

James 2 Comes Alive: Inspiring Faith and Deeds in Tri-Cities, Washington

By Tammy Fleming

The simple, determined faith of a young African student and the cooperation of the family of disciples around the world brings us an inspiring story from the now 37-member Tri-Cities¹ church in Washington State, USA. I met Gadine Marie on a weekend visit to the church in Tri-Cities earlier this year. This is her story, in her words:

I am a citizen of the Republic of Rwanda. Our country is famous for a terrible civil war which took place from 1990 to 1994, resulting in the deaths of somewhere between half a million and a million people. I became a disciple at the age of 19, in Cape Town, South Africa, where I was living at the time with my Dad. When I started studying the Bible, we were living as asylum-seekers in South Africa. My heart was not totally at peace, because some things in my official documents were fake – for instance, my age was changed in order to get me into school. I decided that when I reach the right age and I am allowed to do things on my own, I’m going to make things right.

Three years later, in 2012 (I was 22), I moved back to Rwanda, in order to correct my official documents. My Dad was not happy with my decision, he thought it was not wise. My plan was to be able to return to South Africa and go to college -- but that plan didn’t work. Suddenly I found myself in the very difficult position of having to figure out how to get myself into higher education in Rwanda -- a country made up almost entirely of rural subsistence farmers.

I had finished high school in South Africa, but that was all. My dream was to become a nurse. I tried to qualify for local nursing training. I applied to different schools in the US, but I could not figure out how to get any scholarships, and I did not have money to pay on my own. I started volunteering at hospitals in Rwanda, where I thought I could meet missionary doctors from Europe and the US and make connections that way. At one of my volunteer hospital jobs, I met a man and his wife who are Christian believers, from a church not affiliated with the Churches of Christ. As I worked with them at the hospital I shared my dream with them. We talked about how I got to be where I was, and why I couldn’t continue my education in South Africa. We became friends.

One day in 2015, after they had returned home to the US, I got an email from the wife. She wrote, “You can come! We found a college for you that can help you get the degree you wanted – (it would be a prerequisite to qualify me for nurse training) -- and we’re going to sponsor you. The college is not far from us. You can live with us and you will be going to school! Start packing your bags, that’s all you’re allowed to do.” They worked so hard to get my visa, they even sent me suitcases to use, all the way from the US!

While I was still home in Kigali I let them know that I regularly attend the International Church of Christ, and I wondered if there was an ICOC church in the city where they live – Walla Walla, Washington. I had never been in the US so I wouldn’t have any idea. The wife replied, “Yes, there is an ICOC, it’s in Eugene, Oregon—about four hours’ drive.”

That sounded so far away. Maybe I'll be attending now and then, I thought. I talked it over with my friend and mentor in my church back home in Kigali; we were thinking it would be difficult but probably doable. And so I came to the USA to pursue my dream to study to become a nurse.

On the 6th of December, 2015, I landed in Walla Walla, Washington. The first few weeks were really great. My host family couple got me ready for my college orientation, got all my vaccines, it was a really exciting time. I continued connecting with the disciples in Kigali, in Kenya, in other parts of Rwanda, and with disciples I knew in different parts of the US asking them, "Hey, does anybody know where the nearest church I can attend besides Eugene, Oregon, might be?"

One brother contacted me and asked if I had checked the church locator on the Disciples Today website. I checked once, but didn't see Walla Walla. "Try 'Tri-cities,'" he said. Tri-cities? That's only one hour away from where I was staying! I got online and found the website for the church in Tri-cities, and the number for Ian and Francine Edmunds, who lead the church. I called Francine and introduced myself. I told her I had been here for 2 weeks.

Francine told me that there were a couple of disciples who actually live in Walla Walla, and commute to church in Tri-cities! That very week, disciples from the Tri-cities church came to visit me—a sister called Vivienne, and one of the campus brothers. I was really excited, so thrilled. Now it was time for me to ask my host family for permission to go to church in Tri-cities. I approached the couple and explained that I found out that the church I attend is in Tri-cities; I feel like it's still far, but it's my desire to attend the service there once in a while. I heard there is a married couple who drives from here to there every week, and I can travel with them.

