speech Lowell gave at Koronis, and he asked Lowell to conduct services at the New Trier Church while still in college.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, changed everyone's lives, and in 1942 Lowell registered for Selective Service. His 1-A status was later changed by the draft board when they learned about his church work. This weighed heavily on his heart as so many high school and college classmates were giving their last full measure of love and allegiance to our country. More than 16 million mostly young Americans served in WWII –nearly 12% of our population. More than 1 million were either killed or wounded. By the end of the war few blocks in the Twin Cities did not have a Gold Star hanging in one window. ~ ~ ~ **The Lord had another plan for Lowell's life.**

The three years at Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville were happy and challenging. Lowell got jobs as a librarian and painting with a friend. He was elected student body president representing 80 men deeply committed to Jesus Christ in ministry.

A truly great moment occurred when a former roommate invited him to dinner with his wife and her sister, Ruth Bradley. It was a “rising of love” at first sight. A few days later he wrote to his parents:

***“I met Petnik’s sister-in-law Ruth Bradley. I have met hundreds of fine girls at Lake Koronis, Lake Geneva, at college, and other places..... what I am getting at is that I’ve come to know a girl who tops all that I’ve ever known. What’s more, she has one more year of nursing school before she graduates from Winnipeg General Hospital. She then intends to go to school in Chicago for Bible study with the intent of being a missionary. Ruth is a very modest and sincere person. She has a spiritual quality that I never dreamed girls could have. I guess I never met the right one before. She uses a touch of rouge, but no lipstick. Frankly, she looks much better than if she did. I’m especially anxious that you meet Ruth because for the first time in my almost 23 years, I’ve met one who meets all the requirements – requirements that I thought perhaps were too high. After you have met Ruth, and after I have talked it over with you, I have a feeling that this one is going through.”***

With Seminary completed, in May of 1945, Lowell was appointed to serve at St. Cloud and Graham Churches in Minnesota. A few days after graduation, Lowell arrived in St Cloud as a bona fide “preacher” without a car, with all his earthly possessions in two suitcases, and a King James Bible. A \$40 loan from Reverend Trapp paid for a kitchen table, chairs, and bed. He bought a 1937 Chevrolet from a church member for \$460. At the first service, he forgot his notes. But he had practiced the sermon so well that parishioners were impressed by the new pastor preaching from an open Bible in his hand.

On May 22, 1945, Lowell received his release from the draft board, and he called Ruth in Canada. The next morning, he boarded the train. He met Ruth’s family, and attended her graduation from nurse’s training. He made his first-ever purchase of a dozen roses for Ruth. ***“I was going all out,”*** he says, ***“even buying ‘Melody of Love’ sheet music for Ruth’s mother and nuts for Ruth’s sister Irene.”*** Back in St Cloud a couple days later, there was a reception for the new pastor, and Lowell was given a congregational gift of \$17.50. He was graciously reimbursed for his Winnipeg high spending spree!

***That popular piece, “Melody of Love” was first written in 1903, and Lyrics not added till 1954. Let’s listen to Frank Sinatra sing that song, so we can feel the longing so many young people felt near the end of World War II.***

## Part 2 – Trials, Tests and Happiness

In summer of 1945, Lowell started pre-med courses at St. John's University. He commuted to Chicago during the week to take a physics class. He often stood on the train the entire trip so older folks and ladies could sit. **Victory-Over-Japan Day** marked the end of the war on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945. The entire country heaved a collective sigh of relief. Life could begin anew. Three weeks later Ruth came to St Cloud and they were engaged.

The end of December Lowell traveled to Winnipeg. With family present, Lowell and Ruth exchanged wedding vows. They proved to be the perfect team and love match. Ruth's father had died when she was 16. Ruth trained as a secretary, and for five years she supported her mother and sister on \$45 a month. When she didn't get the raise she asked for, she found another job that paid \$90 a month. With the extra money, she was able to attend nursing school. Though small in stature, Ruth was healthy, capable, sensible and very fit to take on all the duties she would as a Mother, pastor's wife, nurse, surgical assistant, and manager of mission hospitals. Ruth stayed healthy when other family members came down with Malaria and hepatitis.

