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As a child, Dr. Douglas Dickens didn't have grandiose visions of becoming a world-renowned authority on the care and education of ministers. He never dreamed of the intricate ways God would lead him around the world to serve men and women in ministry. But as Sir Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give."

Dickens is a living testimony of God's redemptive purposes, and in spite of his tremendous successes and an impressive professional biography, he doesn't convey an exaggerated sense of importance about who he is. "Having grown up in a children's home and come out of a very dysfunctional family, I am keenly aware that I am just one small example of how God redeems broken places in people's lives and uses us," he shared. "So I really am sometimes overwhelmed and amazed at the places where I wind up and the things I wind up doing."

The son of an alcoholic father and a loving but psychologically-challenged mother, Dickens survived his childhood and embraced a call toward pastoral care. For the past 12 years, he has served as a professor of pastoral care and counseling in the School of Divinity at GWU, and is the current chair of the W. Randall Lolley Chair of Pastoral Studies. Prior to joining the School of Divinity, Dickens was an Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, where he earned his masters and doctoral degrees. For more than 25 years, Dickens has had training from premier organizations in America related to trauma and crisis intervention in refugees. Most recently, he was invited to serve as part of a new Harvard Trauma Program to work with displaced people groups and those who have been devastated from war and civil violence.

"It was mind-boggling for me. I'm a professor from Gardner-Webb University, and they've selected psychiatrists and psychologists and experts from all over the world, and they select me," Dickens stated incredulously. "God has a funny, funny imagination."

With mission service in foreign countries like Rwanda, Uganda, the Belgian Congo, Russia, Thailand and beyond, a man of his expertise could easily sit back and enjoy his golden years, sharing stories and experiences with students as he teaches them about the importance of living out God's word. But Dickens is still highly motivated to make a difference on an international level. He credits GWU President Dr. Frank Bonner for helping him maintain a continued commitment to international service and missions. "One of the ways Dr. Bonner has blessed me—and I think it has ultimately blessed the University through my classes—is that he has always allowed me to continue to be involved in international efforts," stated

Dickens. “When the tsunami hit Indonesia and Thailand, I was asked immediately if I could go. Dr. Bonner didn’t bat an eye. He said ‘we see this as a way of using our professors internationally and using their gifts and it will come back to us.’”

Recently, Dickens was asked to serve as a speaker and presenter for the inaugural Global Member Care Conference, held in Thailand. The organization exists to resource, equip and provide an international connection between Christian practitioners of member care at all levels. As part of the trip, he hoped to incorporate a visit that had been four years in the making. “It occurred to me,” he said. “If I attend the conference and present this paper, why can’t I tie this into going a few hundred miles into the mountains to this refugee camp?”

Although it was quick planning, his trip to Thailand ultimately included a journey to the Mae La Refugee Camp, which is the largest of seven camps along Thailand’s border with Burma. The camps house over 140,000 people who were forced to flee their homes when military forces burned the villages and committed atrocities which caused ethnic minorities and especially the Karen people to believe they intended genocide. Dickens’ focus was research, and he desired to connect with the members of the Karen people who had previously converted to Christianity, many of whom were also primarily Baptist.

What Dickens had not counted on was nearly succumbing to heat stroke in temperatures of well over 100 degrees. “The month of April is the hottest time of the year, and the temperatures in the camp the week I was there were 105,” Dickens recalled. “There were at least 60,000 people in this guarded United Nations camp, split into four quadrants. No real roads in the camp; very little electricity. The Bible School had electricity, but only at certain times of the day.”

While out walking with the pastor in the camp, Dickens realized that he wasn’t sweating, he was dizzy, his head hurt and he could think of one thing: heat stroke. He knew the safest course of action was to get back to the Bible School and pour water over his head and try to stand under the one electric fan that was there. “When I got there, they were having a brown out [no electricity],” reflected Dickens. “I poured water over my head and stripped down to my shorts and decided to just sit there until my body cooled off. It was as primitive and difficult a condition as I’ve ever been in.”

As he sat in the Bible School, unsure of whether his body was cooling down quickly enough, he began to talk to members of the faculty and some of their students. He realized his physical condition was giving him an opportunity to talk to the people he was there to research. “I was doing narrative interviews, letting them tell the story of watching their wives and children as they were being run out by the Burmese army who were trying to kill them,” he shared. “They were talking about their wives being raped, their sons and men just shot and killed. I mean, awful, awful stories. But I kept hearing how their faith and trust in God kept them going.”

Armed with these amazing stories of survival and hope, Dr. Dickens traveled back to Chang Mai to participate in the conference. “One week to the day I left the refugee camp, the Bible College burned to the ground,” Dickens announced. “They had five or six buildings, all wooden buildings with bamboo leaf roofs. They cook in open pots over huge fires. One stray spark could easily ignite the buildings and they had to go to the river to get water. Everything burned. The library, their classrooms, the faculty housing, personal items, everything. But they’ll be working, they’ll be operating again by this fall. In January, if I can find a way to get the money, I’m going back to teach for a week, a pastoral care course.”

As tragedy once again touched the lives of the refugees, Dickens was inspired by the positive perspective of the Bible school leaders. “Their response to the fire was basically that they were going to thank God for his grace for what He provided in the past, and that they were going to thank God for what they knew He would provide for the future,” he shared. The beautiful attitudes of these tragic-stricken individuals gave Dickens immediate and practical examples as he prepared to present his paper on Beatitudes as mental health markers for missionaries and families.

For Dickens, the chance to present his paper at the first Global Member Care Conference led to an even greater learning opportunity. “I was delighted to share my insights on the use of the Beatitudes as they relate to the mental health of evangelists,” he said. “But I gained such an incredible perspective in return by participating with the refugees and traumatized people at a Bible School in a refugee camp. I heard stories that make me ashamed of how comfortable my faith is. When a student says they want three more points on a test because they didn’t think it was fair, I look at them and say ‘What world are you living in?’”

His years of research with world-famous psychiatrists have confirmed one very important thing. There is a connection between spirituality and trauma. Research shows that people in trauma who have an intrinsic or deep spirituality or faith are more resilient. At this point, Dr. Dickens simply smiles. “I’ve seen God, in the lives of these people, give them more,” he said. “But again, I’ll go back to the beginning. My daddy, whom I loved, was an alcoholic and my momma had her psychotic episodes, and I’ve seen God redeem my whole life. That, I understand.”