To my great disappointment, they said, "Absolutely not."

I decided not to fight them right at that moment, and to go and pray first, about their response. I let my friends back in Kigali know about what happened in that conversation. That same week, my host family's church had a Father- Daughter event, which included an ice hockey game in Tri-Cities. On the way back home, I brought up the matter again, this time with the husband, hoping I could persuade him. He also told me I could not go to the ICOC church in Tri-Cities, and the reason was that, "we can't be attending two different churches. We want you to be attending church where we are." I said, "I have nothing against your church. As you know, I have been going to church with you. I will come and visit you; but my real church is the Church of Christ, that's where I belong." And the husband said, "No. If you start doing that, it will feel like you are fighting for the church more than you are for us."

Three days went by. On the weekend leading up to New Year's Eve, on December 29th I brought it up again. Why can't I attend the church that I want to attend? The husband brought the case back to his wife, and the wife said, "No. We cannot be in two different camps. If you're with us, this is where you are. We're going to start doing research about that church of yours."

"That's ok," I said. "I do know there's different stuff online you're going to find, it's not all true. You can call Francine, call Ian, ask them questions, you are welcome to do so."

They said they didn't want anything to do with them, but googled ICOC, and found and read some negative reports. They came to me and told me, "you're in a cult!" I said, "With all due respect, it's not a cult; and I'll tell you why it is the way it is: we have some sad things in our background and we're not proud of it; but this is where I want to be, this is where I grew up, this is a part of my life and my faith. Just give me a chance, you don't have to come and attend. I will. You can come and visit."

Things really exploded. They gave me two days to decide "whether you choose the church or us." I was terrified. What am I doing, I was thinking! During those two days, I called my mentor in Kigali, and I sent messages to different people in Rwanda and Kenya. My host family started to control my phone and every move I made. I texted Francine really fast and I even had to hide myself in the middle of the night to message people in Rwanda to ask them to pray for me. The next morning, I was clear about the fact that I was not going to choose these people. Why am I being asked to compromise my faith? The next day I was so quiet. I was challenged with a lot of talk. Then on the 31st of December, they called me and asked, "Have you made your decision?" I said: "I want to be a nurse. I feel called to the medical field. I want to obey you, I want to be in school, but I don't want school to come at the cost of what I believe in, my faith, my church or my spiritual family. That's not what I ever dreamed of. So, if there's a way we can work around this together, I am willing to do so." They said, "No, we're not going to do this." I said, "then I'm sorry; I will choose my spiritual family."

They were so angry, so furious, a lot of talks went on and on about it. They called their pastor on the 31st, that night, to come and pray for me. They believed I was possessed. The pastor came in and started praying, asking what's going on. I asked him, "If your daughter asked you to go and attend another church, would you disown her because she chose to attend a different church?" They were angry with me, that I asked their pastor such a question. I said that I just want to attend church where I want to attend, and I am sure of where I want to be. I am 25 years old; it's time for me to make my own decisions and bear whatever consequences come as a result.

At the end of the conversation, when they realized that I was not going to give up, they got so mad, so angry, they texted Francine from my phone and sent a message to Norah in Kigali, and said, "She's a child of the devil!" They took back the laptop that they gave me. They said, "We are going to send you back home". I said, "I can't make any other choices, this was the final one. This is where I'm sticking, I'm not going to change my mind." Still they kept at it, saying, "If you want to stay here and continue your studies, you have to cut off all communication between anybody who ever attended ICOC." I said, well, that includes my Dad, my parents, everybody, I'm sorry, I can't do that, that is out of the question."