Getting married to an American didn't satisfy U.S. Immigration for Ruth's permanent entry into the United States. At the border, the American consul questioned if Lowell could support Ruth on a pastor's salary. She was allowed to visit for two weeks. Letters from Minnesota church officials satisfied the examiners and citizenship would follow. Lowell said that Ruth was the perfect preacher's wife. The following year they got a new appointment to Mayer Evangelical Church. Little did they know that moving would characterize their lives.

Lowell said that Ruth was not easily "cowed." Around age 55, Ruth wrote her **Statement of Faith** essay, which is by itself a "sermon" worth studying in Lowell's 2012 book. It shows her wisdom gained in the constant self-examination a Christian should give to one's life. She said, ***"I believe my greatest strength lies in the fact that I realize I can't go it alone, either without the help of others or of God."*** About her beliefs she said, ***"In person-to-person relationships I feel called to love and to care, and to have honesty and integrity in all that I do. I feel we are called as Christians to fight intolerance, injustice, racism, indifference and violence itself, by being actively involved in the political and public structures of our society, that all may have equal opportunity to enjoy and benefit from the plenty that is available."***

In his 2012 book Lowell reflects, ***"My admiration for Ruth remains immeasurable. Without complaint and often with short notice, she would bundle up the family for a new move and a new experience."*** Ruth passed away at age 93 in 2010, only weeks short of their 65<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. She made her final 162<sup>nd</sup> ocean crossing in 2004. We have placed flowers on the piano today to the loving memory of Ruth Gess.

In fall of 1946, they welcomed the birth of first son, Tim. Responsibilities were great. Every moment was taken up as Lowell continued pre-med studies at U of M. God didn't always lay out a clear, easy

path. There were tests, and many people would have given up and settled for less than their goal; but not Lowell and Ruth. Despite all the sacrifices being made, they were happy. At one point Lowell's stretched life caused his grades to drop, which threatened his acceptance to private medical school. The Lord "pulled some strings" and Lowell was accepted to Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. He quickly raised the \$600 tuition by selling his '37 Chevy.

The family moved to St Louis, and lived in very modest housing that led to better housing as time went on. Lowell had the demands of medical school. Ruth did secretarial work from home for a church, and she shared a job at a hospital with another nurse. At one point, they were offered an entire parsonage in exchange for Lowell preaching Sunday sermons. That church grew, and Lowell took on extra duties of visitation, weddings and funerals. Being short on sleep, he was burning the candle at both ends, and Mononucleosis put him in the hospital for 10 days. When the dean learned of all Lowell was trying to do, he offered him a scholarship usually given to top scholastic students. With more time to study and rest, Lowell went to the top 15% of his class, and the final two years of med school were a delight.

Daughters Mary and Elizabeth were born while the family was in St Louis for Medical School.

Lowell said that it was mind-boggling to think of Christians who helped him realize his calling. Sacrificial gifts came from family, friends and other sources. He took his boards in June 1951. Medical School was finished, but he still had to fulfill internship at Ancker General Hospital back in Minnesota.

Ruth and Lowell had mixed feelings as they packed the car. The thought of never seeing dear friends again was overwhelming; yet it was a fact of their lives that would happen again and again.

Lowell was 30 years old when he started at Ancker Hospital. With a missionary salary and rental allowance of \$2,920 a year, they bought and settled into their own house for a time. During this time, a back injury required surgery and ended his fastball pitching days. At the hospital, he oversaw 30 Tuberculosis cases. He also worked emergency and receiving rooms during the last major polio epidemic in Minnesota. To make diagnosis, they did spinal taps, and this training prepared him for diagnosis of meningitis in Africa. Lowell was on call day and night. 3 hours of daily sleep took its toll, and he was hospitalized - again - this time with a case of mumps - on both sides.



## Part 3 - “Bound for Africa”

**Lowell wrote to Curt Wegner in 1999, telling about a favorite Salem song: Joy Down in My Heart. He said, “for many years I would sometimes hum the tune or murmur the words while doing eye surgery. Another doctor heard me one day, and called his wife in so she could listen. With tears in her eyes she said, ‘My father composed that song while being a missionary in China where I was born.’ I assured her that it has been a blessing around the world.”**

**With all the preparations and sacrifices Lowell and Ruth made to reach this point in our story, it is the perfect time to sing “Joy, Joy, Joy”. The words are on your song sheet.**

In the early 1900’s, missionaries could help people with health issues from contaminated water, food and ulcers, but little else. In 1937, the British Government required missionaries to have six months of training in tropical diseases. Missionaries too were subject to illness, death and danger. With needs so great, and the support of churches and other organizations, medical care improved for mission fields in the 50 years that followed.

