

# The Calling of Patricia Bentsen

By David Lerseth

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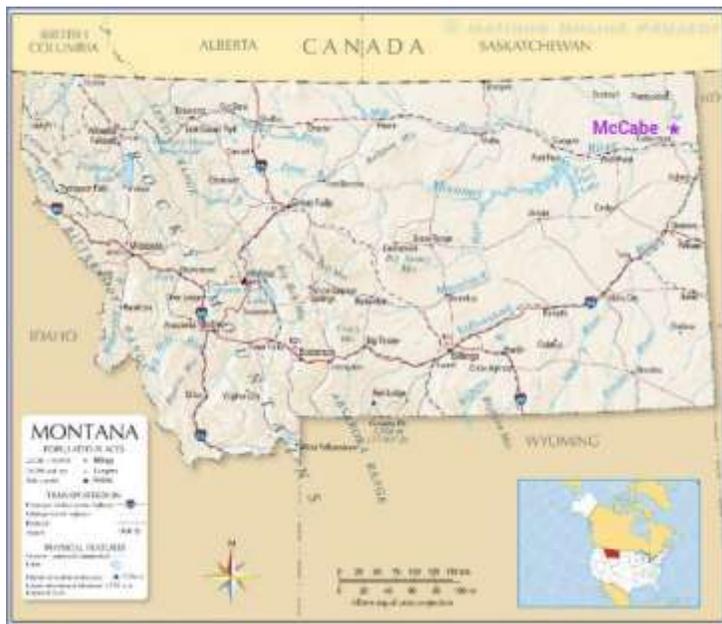
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## History of Global Mission Through the Life and Calling of Patricia Bentsen

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How did a farm girl from rural Montana become a lifetime missionary in Madagascar? It is an interesting story mixed with influence from parents, church, education, work experience, and a conviction that God was **“calling”** her to be a missionary.

*Map of Montana with purple star indicating location of McCabe*



Patricia Bentsen



Patricia Bentsen grew up on a farm in northeast Montana, one quarter of a mile from the small town of McCabe. She has an older sister and a younger brother. Their father was a farmer, and her mother was a nurse anesthetist. The family belonged to Ebenezer Lutheran Church, which was located in the Dane Valley Community near McCabe.

Patricia attended grade school in McCabe with 6 students in her class and had the same teacher for all 8 years. When it came time to attend high school, she rode a bus for about an hour to Culbertson, Montana.

When Patricia was 16 years old her father died and so they moved from the farm into Culbertson. Her mother was the director of nurses and a nurse-anesthetist, and they lived in the basement apartment at the Roosevelt Memorial Hospital. During her grade school years, Patricia was a member of 4-H (Head, Heart, Hands and Health), representing the four pillars of development for the youth organization, and of Future Homemakers of America (FHA) in high school.



*The Bentsen family*



*School Patricia attended*

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## Early Spiritual Journey

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Patricia recalls her spiritual journey as a child at Ebenezer Lutheran Church, attending worship, Sunday school, confirmation and being confirmed while in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She was active in Luther League at Ebenezer and was a delegate to the Luther League convention of the American Lutheran Church constituting convention in 1960 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One evening at her church, when a missionary was visiting their congregation and showing pictures of children playing in the trees, she says, “At that time I felt the Lord **‘calling’** me to become a missionary in Africa!”



*Ebenezer Lutheran Church, which is located in the Dane Valley Community near McCabe*



John 15:16. This was also the verse chosen *Patricia's confirmation photo (standing on right)*

Jesus says:

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name. He will give it to you.”

— John 15:16

Patricia looked forward to attending Sunday school where memorizing Bible verses was encouraged, daily vacation Bible school during the summertime, and the weekly pre-confirmation sessions with Pastor Theodore Hansen before being confirmed in the Christian faith. Her confirmation verse was

for her service overseas. After graduating from high school, Patricia attended Trinity Hospital School of Nursing in Minot, North Dakota, a three-year nursing program. Upon graduating with a nursing diploma, she worked for one year at the Poplar Community Hospital in Poplar, Montana, which is 47 miles from her hometown of McCabe, Montana, to gain nursing experience before she attended California Lutheran Bible School (CLBS) in Los Angeles, California. While attending school there for two years she also worked part-time at California Hospital.