They booked a flight that night, at 10 pm, straight to Kigali. The wife brought everything downstairs from my room, they didn't allow me to sleep. I sat on the couch all night. At 3 am, I was coming out of the house to begin the drive to Tri-Cities to the airport. The wife took me aside and said, "Look, we have bought you a car, we opened you a bank account, we paid for your insurance -- are you really going to leave all of this, just for a church?" I thought, this is exactly what happened to Jesus when Satan tempted him with all the kingdoms and riches of

this world. I smiled at her. I said, "No one in my family has ever owned a car. I'm not going to compromise my faith."

By 5 am I was flying to San Francisco. I was so exhausted. I hadn't showered for two days. On the flight from Tri-Cities to San Francisco, I kept saying to God, "is there still something you want me to do? Is there something more I should be thinking of to do in this situation?" I decided that I would ask whomever sits next to me on the plane if I could please borrow their phone. If they say yes, that's fine. I asked the lady who sat next to me. She was a beautiful woman, very classy, very tall. I was so terrified – here's this lady, looking like someone that I only see in the movies, but I took courage and said, "I'm from Africa, traveling back to Africa. I don't think there's anybody back home who knows that I'm coming." She gave me her smartphone and I realized I had no US phone numbers in my head. I went to the Disciples Today website.

I kept trying to google "Tri-cities Christian Church." I'm telling myself, I know I have seen the website for Tri-Cities! What does it look like? I managed to get to Tri-Cities' website, but now where is the contact info on the website? It's different on the mobile phone version of the page than it looks on the computer! The flight attendant was telling us to switch off our phones and I was about to give up. We're about to take off. I'm thinking, God, this is final. I'm about to turn off the phone and hand it back, and all of a sudden, in the last second, Ian and Francine's number just popped up. I wrote it down, and that's all I had time to do. I gave the phone back, thanked the movie-star lady for it, and the plane took off.

When we landed in San Francisco, once again, I asked if I could borrow the phone. Movie-star lady was wanting to rush off to her connecting flight, but she reluctantly gave me another two minutes with her phone. It was Sunday morning at 8 am. Ian's number went straight to voicemail. I wasn't going to leave a message. I called a second time, and Francine picked up. "I am at San Francisco airport," I told her, "Things went bad at home and I'm going back to Rwanda."

"Where is your passport?" Francine asked.

"It's here," I said, "Early this morning on the way to the airport, my host mom took it and tore out the page with my student visa, right out of my passport." My host mom said, "it is my right; I am the one who got you into this country!" The airline employee who checked me in for the flight, however, had looked at my host mom and said, "I would not have done that." Nodding at me, she continued, "For her to fly within the US, it's fine, but outside the US it's going to be dangerous for her. That passport is the property of the Rwandan government. She needs to be able to explain why her passport is damaged, with a page missing. It's no longer a valid document.'" So here I was, sitting in San Francisco, no visa and a page missing in my passport, super-exhausted. I just told Francine, "This is where I am. If you can contact anybody in Rwanda, please just tell someone I am coming. I have no money with me, no phone, no way to communicate. If someone could just meet me there when I land." We hung up the phone. I was very sad.

About an hour later, I thought I heard my name being called over the loudspeakers in the airport. Then, a second time, there it was: I heard my name, booming throughout the whole airport. I said to the lady sitting next to me, "Do you hear this, what is this, I think that's me they're calling?" The lady said, "Go pick up that phone over there, and the airport will tell you what to do." When I picked up the phone and identified myself, the lady on the other end said, "Your family said, 'you must not get on that next flight.'" Francine had called the airport and asked them to page me. We were very worried about the fact that my next connection was through France, and this was all happening at the time when ISIS had set off a bomb in Paris. It was so scary, anybody arriving in France was being taken as a suspect if there were any issues at all with your documents. I could be taken as a criminal and go to jail. Francine helped to delay my flight to the next day, and arranged to have a disciple couple from San Diego, Jeff and Melanie Mossingers, come to pick me up. I stayed with them in their home for that night.

