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## Plunging in... moving with... joining the dance

Joyce de Gooijer

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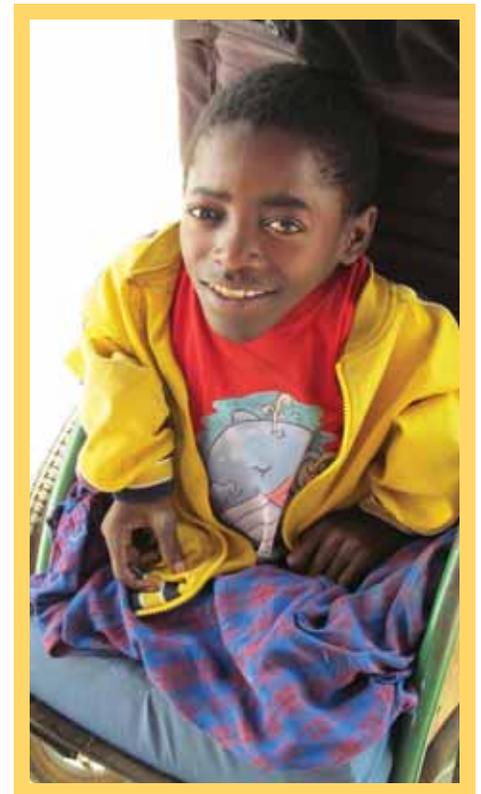
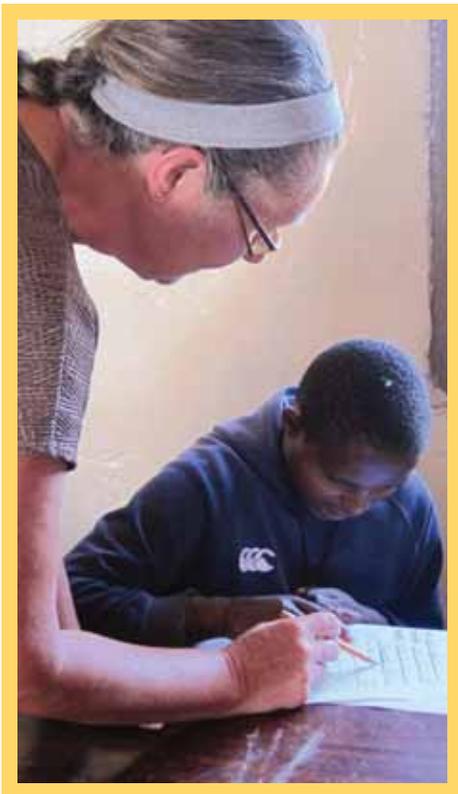
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# Plunging in... moving with... joining the dance

Joyce de Gooijer,  
Director of VICS



“**T**he only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.”  
*Alan Wilson Watts*

This quote certainly describes how I’m feeling as the new director of Volunteer International Christian Service. VICS, a lay volunteer mission organization, was started by the Canadian Spiritan priests 42 years ago. They have chosen to continue

their support and involvement in VICS with one major change — handing the directorship over to a lay person — me! My name is Joyce de Gooijer and though I plunged into the position in January this year, I joined the VICS dance many years ago.

It started almost 27 years ago. My husband, John, and I were newly married. We traveled to Gambia, West Africa, to visit Karen, a friend of John’s, volunteering with CUSO.

While there, she had met and married another volunteer, Brian, working with an organization we never knew existed. You guessed it — the organization was VICS! That was that — or so we thought — until they sent a letter telling us of a posting in Kenya with VICS — and it was for a couple. Now, wouldn't that be something we'd want to consider?

## Kenya

John had always talked about going to Africa and I thought this would be a great opportunity. As is often the case, I got all excited and suggested we apply. Going with my philosophy of, "If it's meant to happen — it will," we submitted an application. Well, wouldn't you know it, we DID hear from VICS — first from MaryBelle Denis, the VICS representative in Saskatoon and then from Dermot Doran, the VICS director. At every stage, "if it's meant to happen" seemed to happen and before we knew it we were at a VICS orientation in Toronto and on our way to Kenya.

## Kiribati

I believe that life experiences prepare us for whatever is coming next in our lives. Twenty years of teaching and principal experiences in rural Saskatchewan (most recently in the Watson and Drake areas), and completing a Masters Program in Educational Administration certainly gave me a good skill base. In Kenya, I taught Math and Home Economics to high school students. In Kiribati I expected to teach again, but I became a teaching-principal at St. Joseph's College, a 400-student boarding school. Sr. Rotee, the woman I called my earthly guardian angel, kept me on track and helped me through all my cultural faux-pas.

## Tanzania

Who would have thought that simultaneously being a learning resource room teacher, classroom teacher and principal in Saskatchewan would give me skills needed to teach at Olkokola Vocational School in Tanzania? John volunteered as administrator for Flying Medical Service, an organization started 30 years ago by Pat Patten, a Spiritan priest. It took me a few months to find my niche and work out exactly what I could do. After learning that some students could speak their national language, Swahili, but had never learned to read and write it, I received permission from Zablon, the school principal, to work with them. My great joy came from

teaching twelve students between the ages of 13 and 56 to read and write words specific to their personal lives and tailoring class.

More than that, though, was the emotional connection I made with the students and what I learned from them. Each

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*A posting in Kenya with VICS — and it was for a couple. Now, wouldn't that be something we'd want to consider?*

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student was dealing with a specific disability. How easy for me — an able-bodied person — to talk about trying something new and overcoming difficulties. How humbling for me

to experience their inner strength. Kristina was visually impaired, John had brittle bone disease, Teresia, our 56-year-old 'bibi' (grandmother) was learning to live with an amputated foot, and Loitajho had wrist contractures. Nothing stopped them.

Imagine this: I pushing our student, John, his wheelchair tipped backward, front wheel in the air, he making airplane sounds and yelling, "EH! MREMBO!" ("Hey! Beautiful!") to young women we passed. What a change from the young man who, when he first arrived, had

not experienced friendship, would hide and refuse to talk to anyone. How could I not learn about enjoying life?

## Planting roots, getting uprooted

Being a railroader's kid, home is always where I am living. Establishing roots quickly has been a blessing and a challenge. John's and my married life has evolved into one or both of us planting roots or being uprooted. VICS has certainly played a role in that pattern! Our lives have unfolded in 10-year increments. Volunteer in Kenya — work for 10 years; volunteer in Kiribati — work for 10 years; Volunteer in Tanzania — work at the VICS office!

Now, as my journey with VICS continues, I plunge in, move with and am part of the VICS dance in a new way; continuing to respect the program and its philosophies within the context of change and moving forward. What an exciting place to be! ■



Joyce de Gooijer (centre) with the two "bibis" (grandmothers) at the Olkokola Vocational School in Tanzania, Teresia (left) and Elizabeth (right).