*Trinity Hospital School of Nursing*

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## Called to Be a Missionary

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While at CLBS/Los Angeles she was contacted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church about the possibility of her being interested in becoming a missionary. After filling out the application forms, she was interviewed, accepted, and “**called**”, after which she spent one year learning the French language at Le Chambon sur-Lignon in south-central France, beginning in August of 1967.

In 1968 Patricia was on her way to Madagascar to study the Malagasy language for one year at Fort Dauphin (now called Taolagnaro). Following the completion of the year of study she was assigned to work at Ejeda Lutheran Hospital in southwest Madagascar. This region spoke a totally different dialect of the Malagasy language, so she immersed herself into their culture by visiting in their homes, as well as assuming her responsibilities at the hospital, one of which was to give general anesthesia. After only one month of studying and giving general anesthesia, under the guidance of Corrine Nielsen, Corrine departed for the States. There was a major surgical procedure scheduled for that day, so Patricia sought out Peg Stolee (wife of Dr. Curt Stolee). The two of them praised the Lord that there were no major anesthesia difficulties during those years.



The majority of Patricia’s days were spent overseeing and assisting the nurses on the men’s and women’s wards, working in the stock pharmacy, and giving anesthesia. She also enjoyed visiting in the nurses’ homes, teaching English,

and singing in the hospital choir. At night, Patricia often heard the beating of drums after someone had died. This is called *tromba*, which is a traditional ancestral spirit worship in rural communities in southern Madagascar. Patricia sometimes attended the *ari-tory* (which means to keep awake) in the village of Ejeda where she lived.



*Operating room in Ejeda Hospital*



*Dr. Quanbeck, Patricia, Kathie Quanbeck and Malagasy staff member*

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## Called by SALFA

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After nine years of service at Ejeda, Patricia returned to the United States in 1977. She worked the evening shift at Deaconess Lutheran Hospital in Minneapolis on an orthopedic floor, where from time to time she encountered former Madagascar missionaries Dr. Timothy Rietz (a resident at that time) and Claire Stolee (an intern).

In the fall of 1980, she was **“called”** by SALFA (Malagasy Lutheran Church Health Department) to return to Madagascar. Her new responsibilities now centered around two programs. First was a Primary Health Care Program where she worked with a Christian team, visiting villages and training village health workers (VHW). These health workers were usually non-Christian. During one training session at Ejeda, two of the VHWs left on the second day. When asked about their disappearance, others explained that the “spirits” told them to leave because the name of Jesus was being proclaimed. To this day, there are still witch doctors and sorcerers on that island. May we be fervent in prayer.



*SALFA emblem  
(Malagasy Lutheran Health Care)*

In the latter part of the 1980s, Patricia assisted with the tuberculosis team, where she worked with both Dr. Christiane, and later with Dr. Ralaivita Mamy. SALFA continues to be involved in the management of tuberculosis patients.

In 1993-1994, Patricia attended Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine located in New Orleans, Louisiana, graduating with a degree in Public Health. She returned to Madagascar following graduation, but due to family reasons, Patricia returned to the States in 1995, where she worked for a short time at the Charles Drew WIC (women, infants, & children) Program in Omaha, then with pediatric patients in their homes.



*Patricia's graduation photo from Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine*

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## Called to St. Luke's Clinic

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In 1999, not being able to stop her **"calling"** to serve the people of Madagascar, Patricia returned to volunteer her services at St. Luke's Clinic in Toliara, a city on the southwest coast of Madagascar until December 2003. During her sojourn in Toliara, she was **"called"** to be a deacon at the Military Chapel there. Initially there were four deacons, who were responsible for facilitating the worship service, assisting with communion, and welcoming the parishioners.

Patricia recalls: "One day at St. Luke's Clinic, a non-Christian Karana man (originally from Pakistan or India), approached me. His sister was a patient at the clinic and he requested prayer for her, to which I readily agreed. The next day, he again made this request for prayer, this time exhorting me to pray with the patient in her room. This was very encouraging to me, and I later prayed that they would each come to know Christ as their Savior."



*Worship service at the military chapel*

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## Called by SALFA...Again

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In December 2003, Patricia was “called”, once again, to work at SALFA in Antananarivo, the capital city of Madagascar, where she worked in an advisory capacity until December of 2010. At that time, she traveled to many SALFA hospitals and clinics, where she offered advice, brought them medications and other supplies, etc. Patricia recalled the experience of one of the nurses:

Nathalie was a SALFA nurse, living in a small town in eastern Madagascar. One day, she and an evangelist went to visit some rural villages. In one village, the local witch doctor informed them that, if they planned on spreading the Word of God in their village, the “spirits” would kill them within a week. With much hope and assurance, Nathalie and the evangelist continued with their responsibilities, and, at the completion of one week, approached the witch doctor to say their good-byes. Needless to say, he was nearly speechless, and told them that “indeed, their God was bigger than his.” This same witch doctor threw away all his *odys* (amulets), attended a Bible school and became a catechist, now sharing the Good News with others.