I finally got a chance to take a shower and went to look at my email before falling asleep. I discovered then, that my host mom had emailed my nursing school and told them they should cancel my classes, that she will return all my books, and that I have made the decision to leave. Her mail said that I no longer wanted to become a nurse, that I had made this choice, and that they respect it; and that's why they had to take me to the airport and send me home. I replied back: "I'm sorry, this is not what happened: This was not my choice. My dream is to study nursing, and I want to continue to pursue my studies. I'm in San Francisco without a student visa in my passport!" The school replied to me and their email read, "Is there a way you can get back to school, then?"

Amazingly, thanks to the incredible love and practical help of the disciples in San Diego and Tri-Cities and Walla Walla, I managed to get reinstated in my college. The school apologized to me. They brought the police in to meet me and to ask if I wanted to press charges against my host family, which I did not want to do. Vivienne's household offered me a place to stay with them for free (she had been praying for a sister to move in who would share the mission with her. She tells me now that I was the answer to her prayer!)

The school offered to pay for the next quarter of my tuition! That was unexpected and entirely amazing and wonderful, but I said to Francine, "it costs \$4,500 or \$5,000 every quarter for my tuition. Where we will ever come up with such money after this next quarter?" Francine said, "Let's just take it one day at a time."

Francine started a GoFundMe account in the hope that it would raise the amount of money I needed for school. Disciples all around contributed. I saw God's hand moving through that effort. In addition, it was winter time and I had no winter outfits; once again, the disciples helped, making sure I was not cold. I started commuting every day from Tri-Cities to Walla Walla. The disciples worked together to drop me off and pick me up. At the end of that quarter, the school decided they would pay for two more, the third and fourth quarter! By the end of the summer, though, they said they couldn't pay any more. Then I was faced again with the very real possibility of not being able to finish my degree, and to have to go back home to Rwanda.

With no money to pay for school, I would no longer have a student visa, and I would have to leave the US within three months' time.

So, I was sitting in church one day, racking my brain, trying to come up with some way to find tuition money; thinking that I probably must face the fact that it's over, that I have to go home. Someone comes up to me with an envelope with my name on it. No address, no name. There is \$2,500 and a note inside, saying: "Gadine, God has decided that this money belongs to you. May his name be glorified." That was half of my tuition. One of the married couples in church volunteered to give me a loan, which paid for two more quarters of my schooling. I had only one more quarter left to go; and there I was at church again, sitting and thinking, how on earth am I going to pay? I got another envelope dropped into my lap. This one had \$4,000 -- just exactly what I needed for tuition! I don't know who brought it -- whoever it is really wanted to remain anonymous, so I decided to respect their wishes.

So here I am -- about to finish my pre-requisite for nursing school! God worked through the faith and prayers of many disciples on my behalf. Even one of my professors, not a member of the church, offered to have me stay in her home, Monday through Friday, for two quarters, in Walla Walla. She and her husband have allowed me to have friends and disciples over for tea and even to spend the night!

As for my host family, I have forgiven them. I sent them an e mail saying if ever we run into one another in the market somewhere, I just want you to know I have no hard feelings. They didn't reply. As far as I'm concerned, I feel like I have worked on my heart to get it to the point that I'm ok with it, I'm ok with where everyone is at.

A year and a half ago, in March of 2016, Gadine was sitting in her stats class in Walla Walla, thinking, *People don't want to come to church with me, all the way to Tri-Cities. It's so far.* But, she turned to the guy sitting next to her, anyway, and asked, *"What are you doing on Sunday?"* "Nothing," he says.

"OK, then, you're coming to church with me."

He didn't actually come that weekend. His text on Sunday said, *"I'm tired, I worked all night, I'm sorry."*

He did, however, come to church the next Sunday! He met Ian Edmunds, and the brothers in the church reached out to him. During the next few weeks, he came to class looking so sad, that Gadine asked him rather pointedly how he was doing. Twice she tried to get him to open up. On the third try, she said, *"Ok, this is the last time I will ask you: Are you sure you're ok?"* "Well, no," he admitted. *"But I don't think you'd be interested in hearing my story."*

Gadine thought to herself, probably right. But then, remembering that she had heard that some young people in the US commit suicide, she thought she had better listen.