In late 1952, the Gess family was packing for their first missionary appointment to Nigeria, Africa, where they would stay till 1955. Fourth child, John, arrived early on August 7<sup>th</sup> while they were covering for a pastor at Red Bird Mission in Kentucky. Baby John’s health problems delayed their ocean crossing, but the family left for Nigeria in December. After 3 weeks of riding the high seas, crossing jungle, savannah, and plateau lands they were finally -- **“home.”** They saw great numbers of birds and wildlife, and passed many villages with grass roofed huts. They gathered the family to thank God for their safe arrival and to put them into His care for the future.

Lowell’s first day of surgery in Nigeria was just two days after arrival. A young man was carried in on a litter by four men from an inaccessible area. A fight at a wedding feast had turned ugly and a spear was thrust into the patient’s abdomen. Ruth assisted, along with an anesthetist and a Nigerian attendant. The spear caused plenty of damage, and Lowell had to dig into his memory to recall which of two procedures he should do. One would cause peritonitis and be fatal. As sometimes came to his mind, **“how could a farm boy from Minnesota be in a situation like this?”** He prayed, **“Show me how to do my part.”** In a moment, he clearly recalled his training. The repair was done and new oral antibiotics were given. Lowell often wondered how long it would have taken for the community to accept him if the first patient he touched had died.

During the three years of Nigerian service, Lowell would deliver babies in cases of obstructed births, perform many hernia surgeries, diagnose and treat the 1954 meningitis epidemic; prescribe new

medicines to stop the spread of leprosy and cure those who had it. He quickly learned about the complications of malnutrition, measles, and malaria and River Blindness; the latter two being caused by parasites. HIV/AIDS would later become the most devastating of all diseases for Africa.

People sometimes died from snake bites for which there was no anti-venom treatment. Lowell decided to identify, catch and milk the deadly vipers for their venom. Missionaries had to carry the venom to New York, and later the anti-venom serum was shipped back to Africa so bite victims had a chance at life.

The various treatments and surgical procedures had to be given with sensitivity to tribal beliefs of the people. Sometimes there were conflicts between beliefs and life-saving treatments, such as blood transfusions. People believed if one lost their blood they would die. With over 500 languages spoken in West Africa, they interpreted languages and dialects as best they could. They often had to wait for life-saving medicines to arrive by means not quick by U.S. standards. Patients sometimes arrived in critical condition and beyond help. It was common for women to die in childbirth, as only 1 in 20 got the surgical procedure needed. Only 15% percent of people needing hernia surgeries would get them.

It was exciting to see new medical procedures and medicines being developed to cure people in the African nation. The World Health Organization launched a leprosy elimination plan in 90 of 122 countries reporting infections. The multi-drug therapies cured 8 million people in ten years, and patients no longer had to be isolated in colonies. The drug company Merck invented and donated a new parasite control drug, called Ivermectin, through the World Health Organization. This drug saved the sight of millions caused by River Blindness.

The Gess family prayed for and saw many miracles over the years. One involved their 5<sup>th</sup> child, Paul, who was born in Nigeria. He developed a serious infection that seemed to be beyond the help of human hands. After doing a spinal tap, they feared they'd have to let him go. They sat huddled together on the couch with Paul in Ruth's arms. Lowell got a cup of water and baptized him with the words of Matthew 19:14 where Jesus says, ***"Suffer the little children to come unto me, forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."*** A half hour later, they noticed the baby was not convulsing, and Ruth thought he was gone. But when Lowell placed the stethoscope on his chest, his heart was beating normally and breathing was regular. His recovery was rapid and Paul developed into a beautiful, strong, athletic boy.

Their next commission was at Rotifunk Hospital in Sierra Leone. Their sixth child, Andrew, was born there and he would spend more time in Africa than his siblings.

