



Photo Credit Cheryl Sorenson

Gayle Sommerfeld:

By Bethel Larsen

As a timid child trying to avoid her father's anger, Gayle Sommerfeld never could have imagined the good plans her heavenly Father had for her, or the way He would lead her step-by-step to establish two mission organizations.

Gayle spent her school years with two older siblings and her parents packed into a one-bedroom Chicago apartment that overlooked a dismal alley. Her father, with only a fourth-grade education, worked two jobs to support his family, and often targeted his youngest with his frustration. Her mother, by contrast, sang hymns as she worked and shielded her daughter with quiet strength. Gayle remembers her mother with great affection.

A NEW LOOK AT MISSION WORK

As her sister and brother worked and lived at home after high school, Gayle dreamed of a college education and escape from the crowded apartment. Awarded a scholarship, she tried a private Michigan college before transferring to the University of Illinois in Champaign. There she met a Lutheran pastor's son, Don Sommerfeld, who caught her attention juggling and eating fire at a social event.

Before their wedding in 1957, Don's father instructed Gayle in Lutheran teaching and received her into membership in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Her bright future was darkened,

however, when her scholarship was withdrawn because of her marriage. "It was a very hard time," she says now. After juggling work and classes to the point of exhaustion, the couple moved to Holland, Michigan, to work and save before dashing back to finish their degrees, as their first child arrived shortly before Don's graduation. After Gayle received her bachelor's degree in sociology, they moved their aging trailer near Chicago, where Gayle's mom could help with childcare while they worked.

Though all appeared well, Gayle's faith had suffered under her agnostic professors. Questioning God's existence, she asked Him to reveal Himself. God met her in the everyday moments of life, flooding her soul with unmistakable peace, confirming His Word in Acts 17: 27b: *Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being.*

Another step of faith would come some years later, when Don had earned his Ph.D. and was working full-time as a director of human resources. With four children of her own, Gayle began a day care business in their Ann Arbor, Michigan, home. Active in church but questioning her need for Jesus, she was guided to an in-home prayer meeting, where she heard believers praying from their hearts and witnessed "the kind of faith I had read about in the life of the early Christians in the Book of Acts," she says.

In 1987, Gayle showed the video series *You Can Make a Difference* to the youth group she was leading and sensed the Holy Spirit's whisper in her own spirit: *Will you go into the world and make a difference in My Name?* As she and Don sought God's guidance, they found no short-term mission opportunities within the LCMS. Their first trip to Haiti was in 1989 with a non-denominational group. Captivated and learning as she went, Gayle returned nine times in three years, organizing and leading teams for construction, short-term medical clinics, and more. A chance inclusion of used eyeglasses on one trip led to a plan for eyeglass clinics. The first steps toward Mission Opportunities Short-Term — MOST Ministries — was born, though it did not receive its name until 1992.

Don soon realized his calling was for logistical support and developing the eyeglass ministry, while Gayle relished the tasks of preparing and leading teams. MOST Ministries developed a "field-driven" servant model for short-term missions. Donated eyeglasses and various supplies soon filled space in the Sommerfeld home, overflowing to rooms on the Concordia College campus in Ann Arbor.



Don and Gayle (left) leading their very first mission trip in March 1989.



Michigan LWML, Women's Ministry and Health Kits, Sorá, Panama, 2003



Panama Eyeglass Mission Trip, 1993



Son David, Haiti, 1991



English as a Second Language (ESL) for nurses India, 2004



ESL in China, 2005

Photo Credit Cheryl Sorenson



Daughter, Sandi Helm, and Gayle celebrate Dignity4Girls' distribution of over 3,500 feminine hygiene kits.

Photo Credit Cheryl Sorenson



Don and Gayle celebrate 30 faithful years of service with MOST Ministries.

Teams went to Latvia to lead English as a Second Language (ESL) camps and Hospice training programs; to China for prayer walking, eyeglass ministry, ESL, and Hospice training; and to several Central American countries to provide water filters for desperately needed clean drinking water systems. Women's and children's programs were developed. Eventually, local leaders established satellite eyeglass clinics in Latvia and Kyrgyzstan. Recently a new partnership began with St. Peter's Confessional Lutheran Church in Middleburg, South Africa, where a Michigan District LCMS grant is helping to fund an ongoing eyeglass ministry.

As MOST Ministries reaches its 30th anniversary, it has sent more than 6,000 team members to 50 countries, impacting more than 231,000 lives with the Gospel, giving hearts, hands and feet to the mandate of Galatians 6:10: *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

Gayle and Don now serve as members emeriti of MOST Ministries' elected board. A Recognized Service Organization (RSO) of the LCMS, MOST occupies its own building in Ann Arbor, where approximately 50 volunteers regularly come and go, preparing thousands of pairs of eyeglasses for the field and accomplishing many other essential tasks. Four full-time and three part-time staff manage requests from the field, assign and prepare teams, and coordinate all the details of international travel.

Twenty trained team leaders currently shepherd the teams. Excellent preparation and support enable novice team members to serve with confidence. A truly symbiotic relationship has developed between LWML and MOST Ministries, as MOST Ministries has enabled many LWML members to serve in short-term missions, and national and district LWML mission grants have funded many MOST Ministries projects.

Gayle's next step was to co-author a book with her daughter, Sandi Helm. *Beyond Sight* interweaves Gayle's own memoir with the history of MOST Ministries, recounting God's direction and provision in a fascinating narrative. A Bible study linking *Beyond Sight* with the Book of Acts will be available soon.

With the help of church friends, Gayle and Sandi then launched Dignity4Girls (dignity4girls.org), forging Gospel-centered connections between LWML/LCMS groups (who sew washable sanitary pads for girls in impoverished countries) and the NGO's that help distribute the pads where girls would otherwise make do with rags and cornhusks. In a special partnering of ministries, a MOST Ministries team will help Dignity4Girls distribute sanitary kits this fall.

Step by step, Gayle has learned to follow her heavenly Father along the paths of service He has prepared. Living the reality of being His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works (Ephesians 2:10a), she has found Him faithful, even in healing her relationship with the earthly father who once terrified her. Late in life he wrote a loving letter to his youngest daughter, expressing his prayers for all that God would do in her life. Gayle now treasures his words and marvels that his prayers have been answered — every step of the way. **Q**

Bethel Larsen lives in Michigan, worships at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Lakeview, and is active in LWML. A widow, she is the mother of five, a grandmother, and a great-grandmother. Her long list of interests includes reading, writing, singing, exploring nature, and travel, including short-term mission trips with MOST Ministries.