Try me, she offered.

They had a long conversation after class.

When he finished sharing, Gadine said, *"Dude. I'm a girl, you're a boy, I have no idea how to help you. I don't have much experience, but I know someone who can help you. I am not going to do this for you, you have to do it yourself: call Ian. Tell him you need help. Tell him where your life is at. For just one month, you could agree to meet with Ian regularly. You have nothing to lose."*

He agreed. He called Ian, and set up the dates to meet. And then, in the end, he decided not to go to any of those meetings. He never showed up. A few months later there was a campus retreat in Spokane in November. Gadine was at the event, walking in the halls of the retreat venue and passed a guy who looked familiar. She looked back, called out a name, with a question mark — and it was That Guy!

"My life has turned out so bad," he said to her when they stopped to greet each other. "Do you have time to talk?"

Oh no, Gadine was thinking. I'm in the middle of a retreat with people all over the place that I want to spend time with; is this going to be a waste of time? And what will people think if I meet this guy to talk to him? She decided to schedule a time to meet him, at a food court, on Saturday. They sat outside on a porch. He talked and talked, and when he finished, Gadine told him, *"Look, I am going to give you the same answer I gave you last time. You didn't take it then, and that's ok. You're not the only person in this world who has problems, we all do. The only difference between me and you, is that I have hope. The kind of hope I have is to see God someday. I keep in mind that this is not my home. My home is in heaven. When I get there, we will not be having the troubles that we have now. I'm just going to tell you, you were with people who could have helped you, and you didn't want to be helped. If I am struggling with a problem, I know my Dad back in Africa loves me, but he can't be here to help me. What he would do is call his friends to help me. That's kind of like the way God works through his church. This world belongs to the devil, he's the one who controls everything. That's the only thing I have to offer. You need that same hope."*

Gadine left him with that, saying she would just continue to pray for him. About a month later, on December 7th, Gadine got a message from him, saying, "I'm getting baptized with the disciples in Spokane!"

A few weeks later, Gadine texted him: "How are you doing?"

She got back an incredible message of transformation: "I have great brothers in my life, my whole purpose has changed" -- a text filled with words of gratitude.

If I didn't get to come back to school, Gadine says with awe, I would never have met this guy. I see things like this and I know there was a purpose for me to be here. Both Gadine and our new brother from Spokane attended the International Campus Missions Conference (ICMC) for the Western half of the USA, in Austin, in June.

Thanks to Gadine's connection with the disciples in Rwanda, the church in Tri-cities was moved by hearing from her about the challenges they were facing, and decided to take up a special

mission contribution especially for Kilgali. *A lot of lives have been impacted in Kilgali because of this, Gadine says. I can never be thankful enough to everyone who has contributed, financially,-- taking care of physical needs, with prayers, food, accommodation, dates and all the support from disciples all over. I am forever thankful to the Napoleons, disciples in Walla Walla, who hosted me for the first few months to relieve the struggle of commuting every day. I am thankful to the Tams, who invested their trust in me with finances. I am thankful to Francine and Ian who adopted me as their daughter and continuously fill in every gap and gave me all the emotional support. I am grateful to Francine for listening to the Holy Spirit and not giving up until I was out of the SFO airport. I am forever in debt to Tri Cities Church. Above all, I can never say enough on how great and amazing our God is. 'I honor and glorify the one who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion, his kingdom endures from generation to generation. (Daniel 4:34).'*

¹The Tri-Cities are a group of three closely tied cities: Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco located at the confluence of the Yakima, Snake, and Columbia rivers in the semi-arid region of Southeastern Washington, USA. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tri-Cities,_Washington, accessed July 6, 2017