Africans develop eye problems such as cataracts and glaucoma much earlier than people in the U.S. Even children can develop congenital glaucoma and cataracts. As a general surgeon, Lowell saw so many blind people come to the hospital and he didn't have the skills to help them. He mentioned this to an ophthalmologist friend in Ohio. Some months later he received a set of eye instruments and a cataract surgery "how to" book. The day came when he would perform his first surgeries on 3 totally blind patients. Once again there was that moment of panic when Lowell questioned his ***"farm boy"***

background. He expected to restore vision on at least one of the patients; but all three were thrilled to see and wanted to dance. Word spread and the blind were brought from every corner of the country, sometimes several being led by a child. Lowell also traveled to other hospitals and remote places to perform medical procedures. Travel might involve driving the Land Rover, riding a bus or train; but might also be by walking, a boat, canoe, or riding a horse. With the need so great for an ophthalmologist, and none to be found, Lowell was asked to go back to the University of Minnesota to complete eye surgeon residency. After training, they moved to Taiama, Sierra Leone in 1965 to start an eye program that would grow by the day.

With several children in college, the Gess family took leave of absence for five years from 1967 to 1972. Lowell worked as an ophthalmologist at a clinic in Bismark, North Dakota.

In 1968 the EUB Church merged with the Methodist Church to form the United Methodist Church, which would spread its mission of faith and strong medical support systems across Africa and around the world. In September 1972, they returned to Sierra Leone to help open the Bo Eye Clinic of the United Methodist Church, where they served till retirement in 1975.

Upon retirement in 1976, Lowell established the Gess Eye Clinic in Alexandria, Minnesota. Son Tim, also an ophthalmologist, joined the practice. Tim's daughter Debby later joined the practice. At first Lowell, worried that patients might be skeptical of a 55-year-old ophthalmologist who honed his skills while a missionary in Africa. He felt he needed to prove his skills. That same year an opportunity presented itself. Lowell learned about intraocular plastic lens implants from Dr. Peter Choyce on a layover in England. The artificial lens replaces an affected natural eye lens after a cataract is removed. The new procedure made recovery almost immediate, and patients could see without being fitted with thick-lens glasses that could later be lost, damaged or stolen. He took additional training, and launched a program in Minnesota which quickly expanded into surrounding states. By 1978, the University of Minnesota eye department invited Lowell to describe his experience with the first 150 implants he and Tim had done. He designed 5 lenses and sought patents on 2. Lowell would teach others how to do the procedure in 14 countries.

## Part 4: The Kissy Eye Hospital

It was actually after retirement in 1976 when Lowell was struck with the idea that the people of Freetown, and 10 million more in West Africa, deserved modern eye care. Lowell and Ruth set up an eye hospital at the Kissy Urban Center. "Kissy" is a term for the eastern Freetown area settled years earlier by members of the Kissy Tribe. Each winter Lowell and Ruth returned for up to 3 months and would recruit volunteer surgeons to participate. They traveled on planes with 70# boxes and suitcases filled with medicines and supplies. This could be challenging, but the supplies might not arrive in time for use if shipped separately.

Between visits they would store the equipment. Through UMC support and volunteer efforts of many people, the money was raised to finish the Kissy United Methodist Eye Hospital, which was later renamed the Lowell and Ruth Gess UMC Eye Hospital.

The hospital was opened each year in spite of two hostile government takeovers, and through a brutal civil war lasting 11 years from 1991 to 2002. It was the churches that worked for peaceful resolution.

### Ebola Crisis

The Ebola outbreak in 2014 spread shocking destruction to human lives and ways of life in West Africa. People, including doctors and nurses, contracted the illness and died quickly due to lack of understanding about how the disease was spread. The outbreak started in December 2013, when a 2-year-old girl in Guinea ingested fruit bat feces, which are natural carriers. She died, as did her family members and others in the household. At first, word was that Ebola was spread through air and breathing. That was untrue; as it was quickly learned it spread by touching bodily fluids of infected people. The African people had a strong tradition of preparing the bodies of dead family members, and this spread the disease rapidly. Normal life, schools, and commerce shut down for months. Access to food quickly caused a related crisis of starvation. There was incredible fear and confusion, and civil unrest. Because early symptoms of Ebola are similar to Malaria, those who just had Malaria would not get treatment either. The churches and hospitals found ways to educate people about the real causes of Ebola. For months people did not touch each other without wearing protective suits. With education, quarantine and other precautions, cases finally subsided several months later. At first 9 in 10 infected people died. In the end, more than 27,000 people were infected, mostly in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, of which more than 11,000 died.

