



# KEITH SANDERS

## SAVED THROUGH THE FLAMES

**Mark Pickering** tells the remarkable story of Keith Sanders, CMF's second General Secretary.



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**W**e recently reported the passing of Dr Keith Sanders, CMF's second General Secretary, who died in November 2023 at the age of 98.<sup>1</sup> Although I didn't have the privilege of meeting Keith during his life, it was an honour to be present at his thanksgiving service in Tewkesbury Abbey on 29 December and to learn some fascinating things about his life.<sup>2</sup>

### early life and a dramatic rescue

Born to missionary parents in Angola in 1925, Keith spent time as a 'missionary kid' in boarding schools in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia today) and the UK. Aged 17, he joined the Merchant Navy in 1942, and there, he had a remarkable experience that shaped his life. He worked on fuel tankers from 1942-46, which brought vital supplies from the USA across the Atlantic, under high risk of torpedo attacks. In December 1942, shortly before leaving for the USA, at church in Liverpool he heard a sermon from Isaiah 43:1-3:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you...When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...When you walk through the fire...the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour...*

Coming back across the Atlantic in January 1943, his ship was torpedoed and sunk whilst the surrounding sea was set ablaze by burning fuel. Amazingly, Keith was able to swim under this surface inferno and get beyond it, rescuing two colleagues and hanging on to floating debris for hours before being picked up by a rescue vessel.

Amazingly, at the next church service he attended, the passage was none other than Isaiah 43! What a testimony to God's sovereign care for his servant!

### Bristol, Marion, and India

He trained at Bristol, first in dentistry, but changed partway through to medicine, qualifying in 1954. Whilst there, he met and married Marion, a medical almoner (social worker), beginning a long and fruitful partnership. He became a leader in the Christian Union and remembers helping at a missionary service in 1949. He quietly prayed that the Lord would call some of those present to overseas missionary service, then immediately heard a voice within him respond, "What about you?!" This led him to change course to medicine in the very year that CMF began.

After their marriage in 1955, Keith and Marion left the UK in 1956 for India, working at the Duncan Hospital in Raxaul, Bihar, right on the border with Nepal.<sup>3</sup> Whilst there, he gained considerable expertise in treating tetanus. With clinical trials and careful



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management, the Duncan Hospital team reduced local mortality from 80-100 per cent to a mere five per cent! He was awarded an MD by Bristol University for this research and continued to write on tetanus for some years after. Keith was also involved in efforts to develop community healthcare and improve relations between mission hospitals in India. He was involved in the formation of the Emmanuel Hospital Association<sup>4</sup> and was also Chair of the United Mission to Nepal.<sup>5</sup>

### an unexpected next chapter

These considerable skills in networking and organisational leadership meant that when, in 1973, Keith and Marion began planning to return to the UK for their children's education, Keith was invited to become CMF's second General Secretary, following on from Douglas Johnson (DJ). There are some delightful interchanges between him and DJ, preserved in several air-mail letters sent between the UK and India during 1973; these include the following excerpts:

**Keith (8 May):** *I am and always have been interested in motivating Christian medical practice, quite apart from encouraging discipleship in itself. But to be responsible for the co-ordinating and inspiring of much of the CMF work has always appeared to me to be beyond my ceiling. Nevertheless I am...prepared to undertake anything which the Lord clearly gives me to do...*

**Douglas (12 July):** *Of all the missionaries coming home...your name has come to us...most... All this... has emboldened us to be much more pressing and frank, as we do not feel we are being responsible for directing you from direct missionary service. All feel rather that we may be putting in your way what might be the next step in your life of service to God!*

**Keith (14 August):** *...it is indeed a very great honour and privilege to be asked to follow you as General Secretary...There is no doubt in my mind but that the CMF is one of the most important agencies (I can think of none more so) in Britain...for the genesis and maintenance of rightness and true service...Thus I... would be very happy to serve in this way...*

**Douglas (18 September):** *It was with relief and thanksgiving that I read your letter...We are grateful to God that you have seen fit to accept the CMF's invitation...that this poor boy can see the end of the road to which he may be able to stagger and collapse on 30 September 1974. May the Lord be with you and the future of CMF.*

The letters display both men's touching humility and trust in God as they seek to discern the Lord's will. They are both deeply conscious of the vital importance of CMF's ministry.