In 2010 Patricia retired from missionary service, having fulfilled the dream of being a missionary when she was a young girl at Ebenezer Lutheran Church back in northeast Montana!

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## Retired from Missionary Service but Called Back to Madagascar as a Volunteer!

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But the story does not end there! Upon Patricia’s retirement, Dr. Julie, the director of the Malagasy Lutheran Nursing School (SeFAM), Dr. Gustave, the director of SALFA and the Malagasy Lutheran church; “called” her to volunteer at SeFAM, located in Antsirabe, Madagascar. While at SeFAM, Patricia mainly supervised the student nurses at local clinics, pediatric wards, etc., as well as teaching about nutrition. On occasion, she would travel with Dr. Julie to supervise the students doing their clinical rotations in other parts of the island.



*SeFAM Nursing School –  
Patricia with student nurses tending to a patient*



*Patricia with students at SeFAM Nursing School*

Patricia worked there on a 9-month visa status, so she would come back to her home base in Blair, Nebraska, for a couple months, then return for another 9-month period, until November of 2020. She fondly remembers in prayer all her Malagasy friends, along with her Malagasy godchildren.



*Patricia speaking/making a presentation on mission on mission in Madagascar*

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## **One of the Last U.S. Missionaries to Madagascar**

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Patricia Bentsen's service was one of being **"called"** to many different positions as a missionary. But to each **"calling"**, she responded with a willingness to be a missionary. She was one the last missionaries from the USA to serve in Madagascar – all of the responsibilities of what missionaries did then are now being done by the Malagasy people. Missionaries accomplished the great task of bringing the Gospel and the institutions to care for the physical needs of the Malagasy people. However, now is a new day of the maturity of the Malagasy Lutheran Church. The story and history for Patricia Bentsen is "well done, good and faithful servant of the Lord!"

Thank you, Patricia Bentsen, for answering God's **"calling"** to dedicate your life of service in Madagascar as a missionary.  
"A life well lived – a life well served"!

Psalm 67 (often “called” the Missionary Psalm)

<sup>1</sup> May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face shine on us—<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>2</sup> so that your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among all nations.

<sup>3</sup> May the peoples praise you, God;  
may all the peoples praise you.

<sup>4</sup> May the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you rule the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations of the earth.

<sup>5</sup> May the peoples praise you, God;  
may all the peoples praise you.

<sup>6</sup> The land yields its harvest;  
God, our God, blesses us.

<sup>7</sup> May God bless us still,  
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.

**For more information**, contact us via website, email, phone or mail.

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**Pastor David Lerseth** served parishes in Rosholt, SD; Bartonville (Peoria), IL; and Aberdeen, SD. He also served as an assistant to the Bishop in the former Iowa District of the ALC and as Executive Director of the ELCA Office for Global Mission Support. He is the founder and current Executive Director of Friends of Madagascar Mission (FOMM).

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**Links:**

Madagascar: <https://madagascarmission.org/about-madagascar/>

Montana: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Montana-state>

Ebenezer: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/391342847679362/>

4-H: <https://4-h.org/>

FHA: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family, Career and Community Leaders of America](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family,_Career_and_Community_Leaders_of_America)

Luther League: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luther League](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luther_League)

American Lutheran Church: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American Lutheran Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Lutheran_Church)

Trinity: <https://trinityson.com/>

Hospital: <https://www.nemhs.net/>

Fort Dauphin: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort-Dauphin \(Madagascar\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort-Dauphin_(Madagascar))

Ejeda: <https://madagascarmission.org/ejeda-hospital-nutrition/>

Malagasy language: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malagasy-languages>

Peg Stolee: <https://www.saintpeterfuneralhome.com/obituaries/margaret-peg-stolee>

SALFA: <https://www.salfa.org/>

Charles Drew: <https://charlesdrew.com/>

Toliara: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Toliara>

Antananarivo: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Antananarivo>

Antsirabe: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Antsirabe>

FOMM: <https://madagascarmission.org/>