The world was not aware of the severity of the crisis till August of 2014. By September Lowell felt compelled to go to Sierra Leone, where the disease was taking a toll. He was struck with grave concern for the safety of the 29 staff members of Kissy Eye Hospital. Because of his training, faith, understanding of the culture and medical facilities, he believed he could help. He could bring medicines, Ebola

protective gear and supplies. ***“Praying is one thing,”*** he said, ***“helping where possible would put prayer into action.”*** He bought a plane ticket in September, but wasn’t allowed to go till January of 2015. He says in his 2015 book “Ebola’s Den,” ***“I have never lived for two months on such a high level of adrenaline”*** AND ***“It may sound strange, but I am enjoying my stay in the lion’s den.”*** Lowell survived his two months stay and made his way home where the Minnesota Health Department put him under quarantine for 3 weeks. Many back home were waiting to hear about his experience.

During his time in Africa, Ebola survivors were referred to the Kissy Eye Hospital because of blindness complications. It was through treating these patients he learned how a survivor’s vision could be protected during the complicated Ebola treatment phase. Working against the clock, Lowell visited Ebola care centers to explain the treatment. He contacted Tim and Debby back in Alexandria, asking them to help pass the information to The World Health Organization, Doctors Without Borders, and Centers for Disease Control.

Lowell returned to Sierra Leone 3 times in 2016 and twice in 2017, to participate in an Ebola research project by Dr. Steven Yeh of Emory University Hospitals of Georgia. There were many physical and social challenges for post Ebola survivors. One was the development of complicated cataracts. Surgical teams were not willing to remove the cataracts due to their own risk of dying. This was because the virus remained alive inside the eye. Through research they discovered that when eye fluid was tested after 18 months, all Ebola viruses were gone. The patient could then have surgery and sight could be restored. All this research was done at the Kissy United Methodist Eye Hospital.

On August 10<sup>th</sup>, ***just a few days ago***, Lowell returned from his second trip to Sierra Leone of 2017. He has crossed the ocean 194 times; that is 97 round trips.

The faith, works and leadership of Lowell and Ruth have had a great impact on many people around the world. One great influence is in how the Gess children and descendants have been inspired in their own lives and careers. Four of the children have doctorates. Two have master’s degrees. Tim is an ophthalmologist; Mary is a nurse-psychologist; Beth is a family counselor, John is an optometrist; Paul is a counselor specializing in abuse cases; Andrew is a professor at Bethel University; Paul and Andrew also have seminary degrees. And three grandchildren are ophthalmologists!

So often Lowell points out how important it is to him that any praise, honor or glory goes to Calvary. He wrote to us recently, ***“After my commitment to the Lordship of Jesus at the Salem altar at age 11, I simply followed the leading of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it was bewildering, but always exciting to pass through the next open door to share the Gospel. And in a quote from his 2012 book, “I humbly thank God for His wonderful kindness and compassion. It is an immeasurable joy to minister to the blind and bless them with sight and spiritual insight into the love of God as revealed through Jesus Christ, our Lord. God called Ruth and me, not to bestow on us greater honor, greater prestige, or greater glory on this earth; God called us for a greater task and for a greater service. We served God by serving others. We were saved to serve.”***

**Lowell**.....the people of Salem have come to believe you belong to us, as we are so amazed by your life, your enthusiasm and love for humanity. With everything you have experienced around the world, we are so taken with the fact that you've never forgotten how your life started .....on a farm....just down the road from here. You've never forgotten Salem Church, its people and the altar of your calling. We know you love us, and we love you too.

Yet while we believe you belong to us, we also know that you belong to Ruth, to your family, to the world of medicine, to West Africa, and most of all.....You belong to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. May God continue to bless you as you have blessed so many, by yielding to His leadership for your life.

***We close our story with a special song and video that will be on the TV: "To God Be the Glory" by Andre Crouch.***