Keith served ably as CMF General Secretary from 1974 to 1990, and during that time, our membership more than doubled, from around 2,000 to over 4,000. His combination of organisational and pastoral skills played a large part in this. Thus Keith fulfilled DJ's desire expressed in their 1973 correspondence to strive towards what he called 'the crucial need':

*i) To double or treble (God helping) the number of medical students and doctors who are Christians.*

*ii) To deepen the spiritual life and Scriptural convictions of every possible medical student and doctor to apply the Christian faith to his daily work.*

### to the ends of the earth

Keith's two decades in India and his love of cross-cultural partnership were a great help in growing the International Christian Medical & Dental Association (ICMDA).<sup>6</sup> This began as the three-yearly International Congress of Christian Physicians (ICCP) in 1963, and DJ had played a pivotal role in the early growth of the Congresses. As the ICCP grew in numbers and influence, it changed from merely a periodic congress to an association with ongoing activity in between gatherings. So ICCP changed to ICMDA around 1982, and the secretary went from being a part-time volunteer to a substantive, ongoing role. Keith was the first ICMDA General Secretary from 1982 to 1992. During that time, the membership of ICMDA increased from 17 to 31 national member movements.<sup>7</sup>

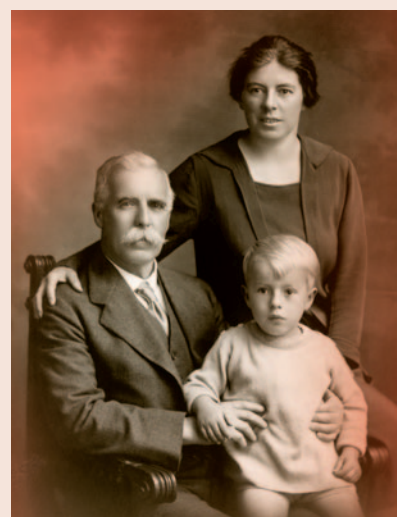
### a multidisciplinary vision

Throughout Keith's tenure at CMF, we were still a fellowship only for doctors and medical students. But he had inherited a multidisciplinary vision from his time in India, where the Christian Medical Association of India comprised members of different professions. He saw it as a real sadness that CMF had not been able to partner more closely with the old Nurses Christian Fellowship in the 1980s, and to help prevent its demise. He was delighted by renewed connections in the late 2000s.<sup>8</sup> I suspect he would have been absolutely thrilled to know that nurses and midwives have now been full members of CMF for ten years!

### God's faithfulness endures

Keith continued to be a staunch supporter of CMF right into his old age. He was a regular encourager of those who succeeded him in CMF until dementia finally curtailed his communications in his 90s.

In January 1993, on the fiftieth anniversary of his amazing sea rescue in 1943, he was again in church, and incredibly, the sermon then was once again on Isaiah 43! He was delighted to be able to tell those present that day the story of God's faithfulness to him all those years ago. Let's give thanks for Keith's humble faithfulness, and may we draw inspiration from how the Lord preserved him through the flames in order to testify of God's love to so many. ●



### key points

- Born into a missionary family and first serving as a merchant seaman, it was a life-transforming experience in the Second World War that set Keith's life on a new path.
- Finding a call to mission and medicine, he served 27 years at Duncan Hospital in Bihar, India, on the border with Nepal.
- These experiences equipped him for his next steps as General Secretary of CMF from 1974 to 1990 and ICMDA General Secretary from 1982 to 1992.



### References (accessed 1/03/2024)

1. Obituaries. *Triple Helix*. Winter 2023. 33. [cmf.li/3t3zj58](https://cmf.li/3t3zj58)
2. Information below is taken from family archive material, some of which has been kindly donated to CMF.
3. See [duncanhospital-eha.org/about-us](https://duncanhospital-eha.org/about-us)
4. See [eha-health.org](https://eha-health.org)
5. See [umn.org.np](https://umn.org.np)
6. See [icmda.net](https://icmda.net)
7. Sanders K et al. *Amazing! A Quarter Century of ICMDA*. London: CMF, 1990: 51-54
8. Correspondence with his successor at CMF, Andrew Fergusson, in 2009